A Promise Unspoken
by Kittenshift17

Summary

Thorfinn Rowle had a mission: Ruin Hermione Granger's life like she'd almost ruined his. To trap a lion cub is easy, but when this little lioness grows up Thorfinn will have to walk a knife-edge between hate and love to avoid her sharp claws. Revenge is a dish best served cold and unspoken promises are deadly.

Notes

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Fancast: Chris Hemsworth as Thorfinn Rowle.

Beta love: Freya Ishtar

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CHAPTER ONE
Horror. That's what she felt when she rounded the corner in the Library of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry on the fifteenth day of term. Her eyes widened in revulsion at the sight before her. Right in front of her eyes, in full view of anyone using this section of the library, a big blonde seventh year Slytherin boy was leaning against the bookshelves, his trousers around his ankles and his expression wrought with bliss.

Kneeling on the floor before him was a dark-haired Hufflepuff girl and, despite her young age, Hermione Granger didn't need to be a genius to figure out what she was doing as the Hufflepuff's head bobbed up and down in front of the boy's groin. Drawing in a sharp gasp of shock – what were they thinking, doing something like that in a *library*? – Hermione backed pedalled, not wanting them to see she'd caught them. She'd heard rumours about Slytherins and the last thing she wanted was to be caught by one who was experiencing fellatio and had such little regard for the rules that he was doing so in the library.

It didn't at all bode well for her continued sanity or peace of mind to catch such a boy in such an act. One she was morally obligated to report. Not matter how alarmingly handsome he might be and no matter how he might be enjoying what he was currently experiencing. The girl on her knees before him was making sucking noises and, if she weren't so revolted, Hermione Granger might have found herself morbidly intrigued by the sight the older boy and girl made as they practiced oral sex.

His hands were tangled in the girl's dark hair, his head tipped back as though floating in a sea of bliss, and his expression was one of pleasure while Hermione tried to back away without being caught. No matter how intrigued she may or may not be, this was against the rules, it was disgusting and it was illegal. She needed to report it and she needed to avoid being spotted by either rebellious party as she did so. Especially the Slytherin. He was likely to make her pay if she tattled on him, or probably even if she interrupted them.

Hermione backed slowly away, being careful where she put her feet and biting her lip on a hiss of surprise when she brushed against a book not properly filed. It toppled from the shelf and hit the floor with a soft thud. Hermione stifled her cry of pain when the heavy book landed on her foot, not wanting to be caught - something that proved useless when the boy's blue eyes snapped open and landed on her. Hermione expected that, having been caught, he might be embarrassed; that he might cease his actions immediately or at the very least attempt to stop the girl or to order Hermione away. She hoped he'd be decent about it and feel remorse over what he was doing, desecrating such a sanctuary as the school library with his vile behaviour.

She hoped in vain.

The boy's half-lidded blue gaze fell upon her and a wicked smirk grew upon his handsome face. Hermione covered her mouth, her eyes wide with the shock of such a sight. The boy began to chuckle very softly as though being caught by someone so young heightened his amusement, rather than mortifying him. His partner tipped her head, having heard his chuckle and probably thinking she was doing something wrong.

"Something funny?" she asked, pulling her mouth from his turgid flesh and shuffling her knees upon the rough carpet.

Hermione's eyes widened in horror and then slammed shut when she caught sight of the boy's private business, every throbbing inch of it on display and standing at attention. A terrible serpent reared and ready to spit venom at her. The muffled sounds of slight protest and surprise that Hermione could only imagine stemmed from the girl suddenly finding her mouth full once more, met her ears, and Hermione may have gagged just a little.
She peeked through her lashes as she ducked down for the book that had landed on her foot before shoving it haphazardly back onto the shelf. Hermione hated herself when a lip-smacking sound of someone trying to keep from drooling coupled with a low groan snapped her attention back to the couple for just a second. The last thing Hermione saw was the boy winking wickedly at her, clearly extremely amused by her embarrassment, before she spun on her heels and raced away in search of Madam Pince.

The image of that boy in all his naked, erect glory, winking at her lasciviously, seemed to be burned in the back of her brain and Hermione tripped over her own feet, and a chair, and almost landed on a disgruntled Ravenclaw as she raced away. She searched desperately for Madam Pince. She was sure that if she just found the librarian and put a stop to the behaviour, she wouldn't have to spend the rest of her life haunted by the sight of a hulking Viking of a Slytherin boy with his serpentine trouser spear. She was certain that if she found Madam Pince, she wouldn't have to worry about the boy threatening her into silence or about stammering embarrassedly for the rest of her natural life.

"What do you think you are doing? Running in the library?" Madam Pince hissed when Hermione raced out into the main party of the library and stumbled over to her desk, her cheeks still crimson and her breath coming in sharp gasps.

"M-Madam P-P-Pince, there's a boy and a girl being extremely i-i-inappropriate in the Goblin War section of the library," Hermione blurted immediately, her revulsion evident in her tone despite the way she stammered and blushed, "Right up against the shelves, knocking books on the floor. They're…"

"They're what?" Madam Pince asked. Her eyes narrowed dangerously at the idea of anyone being inappropriate in any manner within her literary fortress.

"P-P-Practicing f-f-fellatio," Hermione whispered. Her eyes were wide and frightened, her cheeks still glowing as she tattled on the senior students for their behaviour.

A half-choked, strangled sort of squeak left the librarian's thin lips and her eyes bugged in her head, widening so far Hermione feared her eyeballs might fall right out of their sockets. She too turned a mottled shade of red, but rather than simply being embarrassed - as Hermione was - the librarian was livid at the idea of her sacred sanctum being so befouled. Hermione watched Madam Pince clutch at her bony chest for a moment, looking beyond horrified. She dashed away as fast as she could without actually running – that was against the rules - and Hermione pursed her lips as the librarian disappeared in the direction the couple had been being inappropriate.

She couldn't stop thinking about the sight burned into her retinas. The tall blonde-haired, blue-eyed boy with more muscles than sense – apparently – and a cock the length of her forearm, winking at her. All while his cock was licked, sucked and swallowed right down some poor girl's throat. Sweet Merlin, Hermione thought she might faint. She was in danger of swooning with a combination of disgust over the rule-breaking, awe over the sight he had made in all his naked, rippling perfection, and fear over the utter absurdity of what he might do to her when that boy realised she'd tattled on him.

"THORFINN ROWLE! This is a library!" The librarian's voice came a few minutes later. Hermione cringed as everyone in the vicinity looked up in shock, all of them terrified of the shrill sound within the usually quiet sanctum.

"HOW DARE YOU DO SUCH VILE THINGS?" Madam Pince shrieked. "DESECRATING THESE BOOKS AND DISRESPECTING THIS INSTITUTION WITH SUCH BEHAVIOUR! THE TWO OF YOU ARE GOING STRAIGHT TO THE HEADMASTER'S OFFICE! I'LL SEE
YOU BOTH EXPELLED FOR THIS!"

Hermione cringed in horror that she might've inadvertently gotten two people expelled – her own biggest fear. The idea was alarming, but at the same time she didn't feel too badly. This was a library, for goodness sake! How dare they engage in such acts in a public setting? It was against school rules. It was against the law! They deserved everything they got. And right up against the bookshelves, too! Disgusting. Wretched people, that's what they were. Hermione refused to feel bad about them being in trouble for something they'd done, knowingly breaking the rules and risking this exact punishment.

She continued to assure herself she'd done the right thing even as the strapping Slytherin boy and his mortified Hufflepuff accomplice were both frog marched around the corner and towards the doors of the library. To make matters worse, the blonde boy didn't even look repentant. His cheeks weren't stained with embarrassment over his actions. Not like his partner's were. He looked smug. Amused, even. Indeed, he was refastening his trousers and re-buckling his belt as his ear was pinched and pulled on by the irate librarian. Something he was clearly only allowing the woman to do to keep from further irking her, given that he was almost a foot taller than the short woman and had to stoop just to have his ear pinched at all.

It was obvious to Hermione that the boy could've pulled away if he wanted to. The Hufflepuff girl, on the other hand, burst into tears of mortification as she was marched past several other students, Hermione included. She was trying to wipe her mouth free of whatever she'd gotten into it during her romp with the Slytherin and she winced at the grip the librarian had on her ear. The few other students in the library – all Ravenclaws – looked disgusted by their behaviour, all of them shaking their heads condemningly even if they didn't know exactly what had been going on.

Hermione cringed a little when the blue eyes of the Slytherin – Thorfinn Rowle, she assumed – landed on her where she was stood, arms folded, glaring in their direction. He leered at her, his eyes narrowing a bit, a glitter of anger in those stormy depths. For a terrible moment he looked like he might explode at her in a rage, break free of his punishment and attack her for getting him in trouble. Her heart leapt into her throat and Hermione flinched back when he took a threatening step in her direction. Hermione squeaked involuntarily with pure terror. Something about the noise seemed to calm the boy because suddenly he straightened once more and looked as though he'd never been angry. He even winked again as he was dragged past her.

Hermione gulped at the promise in his voice and in his eyes, wondering if maybe she ought to have just minded her own business when he threatened her quietly, clearly ignoring the temper-tantrum and the verbal dressing-down Madam Pince was giving the pair of miscreants. Fear filled her at the unspoken promise of pain in his eyes as he hissed;

"I'm going to get you for this, little lion cub."
"I demand they both be expelled from Hogwarts immediately, Headmaster!" Madam Pince hissed in Dumbledore's office several long minutes later, while Thorfinn Rowle tried not to roll his eyes at the woman's tantrum.

"I hardly think that they should be robbed of their education over an indiscretion, Irma," Dumbledore attempted to calm the witch while offering Thorfinn's partner in crime – Helena Crawford – a handkerchief for the tears she shed.

He lost the battle not to roll his eyes at the sight she made. Tender-hearted Hufflepuffs were so dramatic.

"INDISCRETION!" Pince exploded. "Albus they were… a poor first year girl saw and hastened to tell me straight away."

"Tattling little bitch," Thorfinn muttered under his breath. He glanced around Dumbledore's office with interest at the many magical devices he kept within it.

The portraits all muttered to one another in horror over his receiving a blowjob in the library, but Thorfinn could tell it was mostly an act. The wink Phineas Nigellus Black shot in his direction told him they all knew about the Hogwarts Rite of Passage handed down through the ages of graduating wizards. A long list of tasks to check off the bucket list, as it were, before graduation day. Every graduating seventh year had a sacred duty to do his utmost to complete that rite of passage, achieve every task on the list and earn the magical tattoo it granted as a badge of honour.

Thorfinn's list was shrinking by the day. At this rate he'd be finished and inked long before graduation. He only had about twenty things left to go on the long list of more than one hundred tasks. Every graduating Slytherin male knew about it, even Phineas Nigellus Black, former headmaster and rumoured creator of the Rites. Thorfinn smirked at the portrait in return and tipped his head back to stare at the ceiling while the librarian and the headmaster continued to argue.

"Mr Rowle, is it true that a first year saw the two of you engaging in sexual conduct within the library?" Dumbledore asked. The Headmaster sighed as he turned his attention from the apparently Silenced librarian to interrogate him.

"Sexual conduct is against school rules, Professor," Thorfinn replied. He wasn't about to be tricked into admitting guilt that easily. His eyes flashed with anger again as he recalled the snitching little first year who'd caught them going at it.

"I am well aware," Dumbledore replied coolly. He eyed him carefully over his half-moon spectacles and Thorfinn reckoned the old geezer was practicing Legilimency on him when he felt a headache begin to niggle behind his eyes. "However, if it's true that you have potentially corrupted another student with your vulgarity you will be punished severely, Mr Rowle."
"I would never…" Thorfinn immediately lied through his teeth.

"Keep in mind that lying to your teachers is also against school rules and will result in further punishment before answering me, Mr Rowle," Dumbledore interrupted Thorfinn's protests before he could utter them, his eyes glittering dangerously.

"She was a kid," Thorfinn sighed. "I doubt she knew what we were doing."

"Irm reports the girl used the terminology 'performing fellatio' when describing just what she believed you to be doing with Miss Crawford," Dumbledore replied. Thorfinn's eyes widened slightly at the frank manner the Headmaster was employing.

Helena hiccupped in shock next to him, her cheeks flooding red again and Thorfinn rolled his eyes.

"If she's the type of freaky kid who knows the terminology, Professor, I don't reckon I'll have scarred her for life," Thorfinn retorted, a smirk on his lips.

"You realise you are facing the very real threat of expulsion from Hogwarts, don't you Mr Rowle?" Dumbledore asked. He raised one eyebrow at Thorfinn for his tone and his negligent attitude.

Thorfinn almost rolled his eyes again. Fucking old goat and his preferential treatment of Gryffindors.

He'd bend the rules and let the Boy Wonder play Quidditch in his first year, but one little incident of being sucked off in the library and the bastard was ready to kick him out, just because he was a Slytherin.

"Albus, do keep in mind that teenagers are disgusting beasts who cannot be constantly expected to refrain from their baser urges," Phineas Black spoke up in his defence, though it didn't much sound like it.

"Yes, thank you, Phineas," Dumbledore said. He levelled a glare at the portrait just in time for the door to the office to fly open with a dramatic bang, a swirl of black fabric announcing the entrance of Professor Snape.

"You summoned me, Albus?" Snape said. His tone could always be counted upon to suck all the fun out of a room and make people wary enough to sit up, shut their mouths and pay attention.

Beside him, Helena stopped sniffling and sobbing and the Silenced librarian ceased her gesticulating. All because of Snape's mere presence. Thorfinn envied him the skill.

"Ah Severus, perhaps you can shed some light on things here," Dumbledore said, smiling pleasantly. "You see, Mr Rowle and Miss Crawford have just been caught engaging in oral sex within the confines of the library, where they were stumbled upon - mid-act - by a first year."

Snape's withering glare made Thorfinn cringe just a bit. Now he was in for it. Snape wasn't likely to let Dumbledore expel him from the school, but once things were dealt with here, Thorfinn expected he would receive additional, private punishment from Snape for being caught in the first place.

"Which first year might that have been?" Snape asked. His nostrils flared in a way that rather unsettled Thorfinn.

"Hermione Granger, I believe."

"Ah, our newest resident swot," Snape sneered. "Of course. She would be the only first year scouring the confines of unused sections of the library and likely to tattle."
"I hardly think her character should be called into question in this instant. Irma is demanding I expel both students from the school."

"For a little inappropriate groping?" Snape snorted, arching one eyebrow. "Will we be expelling the entire Hogwarts population for their similar – if unproven – activities?"

"The rest of the school is not currently my concern. As you know this is a serious matter and Mr Rowle - in particular - has a long record of past transgressions. I do believe he was informed on his last stint of bad behaviour that he would be expelled if he caused any more trouble after that explosion he caused last year."

"Expulsion for acting like a horny teenager Albus? Really?" Phineas spoke up again, Slytherins sticking together before the biased Gryffindor-lover. Thorfinn was dimly aware his heart was pounding heavily in his chest, fearful of being shipped home without graduating over a blowjob. Not even a good one, either.

Narrowing his eyes and folding his arms, Thorfinn began to plot the doom of the tattling little lion cub who was responsible for this mess. If she'd kept her mouth shut, none of this would have happened and he wouldn't have a new black mark on his record two weeks into the term.

"I hardly think expulsion is warranted." Dumbledore held his hands up. "But we can hardly allow students to think this is acceptable behaviour. Canoodling is not allowed and to make matters worse, they were caught by a first year."

Thorfinn watched with growing amusement when Pince began gesticulating wildly, unable to vocalise her thoughts but clearly ranting about the damage and desecration of books.

"What do you suggest?" Snape raised one eyebrow, also eyeing Pince with masked amusement. "A few months' worth of detention will surely dent the amount of time they have to engage in sexual behaviour on school grounds."

"I was considering detention in addition to the elimination of privileges afforded senior students. No Hogsmeade trips. No extracurricular activities – such as Quidditch – and potentially a ban from entering the library," Dumbledore replied evenly.

"You mean to exclude a seventh year with a prospective career in the Quidditch industry from playing, as a result of a non-Quidditch related incident, whilst flouting the laws on age restrictions and allowing Potter to play?" Snape hissed. His eyes flashed dangerously at the idea before Thorfinn could even begin to fear for his Quidditch career. "Tell me, Dumbledore, how much more preferential treatment do you mean to offer the snot-nosed little brat? Perhaps a list of all the things he'll be getting away with would save tedious arguments over your favouritism?"

Dumbledore eyes flashed and a silent battle of wills began for several long minutes. No Hogsmeade? No Quidditch? Detention for months? No access to the library? How was he meant to graduate if he wasn't allowed to do his bloody homework? That was bang out of order. Thorfinn's temper began to flare and he made a conscious effort to stuff his wand deeper into his pocket so he wouldn't do something stupid, like set the Headmaster's office on fire. The fucking bastard wanted to screw with his future. Thorfinn Rowle wasn't going to just bend over and take that kind of shit from a senile old man who was more interested in babying a child celebrity than justice for all students.

Narrowing his eyes hatefully as his temper fizzed out of control, manifesting as accidental magic that made the fireplace flare angrily, Thorfinn recognised that he couldn't go after Dumbledore for this. Not directly. No, he'd broken the rules and Dumbledore had to enforce them. Oh, but once
he'd graduated, Thorfinn was going to bury the old man.

"No one else was suitable to fill the position of Seeker for Gryffindor, Severus, we have already discussed this," Dumbledore snapped. Clearly he was exhausted of the topic already.

"If you can make exceptions to the rules for a child, you can make it for Slytherin's best player and team captain," Snape retorted coldly. "And I know you don't mean to imply any student would be capable of passing their NEWTS without access to the school library."

Snape's tone positively dripped with disdain for the idea.

"How do you propose to punish them, then?" Dumbledore snapped, both wizards ignoring a still-gesticulating Pince.

"Detention until Christmas break. No Hogsmeade trips until after Christmas. Loss of house points. Need I remind you, Albus, that this is hardly the first incident of student fornication on Hogwarts grounds? I should think the last thing you would want is more concern from parents after the debacle with the pregnant witch graduating last year?"

"All the more reason to make an example." Dumbledore began arguing before one of the portraits, whom Thorfinn didn't know, cleared his throat conspicuously. The old man paused before sighing wearily, pulling his glasses from his nose and beginning to polish them on his robes.

"Very well, we will do it your way, Severus. Fifty points from each of you for your behaviour. No Hogsmeade until after Christmas. Daily detention until next term recommences in the New Year. If either of you are caught engaging in sexualised behaviour for the remainder of your Hogwarts career you will be expelled. You will not speak of this to anyone, and I will be owling Miss Granger in the morning to ensure she does not feel the need to tell anyone else about your indiscretions. Neither of you will attempt to contact Miss Granger regarding this matter either, is that clear?"

Dumbledore snapped out orders, clearly fed up with people for the day. When Helena hiccupped her agreement and Thorfinn glared at the man but gave a curt nod, they were all dismissed. As he got to his feet, Thorfinn knew even without him saying a word, that Snape meant to continue the discussion in his own office and he saw both students out, escorting Helena to the Hufflepuff Common Room in silence before gliding off towards his own office where he could chastise Thorfinn in peace.

Thorfinn rolled his eyes again, sighing in annoyance and trying to push through the temper still sparking dangerously inside him. He knew that if he didn't get a hold of himself he would fly off the handle at Snape and if there was ever a wizard he didn't want to be on the bad side of, it was Snape. The man had a worse temper that Thorfinn did. The last thing he needed was an up-close and personal encounter with the vicious and cutting Potions Master. Thorfinn knew who would come out on top in that duel, and it wasn't him.

Neither of them said a word as Snape stalked across his office and rounded his desk. A flick of the man's wand slammed the door and Thorfinn braced for what he expected would be a tirade of insults and belittling comments about his levels of intelligence.

"Explain to me, Mr Rowle, which part of a girl being hauled out of here for teenage pregnancy lends itself to the notion of getting caught engaging in sexual activity?" Snape hissed. Thorfinn blinked stupidly for a second, his own anger ebbing in the face of the vicious hiss rather than the shouting he'd been expecting.
"I…"

"Do not believe me naive enough that I am not fully aware of what you were doing in the library and why you were doing it, Thorfinn!" Snape snapped. His eyes flashed angrily at Thorfinn's pathetic attempt to explain himself. "How could you possibly have been caught?"

"That nosey little bitch came snooping." Thorfinn shrugged.

"And I don't suppose you made things easy for yourself by acting contrite, ceasing your actions or otherwise trying to keep the girl from tattling?" Snape said. He pinched the bridge of his nose in annoyance.

"What do you think?" Thorfinn scoffed. "Pretty sure the little brat saw my cock, too."

"Delightful!" Snape hissed. "As always, your gift for tact and your gentlemanly manners set you apart from your peers, Mr Rowle."

Thorfinn was pretty sure that if words had flavour, Snape's would all be burn-a-hole-in-your-tongue sour. He hid his smile at the man's obvious annoyance with him, choosing not to be offended by the heavy sarcasm in Professor Snape's voice.

"Let me see your list," Snape said when he offered no self-defence. Thorfinn smirked, fishing the scroll of parchment from his pocket and handing it over to his Head of House.

Snape unfurled it and scanned it with his eyes.

"If you get caught on any of these remaining activities, Thorfinn, I will not be able to protect you again," Snape warned him quietly. He showed no sign of being impressed with Thorfinn's progress.

"Yes, sir." Thorfinn nodded solemnly.

"As it is, I will have to do something to placate Madam Pince in order for you to be allowed back into the library without her screeching at you and following you everywhere." Snape looked extremely displeased and wrinkled his hooked nose in annoyance over the notion.

Thorfinn felt a little nauseas at the idea.

"I'm really hoping that means you plan on threatening the witch or modifying her memory, sir," he said quietly to the Potions Master, wrinkling his own nose a little.

Snape slanted a cool gaze at him.

"Given that I've yet to see the woman actually show interest in anything other than books and the destruction of students who damage them, I imagine I will have to resort to something of that nature, Mr Rowle," Snape replied. "Though the consequences of performing illegal memory charms on a colleague would likely not be very pleasant."

"Better than… you know," Thorfinn said.

"Given that Pince is potentially asexual, I would personally consider it quite the accomplishment to seduce the woman into forgiving your indiscretions," Snape said evenly, his voice completely devoid of any emotion and his face blank of all expression.

Thorfinn wondered how he did that. He'd never been able to manage it himself.

"Should that be successful, and I suspect it will be," Snape went on, "there is also the matter of
dealing with the student who tattled on you. A first year, you said?"

"Now I really hope you're implying memory charms rather than sexual bribery, Professor."

Thorfinn chuckled as he accepted the list of his remaining tasks back from the professor.

"It would behoove you to refrain from such vulgar thoughts, Mr Rowle." Snape's eyes flashed. "As it happens I merely intended to threaten the annoying little swot into silence. It will be up to you to exact your own revenge on the girl, Thorfinn."

Thorfinn felt a smirk grow across his face.

"Keep in mind that I will not be able to protect you if you get in any more trouble this year." Snape reminded him when he spotted the bloodthirsty grin on Thorfinn's face. "And be aware that Dumbledore will be paying extremely close attention to how you interact with the child and what becomes of her in coming months. Should anything ill-fated befall her before you have graduated, I do no doubt the Headmaster will expel you from Hogwarts."

Thorfinn's brow furrowed slightly.

"I'm going to have to be very Slytherin about this, aren't I?" he asked quietly.

"Indeed." Snape nodded, the faintest hint of a smirk twitching the corners of his mouth. "Do try to ensure that you keep in mind the seriousness of her transgression, Thorfinn. If not for my intervention, you would be on your way home this evening to explain to your parents why it was you'd been thrown out of school. She has threatened your intended career, your graduation and essentially your entire future. Not to mention she is an insufferable know-it-all. Be sure that you repay her kindness."

"Yes, sir," Thorfinn said with a smirk.

"Report to my office every evening between eight and nine for your daily detention, Mr Rowle," Snape said briskly, as though he hadn't just encouraged one student to pit his will against that of another and hadn't just suggested Thorfinn destroy the girl's entire life.

"Of course, sir." Thorfinn agreed readily, getting to his feet and recognising his dismissal.

He made for the door quietly, his mind already working through the possibilities of how best to destroy the life of a tattle-tale twelve year old witch.

"Do not get caught again, Thor," Snape called softly when he reached the door, his hand upon the doorknob. "Either with your list or with your revenge against Miss Granger."

Thorfinn recognised the concern in the professor's words at the use of his nickname rather than his full name or his title. Snape might generally be an arsehole to the school populous, but that tone told Thorfinn that, no matter how angry he might be, or how heartless he might appear, or how wretched he was to deal with, the man approved the actions of his students and cared for their well-being.

He didn't answer the man as he left the room, but Thorfinn nodded to himself as he closed the door softly behind him, already scanning through the best ways to take someone down whilst making it look like he'd never be to blame for such a thing. His cunning mind flared as an idea began to form, the possibilities spinning behind his eyes over how he would break the little witch. She'd almost ruined his life with her supposedly innocent little habit of following the rules.

She was going to pay dearly indeed for that mistake.
Chapter 3

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CHAPTER THREE

She had been silenced and Hermione Granger could not be more livid about it if she tried. First she had been summoned to the Headmaster's office, receiving his owl at breakfast the day after the incident in the library, where she had been told that she had done the right thing of reporting the senior students. Then she'd been told that though it had been the right thing to put a stop to such behaviour on school grounds and that she wasn't in trouble for doing so, she'd been asked politely not to tell anyone else what she'd seen.

Hermione had been beyond appalled when Dumbledore had gone on to explain that the Board of Governors were unhappy with things at Hogwarts after an incident of teenage pregnancy the year before. That if the story of more sexual behaviour taking place on school grounds was discovered, the school might be forced to close. That the students involved had both been given detention and had their privileges suspended until after the New Year. He'd also told her to be on her guard lest the Slytherin boy involved – Thorfinn Rowle – or any of his friends tried to intimidate, hurt or hex her.

She'd been told to report anything they did to her and they would be dealt with accordingly. Told that she wasn't to mention to anyone else what she'd seen in the library.

As if that hadn't left a bad enough taste in her mouth – not that she'd planned on blabbing to anyone else that she'd seen a boy's genitals for the first time or that she'd witnessed such transgressions at all – she'd then been asked to stay back at the end of class after her Potions lesson. Professor Snape had seen fit to inform her that tattle-tales were not taken to kindly within Hogwarts and that she would do well to stop being such an insufferable know-it-all and to mind her own business.

By the time she'd left his office after the verbal dressing-down and the veiled threats he offered her when it came to her conduct pertaining to his Slytherin students, Hermione had been in tears and had been shaking with fury and a little fear. The man was scary at best, not to mention horrible. To add insult to injury, he'd also reiterated that she shouldn't speak of anything like that again and that unless a student's life was in danger, it was no concern of hers what other students did in their free time on school grounds. He'd even hinted that she had best be on her guard when it came to Thorfinn Rowle because the boy was likely to exact his revenge on her in a most unpleasant manner.

Since then, Hermione had been on edge. She saw people breaking the rules and she didn't say anything. She kept her hand down and didn't offer to answer any more questions in Snape's classes and she had trouble even looking in Dumbledore's direction. She was positively disgusted with the actions of both teachers. They were essentially condoning illegal behaviour for the sake of avoiding investigation of the institution and the sake of disgusting, perverted boys who happened to be good at Quidditch. Rowle hadn't even been removed from the Quidditch team or had his captaincy stripped from him, despite his behaviour.

He was extremely creepy and Hermione found herself rather alarmed at all times whenever there
was even the faintest chance that he might hex her or say something to her or even hurt her. She’d spotted him watching her across the Great Hall a few times, a cruel little smile on his face as though he were amused by something pertaining to her. Not knowing what he had planned was like torture and Hermione gained a new depth of understanding when it came to the psychological effects of anticipation as she waited to see how she would be repaid for dobbing on him.

She'd begun paying attention whenever she was in the corridors, always on the lookout for the hulking blonde boy. He was hard to miss when he was actually around, given his size. Taller than everyone in the entire school except for Hagrid, the Groundskeeper, he towered over his classmates and most of the teachers. His golden blonde hair gleamed in the firelight, cascading haphazardly around his shoulders like a huge lion's mane, untamed and rather intimidating, making him look all the more fierce and wild somehow. Like he was a lion himself, just waiting to pounce upon his prey.

She grew to be hyper-aware of the boy, all the more concerned when she noticed little things about him. She'd learned to identify the scent of his cologne – a citrus and smoke concoction that was actually rather pleasant. She could pick him out in a crowd by the sound of his voice or even his laugh alone, the low, deep tones of his voice almost a caress in her ears and his boisterous laughter both cruel, yet strangely uplifting at the same time.

Almost a week after the incident in the library she'd been hurrying through the corridors on the way to Transfiguration when she'd stumbled slightly – jostled by an older student and unbalanced thanks to the number of books she was lugging along in her school bag. She'd tripped and would have fallen right at the boy's feet if not for the way his long strides carried him so far with every step. Hermione had been beyond mortified when she'd tripped right into him, her nose bumping against his tight stomach and beginning to sting like it might bleed.

His huge hands had dwarfed her tiny frame when he'd gripped her shoulders to straighten her, looking concerned at being attacked by a first year before realising it was her. Hermione's cheeks had turned crimson when she'd looked up to meet his blue eyes fearfully, her own hands pushing against his solid form as she tried to right herself.

"Watch it, little lion cub," he'd said unsympathetically when he'd realised who she was. Hermione's nose had chosen that moment to begin bleeding and other than the faintest flicker of something in his blue eyes, his face had showed no emotion as a trickle of blood had run out her nose, down her top lip and dripped onto her white school shirt. Other than to literally pick her up right off her feet until she dangled a foot from the floor before setting her to one side and out of his path, Thorfinn Rowle had done nothing to help her. He'd gone on his merry way with his dark haired friend, laughing about something.

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Her cheeks had burned in shame and her nose had bled for so long that Hermione had spent the entire length of her Transfiguration lesson hiding in the third floor bathrooms trying to stem the flow of blood and trying to wash the blood from her shirt. Professor McGonagall had been appalled and angry with her when Hermione had slipped into her office at the end of the hour to apologise and ask after any homework she had, before being alarmed when she'd looked up to the sight of Hermione covered in her own blood, her school shirt stained in several places and her skin pale thanks to the blood loss. She'd been escorted to the nurse for a blood replenishment potion whilst being interrogated over what had happened to her.

Hermione had bitten her lip on mentioning that it had been Rowle she'd collided with to cause the bleed. Snape's words played in her mind about the consequences of being a snitch. Instead she'd simply said she'd been accidentally shoved in the hallway and had bumped her nose against
something solid when she'd tripped. McGonagall hadn't looked very much like she believed her, but Hermione didn't elaborate. Other than being given a potion to make her feel better and being told what her homework was for the class, Hermione had been sent on her way once more.

She was jumpy in the halls between her classes and the fact that no one wanted to be her friend or liked her ate away at her every day. Though no one except Professor Snape, Professor Dumbledore, Madam Pince, Thorfinn Rowle and the unnamed Hufflepuff girl knew about her tattling, Hermione seemed to be something of a social pariah. None of the other girls in her dormitory seemed interested in being her friend. Marcy Stewart and the red haired Faye Dunbar had become fast friends with each other, while Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil had formed a budding friendship based entirely on a love of fashion.

Hermione - with her love of books, her year worth of study ahead of her peers, her maturity and her know-it-all habit of being a teacher's pet obsessed with her homework - was left friendless and she often found herself alone in the castle. She sat next to other people in class, finding a few of the Ravenclaw students interesting and knowledgeable but none of them seemed very interested in befriending her outside of occasionally pairing up in lessons.

Most of them were offended that she - a Gryffindor - knew more about their topics of study in class than they did. Hermione wanted to cry at the unfairness of it all. It wasn't her fault she'd been born in the middle of September. It wasn't her fault she'd turned twelve while many of them were still just eleven. It wasn't her fault she'd been taken to Diagon Alley on her eleventh birthday for her books and her wand and her uniforms, resulting in her having almost an entire year to read all of her books many times over, practicing spells, memorising facts and otherwise trying to immerse herself in the magical world she'd been told she belonged to. It wasn't her fault she was trying so hard to fit into this magical world when she'd never fit well in the muggle world she'd left behind.

The muggle kids hadn't liked her because she was clever and she was magical. They'd called her a freak and told her she was abnormal. They'd made fun of her big front teeth and her wild curls. They'd been frightened of the things that happened when she got upset - moving things without touching them, setting things on fire by accident when she was angry, making flowers bloom when she was extremely happy. The muggles had picked on her and learned to avoid her.

Hermione had been so sure that when she came to Hogwarts, she would find friends. Other people would be able to do magic too. They wouldn't shy away from her for being able to move things with her mind.

But they did. No one talked to her unless they needed help with something in class. The teachers all praised her, but their praise felt hollow when Hermione looked around the room and saw no one else could do what she could do. She felt even worse when one or two of the teachers - like Professor Flitwick - looked mildly alarmed when she could do things much more advanced than the rest of her year-group. Professor McGonagall had suggested yesterday that maybe she would like to involve herself in independent study at a more advanced level and had begun giving her coursework for second and third year level topics, seeing that Hermione was so far beyond her peers that she often found herself unchallenged and a bit bored in her classes.

The idea meant she spent even more time by herself. She sank herself into the study she'd been given simply because it meant she didn't have to sit in the common room or the Great Hall awkwardly looking around with no one to talk to. She'd seen some of the boys in her year - like Ron Weasley - making fun of her when she'd answered questions so enthusiastically in class. He stuck his top teeth out over his bottom lip, rumpled his hair and jumped around like a monkey, waving one hand in the air and making unflattering noises of excitement.
Hermione had felt even worse when, upon seeing him do so, she'd been torn between wanting to cry and wanting to hurt him. Something that had expressed itself by making all of the taps in the greenhouse during Herbology that morning, explode. The taps had all burst off their pipes and water had sprayed everywhere. To make matters worse, the resulting shower of water had drenched the class, drenched the seedpods they'd been potting – causing tangle-vines to grow wildly, jumping from their trays and their pods, reaching and stretching for more water and almost killing several students when the silly vines had decided humans made excellent climbing walls for them to better get more water and more sunshine.

No one had blamed her, of course. No one had known. In the resulting chaos the fact that it had been Hermione's accidental magic that caused the pipes to burst was overlooked. But Hermione had known. She'd felt horrible for ruining the class, endangering her peers and destroying school property. All of that, combined with the stress of not knowing when – or even if – Rowle would mount some kind of revenge attack on Hermione pushed her towards the end of her rope and she found herself sitting alone in a secluded alcove after dinner, her nose in a book.

She wasn't having much luck at actually reading it given the poor lighting and the fact that tears kept welling in her eyes and trickling down her cheeks. Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to stem the tears and trying to pull herself together. She was better than this. She refused to let one stupid Slytherin boy, some indifferent or nasty teacher and one insignificant, dull-minded little ginger kid rob her of her dignity. She wasn't going to let the fact that as usual, no one her age appreciated her brilliance, rob her of her happiness. And she wasn't about to let the world think she was beaten just because she'd had a bit of a bad month.

Pinching her nose hard enough she was in danger of making it bleed all over again Hermione snapped her book closed with her free hand and made to stand. Just as she did, the sound of shuffling footsteps, a huff of breath and a wet sort of lip-smacking sound filled her ears. Hermione blinked her teary eyes open slowly, searching the deserted corridor for the source of the sound.

"Oh, for goodness sake," she hissed to herself when she spotted what appeared to be none other than the Slytherin boy she had been afraid of all week. Well, at least she spotted some of him. His bare backside, if her eyes were to be believed. Hermione shook her head in horror at the sight before her when, across the corridor in the alcove one down from her own, Thorfinn Rowle could be seen, his trousers once again around his ankles as he engaged in lewd acts. Hermione narrowed her eyes when he twisted slightly, some little witch pressed against the wall in his hold. Hermione could see the girl's legs wrapped around his waist and she rolled her eyes at the way the other witch dragged her hands through Thorfinn's long blonde hair.

She moaned breathily at the way the boy was rutting her and Hermione's lip curled in disgust when the girl's face came into view as she tipped her head back while Rowle kissed her neck. Whoever she was, she most certainly wasn't the same Hufflepuff girl Rowle had been inappropriate with in the library last week. This one had chin-length auburn curls and freckles dusting her nose. She was also rather loud.

"Disgusting," Hermione muttered to herself, knowing that she couldn't very well get up and walk away without being caught or spotted by the couple. The last thing she needed was to be caught by Rowle – again – when he was mid sexual act.

The pervert would likely wink at her, threaten her to keep her mouth shut and go right on doing what he was doing. It occurred to Hermione that she could report him to Dumbledore and have the boy expelled for being an irredeemable scoundrel, but even as she had the idea, the image of Professor Snape's sneering visage flashed behind her eyes and Hermione shook her head. Biting her
lip, Hermione tried desperately to look away. To cover her ears so she wouldn't have to listen to them going at it – this girl was entirely too loud for anyone's good. Something Rowle seemed to agree with, silencing her with his lips and driving into her.

Hermione hated the fact that as horrified as she was, her curiosity nipped at her subconscious. She'd read about sex before, but other than spotting Rowle mid-fellatio last week, she'd never seen anything more sexual than people snogging and once, a man pinching a woman's bum on the Tube in London. Besides, if they were stupid enough to have sex in a public place, they had to realise that they might be spied on. Peering through the darkness from her own alcove – having moved back further in it so no one would see her – Hermione found herself watching the animalistic display.

It looked uncomfortable and kind of painful, if the girl's furrowed brow was anything to go by. Hermione shook her head slowly from side to side, her gaze drawn to the bare expanse of flesh Rowle had on display. The muscles of his powerful thighs and his backside contracted and released rhythmically as he thrust powerfully into the witch he'd pinned to the wall.

"Harder, Thor," the little witch moaned when she broke away from his lips. Hermione felt her top lip curl into an even more disgusted expression at the wanton words.

*People called him Thor?*

The idea made her feel squicky inside. It was a nickname, obviously, but the idea of referring to the already Norse looking boy by the name of a Norse god rather unsettled her. Surely such a boy didn't deserve the nickname that could be construed as so powerful a being as a god? Not to mention the girl was obviously a tart, shagging in a corridor and moaning like a well-paid trollop!

Hermione continued to shake her head, her own brow furrowing in concern over the fate of the human race if such specimens were at an age where they could potentially begin contributing to the gene pool.

"Like that, do you?" Rowle's low voice growled huskily, amusement and smugness thick in his tone.

When the girl moaned again, Hermione decided that the last thing she felt like doing – no matter her curiosity – was to continue sitting there watching the Viking's arse muscles flex while the twisted couple dirty-talked. Standing, Hermione clutched her book to her chest and left the alcove she'd been hiding in. Her own bitter mood coupled with her disdain for the pair and before she could think better of it, Hermione found herself speaking disparaging words.

"You should know he was shagging a different trollop last week," Hermione said loudly as she passed the alcove where the couple was. "If I were you, I'd make certain you're using extremely strong charms against STDs."

The girl squealed in horror at being caught and Hermione heard Rowle cursing colourfully.

"Who was that?" the witch asked. "Let me down! Someone saw us, Thor! And what's she talking about? You were shagging someone else last week?"

Hermione snorted to herself as she continued on up the corridor.

"Oi! Don't hit me, witch," Thorfinn growled. "Who the fuck said that? Where is she? YOU!"

Hermione looked over her shoulder to see Rowle sticking his head out of the alcove and looking in her direction.
"The little fucking lion cub," he snarled. "What the fuck is with you and constantly interrupting me while I shag?"

"What's with you shagging in places I happen to be?" Hermione retorted coldly, turning and walking backwards as she continued trying to leave the area whilst arguing with the boy – not trusting him not to hex her from behind. "I was minding my own business – again – and you just happened to pick the same part of the castle to live out your perversions – again. Why can't you use an abandoned classroom or a broom cupboard like everyone else, Rowle?"

Hermione watched the way the witch he'd been shagging fled the alcove, running in the other direction away from where Hermione was standing and disappearing around the corner.

"Oh and thank you for that," Rowle snarled, looking in the direction the witch went as he stormed out of the alcove still fastening his trousers and buckling her belt once more. "Come here, you little brat!"

Hermione ran for it. Spinning around, she sprinted down the corridor but Rowle's legs were much longer than hers and he caught her easily. One of his huge hands closed around her upper arm and jerked her to a stop, pulling her around to glare up at him.

"Let me go or I'll hex you, you big moron!" Hermione hissed, her hair beginning to crackle and sparkle with magic as her annoyance grew.

She'd been having a bad month, a wretched week and a positively terrible day so she was in no mood to be jerked around or hurt by an irate Slytherin boy. Even if he was bigger and meaner than her. Swinging the book she carried with both hands, Hermione clobbered the big idiot with it right in the middle of his chest. She hit him as hard as she could and she felt rather satisfied when he grunted in surprise.

"Oi! Knock it off, you crazy bint!" he complained, snatching the book from her hands easily enough and flinging it away onto one of the benches in the corridor. Hermione growled at him like a rabid dog in her fury when he used his free hand to grip her other arm. Liked he'd done when she collided with him the other day, he picked her up from the floor, his hands tight around her upper arms until her feet dangled above the ground.

"Put me down this instant, Thorfinn Rowle!" Hermione snarled. "Just because you're bigger than me doesn't mean you can pick me up like a rag-doll! Put me down!"

"Feisty little thing, aren't you?" he asked, his frown dissolving as he stared into her angry face while she writhed in his hold.

"Get off me this instant!" Hermione insisted, ignoring his words

"You're a cock-blocking little piece of work, Granger," Rowle said, giving her a gentle shake that still managed to make her teeth rattle.

"You're a perverted Neanderthal," Hermione spat in return, her magic flaring dangerously and nearly slipping free of her control in her fury.

"Big words for a little kid," he retorted. "Stop squirming, little lioness and I'll put you down."

"Don't you dare blackmail me!" Hermione snapped.

"You blackmailed me," he said. "Said to let go or you'd hex me."
"That's a threat, not blackmail," Hermione informed him coldly. "One I'm only too willing to carry out if you don't put me down this instant."

"Certainly a reckless little lion cub, aren't you?" he laughed.

Hermione kicked him.

"Oi!" he shook her again in annoyance.

"PUT ME DOWN!" Hermione shouted, entirely losing her temper and losing control of her magic in the process. Rowle dropped her when a Stinging Hex struck him and Hermione winced as she tried to keep her feet under her, twisting her ankle in the process.

"Bloody hell, witch!" he complained, rubbing at his chest where the hex had hit him.

"Serves you right, you big brute," Hermione snapped as she limped over to collect her book from where he'd thrown it and tried to make her escape.

Her ankle throbbed dully and Rowle blocked her path before she could be on her way.

"Off to tattle on me again?" he demanded, raising his eyebrows.

"If I were, it would be no more than you deserve," Hermione said coldly, glaring up in his blue eyes. "You're disgusting. No one wants to witness you shagging every girl in the school, you know?"

"Stop interrupting me when I do it then," Rowle retorted.

"Interrupting?" Hermione scoffed at the older boy, "You're the one who does it in public. If you don't want to get caught, do it somewhere private."

"Why you?" he sighed, running one of his hands through his long golden hair and suddenly looking rather frustrated. "Why, of all the people who could catch me, does it keep being you?"

"Probably because you have bad habit of doing it where I happen to be?" Hermione suggested. "I was in this corridor first, reading. You're the idiot who didn't check the corridor was deserted before dropping your trousers again."

"Enjoy the view, did you?" he smirked unkindly.

"I vomited in my mouth," Hermione replied meanly. "You're disgusting and probably diseased, given the way you apparently get around."

Rowle's eyes narrowed for a moment before he tipped his head to one side, his expression smoothing out as he regarded her for a long moment in silence.

"If you weren't such a pain in my arse," he said. "You'd be kind of funny, kid."

"Do you delude yourself into believing that I care about your opinion of me?" Hermione retorted coldly, attempting to side-step him again.

Rowle suddenly snorted in amusement, looking like he couldn't entirely believe his ears.

"You're the feistiest girl I've ever met!" He shook his head as he chuckled.

"Ah, now I understand how you keep talking your way into these girl's knickers," Hermione
sneered. "You clearly go for the door-mats who can't string a coherent sentence together."

"Bloody hell, witch," he said, his eyebrows rising as he looked wickedly amused. "How old are you?"

"How is that any concern of yours?" Hermione sniffed. "Get out of my way Rowle, or I might forget the little pep-talk your Head of House gave me on your behalf and tell on you for public indecency again."

"First year, right? Can't be more than twelve at the most," he said speculatively as though he weren't listening to her. He continued to step into her path when she tried to pass him. "Sharp-tongued little thing too, with no regard for your own life if you back-talk everyone the way you back-talk me."

"Oh, did you expect me to be scared just because you're the same size and of equal intelligence to a large boulder?" Hermione raised her eyebrows at him before raking him with a disgusted gaze. Well, mostly disgusted. He was too handsome for anyone to be truly disgusted by the sight of him.

"Blimey, you're going to be a fire-cracker when you grow up, Kitten," he murmured, eyeing her in return, though he looked speculative and perhaps a little appreciative rather than scathing.

"Are you going to continue preventing me from returning to my dormitory, Rowle?" Hermione demanded, losing her temper and hitting him with her book when he stepped in front of her and blocked her for the twelfth consecutive time.

"Are you going to run off and report me for shagging in the corridors?" he asked in return, not looking the faintest bit phased by being hit.

"Why bother?" Hermione said bitterly. "The teachers are too scared of an inquisition into the disciplinary actions the school takes against sexual deviants after that girl got pregnant last year. They'll just cover up what you were reported for and tell people like me to keep their mouths shut."

"Did you just call me a sexual deviant, little lioness?"

"Would you stop calling me things like that?" Hermione demanded, stamping her foot in annoyance. "It's very annoying and rather clichéd. I do happen to have a name, you know? And yes, I did call you a sexual deviant. You're a lascivious cad who can't keep it in his trousers."

"Whom you're not going to report," he smirked wickedly at her.

"Let me past or I will," Hermione threatened coolly in reply, growing more and more annoyed with him by the second.

"I don't think you will, kid. And I still owe you pay-back," he said, crossing his arms over his chest as he stared down at her. "You nearly got me expelled, you know?"

"Serves you right for being disgusting."

"You're going to regret it, you know?" he went on, his tone conversational as though he was discussing something unimportant, like the weather, rather than her potential demise.

"What are you going to do?" Hermione asked, rolling her eyes. "Hex me in the hallways? I doubt it - you'll get in more trouble. Make fun of me for the way I look? You'll hardly be the first person to do so. Ruin my reputation with scandalous slurs of being a trollop? Not exactly possible given than I'm twelve."
Hermione shrugged at him defiantly, glaring up into his handsome face and hating the way she noted all the little things about him. The way his hair fell into his eyes. The way his blue eyes glittered with a dangerous sparkle. The way he really did look rather like the Norse god his nickname dubbed him.

She blinked when he stooped slightly, bending until he was on level with her. He lifted one hand and brushed his fingers along her jaw before cupping the back of her neck, his fingers twisting into her hair and forcing her to hold his gaze. She squirmed a bit but the grip he had on the back of her neck meant she couldn't really wriggle free of his hold. She opened her mouth, intent of telling him not to touch her and to get out of her way again, but he cut her off before she could say a word.

"You're not thinking big enough, Baby-girl," he murmured to her, his gaze boring into hers, those blue eyes of his full of unspoken promises of just what he meant to do to her in revenge. "Not nearly big enough."

He smiled then, a mean little smile that made her think of a snake preparing to strike. Flexing his fingers once against the back of her neck, he gave a little squeeze before releasing her and straightening once more. Hermione stared up at him suspiciously, but he seemed to have decided he'd spent enough of his evening on annoying first years. Stepping around her, Thorfinn Rowle strolled off down the corridor that lead towards the lower floors.

Hermione felt a chill slide down her spine when he began to whistle a jaunty tune as he went.
Thorfinn Rowle watched the curly-haired little Gryffindor girl across the Great Hall where she sat all alone, her nose buried in a book as she picked at her food. He'd been watching her daily since the incident in the library and keeping an even closer eye on her since their second encounter in the hallway when the little witch had caught him shagging Becky Selwyn. It was clear to him that Hermione Granger was a bit of a social pariah, even in her own house, for her studious nature and her utter swottiness. Something he'd experienced first-hand. He'd been contemplating how best to exact his revenge on the little tattle-tale for ratting him out mid blowjob weeks ago.

If he was being honest, watching the way she twitched and flinched every time she spotted him watching her or every time she had to pass him in the corridors was almost revenge enough. Almost. She was positively terrified of what he planned to do to her and the bravado she'd showed in the corridor after catching him with Selwyn seemed to have dried up again. Clearly his reputation, either as a short-tempered arsehole or simply as a Slytherin, proceeded him and the little cub was terrified of what he might do to her.

As well she should be.

The plans he had forming in his mind were beyond reprehensible but that was half the fun, wasn't it? The things he planned to do to that little witch would ruin her life. She'd almost cost him everything. His family. His future. His inheritance. His career. Even his merlin-cursed education. Her little act of tattling on him had almost ripped all of that away from him and he wasn't going to take that lying down. No, Thorfinn had a plan in mind that would cost her everything she had almost cost him. She was going to rue the day she drew his ire. Hermione Granger would one day lament ever having laid eyes on Thorfinn Rowle.

Not that he was actually all that pissed off at her for catching him and telling on him, when he thought about it. Sure, she'd ratted on him but he'd still come before being interrupted by Pince. He'd still ticked that off his Hogwarts Rite of Passage task-list. And anyway, it gave him an excuse not to have that awkward dismissive conversation with the Hufflepuff tart he'd talked into blowing him when he was done with her and no longer wanted to look at her sideways. Saved him the easy let-down that would undoubtedly have turned cold-fury shut-down when the pushy little swot wouldn't take no for an answer.

That said, he couldn't let the little lion cub think she'd got off scott-free for being a tattle-tale. That wouldn't do. If she wanted to survive this place the girl was going to have to stop being such a swot, get her nose out of those books, stop showing off in class - the Malfoy kid never shut up about her know-it-all ways in the classroom - and she was going to have to learn to keep shit to herself. Thorfinn wasn't above teaching the little brat. Even if she had kept quiet about Selwyn. She would learn to keep her mouth shut and she would learn that all of her actions had consequences. Unpleasant consequences.

The question was, how exactly would he do it?

He reckoned she wasn't likely to actually be intimidated by him if push came to shove. The little brat was rumoured to have run off after that troll that had broken into the school, intent on taking it on all by herself. If not for the Boy Who Lived and his ginger side-kick the swot would likely be dead. But if she had the stones to willingly seek out a fully grown Mountain Troll and try to take it
on by herself even though she was just an ickle first year, he wasn’t sure she'd be so intimidated by
him. She might looked petrified of what he could do to her but she would likely turn on him all
claws and fangs if she lost her temper.

Now that would be a sight to see. It had been sight enough when she’d snapped and snarled at him
the other night in the corridor, clobbering him with that heavy tome she’d been reading and
sneering at him as though he weren't twice her size and capable of literally snapping her in half in
he wanted to. She'd packed quite the magical punch too when she'd hit him with that Stinging Hex,
her magic lashing out spitefully in her fury with him.

No, the little swot might sometimes look terrified of what he might do to her but she was reckless
and daring and unafraid of the danger he presented. Her fear was all in the terror of the unknown –
the spine tingling chill of not knowing what was in the dark; the sick thrill of waiting for the axe to
fall, waiting for the blow to come. Thorfinn knew that fear well enough. The tactic of inspiring it
was a favourite punishment of his father's when Thorfinn had been a boy.

"How's the list going?" his best friend Antonin Dolohov muttered to him, dropping down to sit
beside him at the Slytherin table. "Got your tattoo yet?"

"Close," Thorfinn smirked, taking his eyes off the curly haired little witch who'd almost gotten him
expelled from Hogwarts. "Only about ten things left to go."

"Bastard," Dolohov grumbled. "Pince is like a fucking hawk in that library thanks to you getting
caught. Nearly took my head off for even being in the same row as a girl last night."

"Having trouble hitting your goals there, Dolohov?" Thorfinn needled his friend, smirking at him
in amusement. They'd begun their rivalry to complete the list in first year when the graduating
seventh years who'd completed their lists had passed down the legacy to the next generation of
students.

"How the fuck did you get caught anyway?" Antonin wanted to know, frowning. "You never get
cought breaking the rules."

"An ickle firstie walked up mid-way through," Thorfinn shrugged. "She ratted on me."

"That lion cub you keep glaring at whenever you pass her in the halls? I wondered what the fuck
you were doing perving on the kid."

"That's the one," Thorfinn nodded, ignoring the mention of perving that was clearly meant to get a
rise out of him. "The little bitch nearly got me expelled. Dumbledore wanted to kick me to the curb
but Snape and Headmaster Black's portrait talked him out of it."

"Tattling little bitch," Dolohov muttered darkly, levelling a glare in the direction of the little
Gryffindor where she was resolutely ignoring her peers while she read her book and picked at her
food. "I sweet talked Hastings into blowing me in the library last night but before I could even snog
the bitch, Pince was on us like a bloodhound, loitering and muttering about getting our books and
getting out of her library."

"She's still furious because Snape talked the rest of them out of expelling me," Thorfinn laughed.
"Tried to ban me from the library too, but Snape argued that I'd need access for my studies."

He chose not to mention what else Snape had said he planned to do to the woman to let him back in
the library. Thorfinn had been avoiding it whenever he could, only sneaking in to complete his
homework when he couldn't bully a younger student into getting him the books he needed or
couldn't sweet-talk one of the Slytherin girls into doing his homework for him.

"Good man, Snape," Dolohov commented.

"Should've seen his face when I showed him my list. Did that thing where his lips twitch when he wants to smile, but isn't allowed to encourage us," Thorfinn grinned.

"He earned his own tattoo before he graduated, even looking like he does. I reckon he'll be disappointed in anyone who fails," Antonin laughed. "What do you have planned for revenge on the firstie?"

"She's the one who went after that bloody troll at Halloween," Thorfinn grumbled, his attention returning to the little witch. "I was just going to scare the little brat into minding her own business, but I don't reckon she'll scare so easy. She caught me again a week later nailing Becky Selwyn in a corridor, interrupted us, suggested I probably had STDs, told Becky she was a trollop and then argued with me when I went after her. Hit me with a book, the little bitch."

"Letting her stew seems effective," Dolohov commented, eyeing the messy-haired Gryffindor girl where she was still reading across the hall. She glanced up every now and then as though sensing their gazes but she refused to look towards the Slytherin table. Thorfinn smirked to himself. He'd noticed after what he'd done when he told her she wasn't thinking big enough that she didn't much like making eye contact with him.

"It does, but not for long… I've been thinking it might be high time I started to use some of my inheritance to acquire some property actually," Thorfinn smirked cruelly and Dolohov's returning smile was beyond wicked.

"That's cold, mate. Mudblood, isn't she?" Antonin asked.

"Yeah," Thorfinn smirked, having done his homework on the little witch via less than savoury means. "Her filthy muggle parents are teeth healers. Got their own practice and everything."

Antonin's laugh was utterly gleeful and a number of their fellow Slytherins looked around in alarm at the sound, knowing well from their interactions in the common room that someone was in for a terribly bad time whenever Dolohov unleashed a laugh like that.

"Hitting the task for shagging in a teacher's office tonight," Thorfinn told his friend, changing the subject before anyone else could catch on. "Sweet-talked Calliope Perkins into it."

"You bastard," Dolohov growled. "I tried to talk her into letting me eat her during class and she turned me down."

"Try again next week, she muttered something about a schedule and not wanting to shag more than one different bloke a week or something," Thorfinn smirked at him.

"Whose office are you going to use?" Antonin grumbled, looking annoyed.

"Burbage's," Thorfinn chuckled. "The Muggle Studies bint. She's hardly ever in there because no one takes her stupid class. It'll be nice and empty. Reckon I'll be expelled if I get caught mid-coitus again so soon. I'm still in detention thanks to the cub too."

"Want me to rough her up some in punishment while you're scrubbing cauldrons?" Antonin offered.

"Maybe. Not too much though. You get too rough with the little ones and that one will report you
and have you out on your arse before you can say Quidditch. Dumbledore's watching me when it comes to that one too. He'll bust us both if you go after her too hard."

"Did they take you off the team? You've still been training?" he asked, nodding his understanding and shooting a glare towards the teacher's table.

"Tried to. Snape wouldn't allow it. Reckoned that it wouldn't be fair to remove me for something not Quidditch related and claimed that if they were willing to break the rules and let Potter play even though he's a firstie, it would be preferential treatment to Gryffindor, letting them break rules but not us."

"He does love to rub it in that the other houses get preferential treatment over us. Dumbledore can't throw you off the team then?"

"Don't reckon Snape will protect me if I'm caught again though," Thorfinn sighed. "So I might just have to make sure little lion cubs like that one don't catch me or make sure they hold their tongues. She's kept quiet after I shagged Selwyn, but you never know. Sounds like Snape put the fear of Merlin in her and she lost some respect for old Dumbledore when he gave her a pep-talk about avoiding investigation from the Board of Governors after that Hufflepuff chit got herself knocked up last year."

"I'll see what I can teach her about keeping quiet then, shall I?" Dolohov chuckled and Thorfinn smirked in return, recognising the blood-thirsty look on his best friend's face and knowing that no amount of trying to talk him out of it would keep him from roughing up the girl.

~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~

She'd been on tenterhooks about the Slytherin's revenge for over a month by the time any of them even hinted at making her pay for tattling on Rowle. He'd been given three months' worth of detention and the girl with him copped the same. Hermione had been beside herself, worried about what they might do to her. She was a bit disappointed when it all came down to being shoved over and having her bag stolen by a dark haired Slytherin boy she'd often seen Rowle with.

"Well if it isn't the squealing little pig of a Gryffindor," the boy taunted her when she was trying to get to the library to work on her Herbology essay for Professor Sprout after dinner on Wednesday evening.

She hadn't been paying attention to her surroundings as she walked, too busy muttering to herself about the books she would need and about Harry and Ron being so slack with their own homework. As such, she hadn't seen the bigger boy until it was too late. She crashed right into him in the corridor and he snatched her bag from her, letting her fall to the floor in an ungraceful heap.

Narrowing her eyes on the boy, Hermione pushed herself back to her feet, ignoring the sting in her palms where she'd scraped them on the stone floor of the corridor.

"Give me back my things, Dolohov," Hermione growled fiercely, drawing her wand and aiming it at the older boy while he began to rifle through her bag, dumping things out and generally making a nuisance of himself. Hermione loathed people like him. He was clearly delusional, operating under the impression that she would be intimidated by him just because he was bigger than her.

"Or you'll what, little piggy?" he sneered, tipping all her books out of her bag.

Hermione watched with dismay as her inkwells followed, tumbling to the floor where they smashed and splattered ink everywhere. Her quills floated out afterwards and she winced when he
stomped on one of them, snapping it in two. When he located the little bag she kept on-hand for her feminine products, Hermione forgot to care that he was bigger than her or that it was against school rules to duel in the corridors. She fired a Stinging Hex at him viciously and felt a little prickle of satisfaction when he yelped and dropped her bag before he could tip out her tampons all over the inky mess already upon the floor.

"You little bitch!" he snarled, glaring at the stinging red mark across the top of his right forearm.

"Go away, Dolohov," Hermione snapped. "And tell your stupid friend that if he has a problem with me, he should be a man and confront me himself, not hide behind his inept bum-buddy. Run along now and lick your wounds. You're not welcome here."

Dolohov narrowed his eyes on her and drew his wand in return, looking like he was about to hex her for her cheek.

Boisterous laughter met her ears before Dolohov could curse her and Hermione twitched at the sound. She knew it. She'd been on edge for weeks around Rowle. She'd picked up the ability to recognise the sound of his laughter without having to look at him. Some days she was relatively sure she'd be able to pick him out by the sound of his voice or even the scent of his cologne.

"Little kitten's got some claws," he needled, still sounding amused rather than offended. "Put your wand away Toshka, you can't curse a firstie for defending herself."

"She called me an inept bum-buddy," Dolohov argued with his friend and Hermione rolled her eyes.

"You deserved it. You just ruined all my books, smashed my inkwells and broke my quill. You better be grateful I didn't call you a bumbling baboon with an overbite or a knuckle-dragging Neanderthal," Hermione muttered, stooping to pick up her destroyed things. She flicked her wand, muttering cleaning charms to remove as much of the ink as she could from her books and her quills. She repaired the shattered glass of the inkwells too, but nothing could return the ink to the wells.

Rowle positively roared with laughter, clearly catching her words and noting the way she turned her attention to cleaning up the mess, not paying Dolohov any more mind even though he could likely hex her and make her life very uncomfortable. She supposed it was a risky move after insulting him and hexing him when he'd already been intent on making her life difficult.

"You need a fucking lesson in how to talk to your superiors, Mudblood," Dolohov snarled at her and Hermione glanced up at him, frowning over the term he'd used, not at all recognising it.

"When I find someone I consider superior, Dolohov, I'll be sure to remember that," Hermione fired back, making sure not to let her confusion over the term show.

Rowle was still laughing as she continued, straightening slowly to her full height and glaring up at both older boys unflinchingly.

"You're not afraid of us, are you, little lion cub?" he asked, eyeing her as though she were a puzzle he was trying to solve.

"Should I be?" Hermione challenged, tipping her head back to hold the gaze of the strapping blonde boy.

He looked very much like she imagined a Viking warrior might. Hulking muscular build, long blonde hair that gleamed in the torchlight, bright blue eyes that sparkled with mischief and danger.
He was easily half a foot taller than Dolohov and had more than two feet worth of height on Hermione herself thanks to her young age and short stature.

"Yes," he replied frankly.

"Of you? Or your..." she pursed her lips and swept a bold gaze over Dolohov. "Little friend?"

Rowle narrowed his eyes slightly for her tone but Hermione refused to back down. It had never been in her nature to back down from bullies who thought they could push her around and she wasn't about to start now.

"Both," he informed her.

"Yes, assaulted by a pair of grown wizards in a school corridor who can't do more than ruffle my feathers by stealing my bag and tipping my things out. How terrifying," Hermione deadpanned. "Honestly, I know first years who do more intimidating things to me than you two. If this is about that mess in the library last month, you've waited entirely too long to seek revenge and it's not a very effective way to discourage me from tattling on you by doing things that are so utterly childish. I feel like I should tattle all over again to make you realise you're both adults, not petulant little boys. I mean really, I'd expect this type of behaviour from the likes of Malfoy and his goons, but you two? This is how you put the fear of Merlin into a girl? Really?"

"Let me curse her," Dolohov practically begged and Hermione slanted a glare at him. "Let me curse the uppity little mudblood bitch, Rowle."

"You want to go to prison for murdering her?" Thorfinn asked, raising one eyebrow. "If you throw that curse of yours at her, she'll die and you'll land in Azkaban over an ickle firstie telling on me for getting blown in the library."

Dolohov looked like he thought it would be worth it just to pay her back for her sassiness.

"Oooh, what kind of curse is it? Something illegal?" Hermione asked pretending to be excited before letting her voice and her face go lax. "How predictable."

"Rowle," Dolohov growled, hatred glittering in his eyes. "Shut her up, before I do."

"Walk away, you bloody git," Thorfinn muttered to his friend, nudging him with his shoulder and attempting to shove him away down the corridor.

Dolohov resisted, lifting his wand and aiming it at her. Hermione felt just a little bit of concern when the big blonde idiot spun on his friend and shoved both his hands hard enough against the middle of Dolohov's chest that the other boy went flying backwards. Literally. He stumbled several steps, almost lost his balance, cursed and snarled profanity before spinning on his heel and turning away. Hermione watched him stomp off down the corridor, his wand still clenched in his fist.

"You need to be careful who you go making enemies out of, little lioness," Thorfinn propped one enormous shoulder against the wall and curled his inside ankle around the outside one as he regarded her. "He's not likely to forget that you humiliated him, even if it was just in front of me, or to forgive that you didn't have the good sense to act scared, even if you didn't feel it. You better watch it if you ever find yourself alone with him, Cub."

"Fortunately I make a point of never finding myself alone with dim-witted drongo's like him," Hermione replied evenly. "Are you intending to ruffle my feathers as well, Rowle?"

"Do I need to?" he asked, one golden eyebrow arching.
"It won't do you much good," Hermione shrugged. "It didn't last time, either."

"None of this would have happened if you hadn't tattled on me, you know?" he retorted.

"Don't do disgusting things in places where you can get caught and I won't have to report you," Hermione answered, refusing to back down from the idea that she'd done the right thing.

"Nothing disgusting about a little BJ, Granger," Thorfinn smirked at her. "You'll figure that out when you're older. If you're lucky."

"Maybe I will, maybe I won't. I know I won't be engaging in such an activity somewhere like the library where just anyone could happen along and catch me," Hermione retorted.

Rowle snorted at her. "Half the fun is in the risk of getting caught, kid."

"You're twisted," said Hermione. "Now, thanks to your stupid side-kick, I need a new quill and will have to fetch fresh inkpots to finish my homework. So, thanks very much for all that."

"It's not like I upended your stuff," he protested, looking wickedly amused by her attitude.

"He's your trained monkey, I don't doubt he did this on your orders. The bastard better hope I don't catch him doing something disgusting and illegal or I'll make sure he gets expelled."

"Feisty little thing, aren't you?" Thorfinn chuckled at her reply, shaking his head slightly. "Just… don't be a tattle-tale, you hear? You'll get a lot worse from others than just him if you tattle on people for breaking the rules all the time. No one likes a rat, kid."

"Plenty of people like rats, they make interesting familiars," Hermione retorted snidely.

"You're a real piece of work. No wonder so many people avoid you. How'd you get those two gits to talk to you anyway? I know you didn't have any friends before that business with the troll," he said meanly. Hermione bit her lip, looking at her feet as she tried not to let the words affect her.

It didn't work very well and she felt tears filling her eyes at the mention of how Harry and Ron had only decided to be friends with her when she'd lied to a teacher instead of tattling on them. Turning on her heel, Hermione made to walk away from him and she heard the older boy sigh heavily.

When his large hand closed over her small arm, Hermione shook it viciously, trying to dislodge him from her person so she could cry without being seen. She didn't need anyone thinking she was a wimp in addition to a swotty know-it-all and a snitch.

"Tell me something, little lion cub," Rowle said quietly, bending slightly until his eyes were level with hers as he'd done after the Selwyn incident. His fingers pressed insistently against her chin until she had no choice but to lift her head and meet his gaze. "What were you thinking running off after that troll?"

Hermione blinked at the older boy, startled by how alarmingly handsome he was from up close when he wasn't threatening her; his were eyes a brilliant shade of sapphire blue that seemed to sparkle in the firelight.

"I didn't run after it," Hermione admitted in a whisper. "I skipped the Halloween feast because I was in a bathroom crying after Ron said I was a nightmare, just for helping him in class and making him look stupid by being able to do a spell when he couldn't. He said it was no wonder I didn't have any friends. I was still in there when the troll got in and found its way to the bathroom where I was crying."
"Why does everyone think you went looking for it?" Rowle asked, his brow furrowed at her answer.

"Because it found me. Harry and Ron – having heard I was in the bathroom crying because of what Ron said – came looking for me when I didn't return to the common room like everyone else. They fought it while I crawled around on the floor trying to keep from being clubbed to death. I lied to the teachers and said that I went looking for it and they saved me to keep from being in trouble for seeking the troll out and to keep anyone from knowing what they'd said to make me cry in the first place," Hermione whispered miserably. "They're only friends with me because I lied to cover their bums. Because I broke the rules."

Hermione pulled away from him as the tears overflowed from her eyes and trickled down her cheeks. She ran down the corridor without looking back at the blonde Slytherin boy.
Thorfinn didn't speak to Hermione Granger again until after Christmas. The little Gryffindor girl was practically the farthest thing from his mind, if he was being honest. With his NEWTs on the way and the amount of homework the teachers plied them with, Quidditch matches, Quidditch training and the number of tasks he was still trying to tick of his Hogwarts bucket list, the last thing he had time for was wasting brain power on some tiny, crazy-haired Gryffindor mudblood. At least outside of the acquisitions he was making privately that would later prove rather unfortunate for her, in any case.

The only time he gave the girl any thought at all in the lead up to Christmas was when he had to elbow Dolohov in the ribs to keep him from glaring at the girl, Toshka's grudge against her festering as she continued to do well in her classes and continued to show disdain for his dark-haired Slytherin friend. He had far more important things to think about. Currently, the thing he was thinking about most was focusing on extremely boring facts about Quidditch history in an attempt to keep from blowing his load inside the tight little Ravenclaw witch he'd talked into shagging him as a means of relieving stress.

Something she'd needed more than him and a vulnerability he had preyed upon when he'd caught her having a mental breakdown over the latest homework they'd been given from Snape. She was biting his neck, clawing his back and gripping his cock so tight with her hot, wet pussy that it was all he could do to hold off until he got her there – he had a reputation to maintain, after all.

"Really?" a rather resigned voice sighed from somewhere behind him just as the girl in his arms climaxed, her body clamping down on his and beginning to spasm as she found her release.

Thorfinn followed the little bint over the edge, realising as he did so that he hadn't even bothered to learn her name and ignoring the voice for the time being.

"What is with you and public displays of indecency?" the same voice asked of him, penetrating the orgasmic fog created as he blew his nut.

Thorfinn blinked stupidly for a moment.

"You say something?" he grunted at the witch he'd just hard-fucked against the wall of the fifth floor corridor.

"No. Oh my god, what have I done?" the witch in his arms was muttering, beginning to squirm against him to be let down.

"Over here, genius," that snarky voice called for his attention a third time and Thorfinn looked over his shoulder to spot a curly-haired little lion cub leaning her shoulder against the wall and looking comically disgusted and yet somewhat amused by the sight before her.

"You again," he growled when he spotted her.

"It would be really nice if I'd been able to get through each term without having to see you part-naked again, Rowle," Hermione Granger informed him, her arms folded as she stared at him.

Her cheeks were pink with embarrassment at the state he was in, his arms still hooked under the
Ravenclaws bare thighs and his cock going soft inside the squirming witch.

"Rowle? Oh god. Down. Let me down now, you Neanderthal!" the witch hissed, beginning to writhe for release now and Thorfinn lowered the girl back to her feet, pulling out of her even as she ducked down trying to grab hold of her knickers where they were puddled on the floor at his feet.

"Don't forget the fucking Contraception charms," he called when the now-crimson Ravenclaw snatched up her things and dashed off down the hall. "Oh, and you're fucking welcome!"

The witch didn't look back and Thorfinn heard the little lioness snort as though amused by his behaviour. Given that his cock was hanging out of his trousers and his shirt was unbuttoned, he supposed he looked a sight.

"Enjoying the view, ickle firstie?" he asked, slanting at glance at the younger girl.

"Try to be decent, would you?" she asked, clearly even more swottish than ever.

"Not going to run off and tattle on me this time?" he sneered, tucking himself back inside trousers and fastening them as he turned toward the little witch.

"You'll be gone by the time I can alert a teacher," Granger shrugged her shoulders at him. "Are you an exhibitionist? I've read about those."

"What kind of shit are you reading, kid?" he snorted, rather amused by her nosy question and noting the way she dragged her eyes over the expanse of his chest where his shirt hung open, revealing the muscled planes of his abs.

"My mother has peculiar taste in reading material and sometimes I run out of books when I'm at home," the girl shrugged at him. "So, are you one?"

"Not that I know of," he shrugged in return, "Are you a voyeur?"

"I imagine anyone who has ever viewed pornographic material or accessed erotic fiction would be considered a voyeur to some extent," she replied, her brow wrinkling a little as though they were having a philosophical debate rather than discussing porn.

"You're a weird kid, you know that, right?" he asked, sauntering toward the little thing and noting that she didn't seem alarmed by his advance.

It looked as though sometime over the Christmas holidays, she'd gotten over her preoccupation with the idea that he might hex her. Maybe she'd seen the number of times he had to prevent Dolohov from hexing her and decided it would be in her best interest to keep him on her side rather than turning them both against her. Maybe she was innocent enough to believe he wasn't playing her for a fool.

"I'm not the one getting my jollies in the hallways," she retorted. "Must you continue to engage in such behaviour where it might offend my eyesight? I'd have rather preferred never to have seen any more of you naked than the glimpse I got in the library at the start of the year."

"Perving on me, Granger?" Thorfinn smirked at the little witch.

"Dream on, Rowle," she replied.

"What are you doing up here interrupting me mid-fuck anyway, lion cub?"
"Trying to get to my common room so I can ditch my bag before dinner," she said. "What are you doing up here, snake?"

"Shagging," he winked at her. "By the end of the day the teachers don't bother coming up here unless they have to. Come here, would you?"

"What? Why?" she asked him, raising her eyebrows and looking alarmed as he beckoned her toward him.

"Just do it, kid," he grumbled at her, buttoning his shirt slowly and fixing things so he was properly attired – if rumpled – once more.

"You're not going to hug me, are you?" she asked cautiously as she approached. "You're covered in essence of Ravenclaw and I don't want anyone to think I'm responsible for that goofy look on your face right now."

"You're real mouthy sometimes, do you know that?" Thorfinn narrowed his eyes on the curly-haired little swot before dropping down to sit on one of the benches along the corridor and tugging on her arm until she toppled into his lap. She squeaked in surprise to find herself there, clearly awkward and not trusting him as far as she could throw him.

A wise move on her part.

"Hey!" she protested, squirming immediately when he looped his arm around her middle and propped his chin on top of her bushy-haired head.

He arranged her easily, noticing as he lifted her to shift her slightly that she weighed next to nothing. She was too young and too small to feel any heavier than a blanket. Warm too, he noticed, settling her better onto his lap and refusing to let her go despite her protests.

"Try not to wriggle, kid," he warned her. "Or you'll trick the other head into believing round two is a viable option. Just hold still."

"Thorfinn Rowle, you let go of me this instant!" the fussy little thing demanded, ceasing her squirming but continuing to try and pry his arm from around her waist. He found himself alarmed by the way he kind of liked the sound of his full name on her tongue.

Shit, that wasn't right. He was meant to be tricking the little swot into befriending him so he could better manipulate her in future. He was not supposed to be intrigued by the way she said his name.

"Hush up and hold still would you, Granger?" he grumbled. "Just sit there and don't wriggle while I hold you for a few minutes."

"No, let go of me this instant. You're covering me in essence of Ravenclaw. Honestly, it smells like a perfume shop threw up all over you. It's disgusting," Granger protested and Thorfinn snorted at her words.

"Is a bit strong, eh?" he chuckled, all the more amused that she was complaining about the other witch's scent but not his. "No wonder she was having a nervous breakdown when I ran into her. Probably can't think past the noxious fumes of... what is that? Vanilla?"

"Vanilla and orchids, I think," Granger replied dryly, drawing a breath in through her nose before coughing as though she'd been gassed. "In any case, it's nauseating. You should bathe. Also, I think it should be noted that it's extremely alarming that you're currently forcing a twelve year old into a post-coital snuggle just because your tart ran off when she realised just whom she was shagging."
Not that I blame her, of course. Clearly her perfume made her delirious and you've taken shameless advantage of the girl."

"Such a piece of work!" Thorfinn laughed at her snarky tone even though she stopped wriggling. She remained rigid in his lap, reclining against his chest, but still making it obvious she didn't want to be touching him at all. "What's your damage anyway, lion cub? You're too young to be knowing about exhibitionism, voyeurism, porn or shagging."

"I'm twelve, thank you very much," she said. "And it's hardly my fault I'm mature for my age and better at conversing with adults than other children. Not that I talk to adults about such things, but I do read."

"You're muggle-born, right?" he asked, his arm belted across her narrow waist as he tried to put his brain back in order.

He couldn't rightly say why he'd pulled her into his lap rather than just down to sit on the bench next to him. He was planning to blame post-shag dopiness if anyone saw him at it, anyway.

"I hardly see what that has to do with my levels of maturity and the topics of conversation I happen to be knowledgeable about."

"Everything, actually. From what I hear, Muggleborns tend to be ostracized by muggle children for their magic. You relate better to adults because the other kids didn't want to play with the weird kid who exhibits accidental magic."

"They don't want to play with me when they realise how thick they are compared to me either," she admitted, sighing softly and relaxing slightly against him. Thorfinn smirked to himself at the habit she had of admitting her faults without restraint. It was a trait that would probably get her into trouble later, but he kind of liked her bravery in owning up to them rather than projecting bravado like a Slytherin would.

"That means you're knowledgeable about all things sex related too then?" he asked curiously.

"In theory, yes," she replied calmly. "I am only twelve."

"You're going to be trouble when you're of age, kid," he chuckled again at her tone.

"I'm never trouble. Would you care to explain to me why you're hugging me, Rowle? I was under the impression you found me to be a nuisance who almost got you expelled for your indecent behaviour."

"You are a nuisance who almost got me expelled," he reminded her. "But you're also currently holding still. Not used to having the girls I nail run off when I'm done with them. They all want to snuggle or whatever."

"And yet here you are, snuggling me, while your tart is nowhere in sight. Careful Rowle, you might get a reputation as a needy, post-coital cuddler."

Thorfinn snorted at her attitude and pinched her lightly through her clothing in punishment for her sass. She didn't respond to the attack and instead fell silent, simply choosing to sit quietly and not squirm. He kind of liked that. Her wild hair was tickling his neck where she leaned against him, the unruly curls winding themselves free of the bun she'd pulled them into. She was tiny compared to him, emphasizing her young age and small stature in comparison to his own.

"How's the NEWT study going?" she asked conversationally when he sighed and closed his eyes,
leaning against the wall and trying to organise his scattered thoughts thanks to his recent climax. Merlin, he needed sleep.

"A nightmare," he answered honestly. "Do yourself a favour Granger; take as few NEWT level subjects as possible. Pretty sure I'd have failed last term if not for Snape's insistence on me doing homework in detention."

"I'm planning on taking as many as OWLs and NEWTs as I'm allowed," she informed him and Thorfinn snorted at her naive innocence.

"You'll change your mind after your OWLs," Thorfinn said. "They don't call them Nastily Exhausting for nothing, Kitten."

"I like exams," she replied. Thorfinn noted the way her hand on his wrist, where she'd been trying to get him to release her, began to idly trace a pattern against his skin.

"Of course you do, I've heard all about your know-it-all ways in the classroom. The firsties complain that you brown-nose too much."

"They're just annoyed because they don't know the answers and it gets me more house points if I'm answering questions," she dismissed the topic with a shrug. "Are you planning on letting me go sometime this afternoon, Rowle?"

"I haven't decided yet," he chuckled. "You're really warm for a kid in a skirt."

"Given the energy you've been expending, shouldn't you be hot and sweaty? Everything I've read on the subject suggests your activities make one hot and sweaty," she asked, clearly puzzled by his answer and Thorfinn couldn't help but laugh.

"Twelve year olds reading erotica is disturbing, Granger, you know that, right?"

"Less disturbing that stumbling across your naked behind every other week," she retorted. "Yeah, yeah," he rolled his eyes. "Don't pretend you don't perve on me. You interrupt me on purpose, I'm sure of it. Which makes you a cock-block, by the way. Don't be a cock-block, Princess."

"I believe that term is only relevant if one keeps another person from actually convincing anyone to sleep with him," she argued. "All three times I've interrupted you, you were already engaged in the act and therefore not blocked from committing it. Now, I might accept being called a sadist if my interruptions led to a lack of completion of the act."

"You're twelve and you're getting technical with me about sexual terminology," he shook his head, laughing heartily. "Odd little thing, you are."

That's a matter of perspective," she argued.

Shaking his head slightly, he didn't bother arguing with her further. He let his eyes drift closed as he leaned against the wall of the otherwise deserted corridor, the little lion cub was quiet on his lap and felt alarmingly good there. He noticed idly, beyond the scent of his Ravenclaw conquest, that Granger smelled like lavender and green tea, floral and sweet, yet refreshing. Much better than the sickly sweet and heady concoction his latest conquest had been wearing, in any case.

The feel of her fingers continuing to trace a soft pattern against the back of his hand and the top of his forearm combined with the post-shag sleepiness and his already overworked state lulled him
towards sleep.

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Hermione sighed softly when she felt Rowle relax beneath her. The tension drained from his muscular form and the arm he'd belted across her waist loosened until he simply held her for the sake of it, rather than to restrain her and keep her in place. She suspected from the way his breathing evened out that the hulking Slytherin had just fallen asleep right there in the corridor. The idea amused her more than it had any right to and she chuckled very softly to herself. He was rather comfortable to sit on, actually.

She supposed she ought to get up, get to the common room, put her things away and then make her way down to dinner before Harry and Ron began wondering where she'd gotten to, but right at that moment she didn't much feel like it. Ron had been grumbling during class that he had lots of incomplete homework and Harry was supposed to have Quidditch training, so she knew that if she went back to the common room after dinner, Ron would likely corner her and try to talk her into helping him with his homework. Which almost always ended up with her doing it for him when he got distracted or pouted because he didn't like her critique on his assignments.

The alternative, of course, was to hide out in the library doing her homework there, but Ron was getting cleverer about finding her and apparently rather gifted at hide and seek. If she hid out there for too long, he almost always located her and nagged her to help him. She was put out with him anyway because he'd been rude to her in class when she knew the answer to a question and he didn't. As though it was her fault she did her homework readings and he didn't?

That, or she could stay right where she was on the lumbering Viking of a Slytherin's lap, soaking up the warmth of his impressive form while he napped. If she was being honest, the appeal of staying right where she sat was strong. He was comfortable and underneath the wretched sweet perfume of his trollop, he smelled delicious. The citrus and smoke scent of his cologne was rather intoxicating and he was comfortable. More to the point, Hermione found she enjoyed the feel of being touched.

Her parents had always been very affectionate with her when she'd been young, pulling her into hugs quite often or into either of their laps or into snuggling cuddles on the couch when they watched films together. As her primary source of comfort, being away from them was hard. Especially when she hadn't managed to really fit in here at Hogwarts any more than she did outside of it. She missed them often and she missed the warmth and comfort provided by a simple hug.

Harry and Ron weren't particularly affectionate. Ron got funny about being touched and Harry, she had noticed, tended to flinch away from her hand slightly if she ever held it towards him. The few comments and things he said, combined with his actions led her to believe that the muggles he'd been raised by were rather cruel to him. As such neither of the only two friends she'd managed to make at Hogwarts were overly forthcoming with their physical comfort.

Thorfinn Rowle, on the other hand, was currently willing to curl and nap with her in his arms and pressed against his large frame. He was warm, he smelled nice and most importantly, he had initiated the contact. Hermione wondered if he simply did it for the reason he'd said – that the girl he'd shagged had run off and he wasn't used to not providing post-coital snuggling. Did he maybe crave comfort in the form of human touch too? She doubted that many Slytherins were overly forthcoming with affection of any kind. Everything she'd witnessed when keeping both eyes peeled for this one and his annoying friends suggested that they weren't even very close. They might laugh and joke and spend time together, they might also be willing to do just about anything for one another.
But they didn't seem friendly and warm and affectionate the way she'd been taught to be. They were cold. Collected. The love-you-from-a-distance types, as her mother referred to such people. She wouldn't be surprised if underneath it all, they craved physical contact too. Rowle's propensity for finding himself between a witch's thighs certainly suggested he enjoyed intimacy. And Hermione wasn't above taking shameless advantage of his willingness to cuddle just because some other girl had turned down the offer.

She liked to be cuddled and if he was going to offer it – even in the form of his taking a nap whilst holding her – Hermione would take it. Fishing one of the textbooks she'd borrowed from the library out of her school bag, Hermione shrugged the heavy sack from her shoulder and let it fall to the floor beside Rowle's feet. She shifted as little as possible, wriggling slightly until she was in a bit more comfortable a position. When she was reclined against his chest where he slumped against the wall, Hermione opened her book and began to read, sighing softly to herself in contentment.

The corridor they were in was a little-travelled one and Hermione doubted anyone would happen along and spot them. Probably the appeal of Rowle using it to shag in the first place. Sinking into the depths of her book, Hermione soaked up the warmth and comfort offered by pressing her body against that of another human being's and she smiled softly to herself as she perused the pages until it grew too dark in the corridor to read by without having to constantly stop and wave her arm to trigger the sensor and keep the torches of the corridor lit.

Rowle snored very, very softly, the faintest snuffling sounds of disquiet thanks to his undoubtedly uncomfortable choice for a sleeping spot and Hermione closed her book, setting it aside and simply listening to him breathe for a little while. She really ought to go. Someone was likely to notice her absence. People would certainly notice his. More importantly, she was frenemies with this boy. She kept catching him in delicate positions and she had seen more of his anatomy than anyone else's except her own, but she had almost gotten him expelled.

He had told her point blank that he would pay her back; that he would get revenge. And that she wasn't thinking big enough with ideas of teasing, name-calling or hexing. What did he have in mind then? She'd spent much of her holidays pondering it and asking her mother about the inner workings of the male mind, trying to figure out what he had planned. He seemed to be of two minds about her. On the one hand, he had gotten into trouble because of her and kept being interrupted mid-coitus by her. Thus he disliked her and certainly never showed her any favour or friendship in front of anyone else. She often caught him looking in her direction in the corridors or across the Great Hall, his gaze speculative, narrowed or even hostile at times.

Yet on the other hand, he seemed rather intrigued by her abrasive nature, her willingness to stand up for herself and for what was right. Her standing up to Dolohov had caught his attention and her rudeness to Rowle himself seemed to have intrigued, amused and annoyed him all in equal measure. He could have been hostile at being interrupted again today, but he hadn't been. Instead he'd talked to her in a mostly civil way and had pulled her into his lap before promptly falling asleep.

Twisting slightly on his lap until she was perched upon one of his powerful thighs, Hermione peered at him through the flickering firelight. His golden hair gleamed even in the faint light, a messy sprawl of blond locks. It was long, hanging to his shoulders and resting against the black of his robes haphazardly. Some of it hung over his face, his eyes currently closed in slumber.

He was unbearably handsome, if she was being honest. With a high, proud forehead, a straight nose and perpetually pouting lips, he was easy on the eyes. He already had a few faint creases across his forehead from frowning in concentration or anger. Hermione knew he was easily angered and prone to violence when enraged. She seen him lose his temper with more than one
person last term, NEWT level study clearly stressful and draining on him.

His eyes were one of his most alluring features when they were open, often glittering with mischief, malice or mirth. The brilliant blue of them was breathtaking and she berated herself silently for the fact that her initial wariness for the boy had begun to morph into admiration and perhaps even a little infatuation. She had lectured herself about it at length over the holidays. He was too old for her, easily five or six years her senior. He was going to graduate at the end of the year and she would be stuck at Hogwarts. He had an explosive temper and he had threatened to exact revenge on her.

The worst thing she could possibly do was develop a crush on the boy but Hermione suspected it might already be too late for that.

Watching him carefully as he slept, Hermione wriggled slightly in his hold, trailing her fingertips over the hair that had fallen across his face and tucking it behind his ear. She marvelled at how thick it was and yet how silky it felt against her skin. Unlike her own coarse nest of curls, the tawny strands of Thorfinn's hair were soft to the touch and silky smooth. Tucking the pieces of what she suspected had been a stylishly cut fringe that had been allowed to grow out, behind his ear, Hermione looked over his sleeping face carefully before noticing the way the long strands of his hair almost immediately tried to fall back into his face.

Without even really thinking about it, Hermione found herself reaching into the pocket of her robes where she carried a small green velvet drawstring purse filled with hair accessories. When she'd first been taken to Diagon Alley, her dad - knowing how much she struggled to tame her riotous curls - had spotted a number of wizarding products designed to better help control wild locks. The man also had a tendency to spoil her and to lose control of his exuberance. Inside the purse Hermione carried hair ties, leather strings, ribbons, clips, pins, and all manner of other hair accessories.

A particular favourite her father had liked when he spotted them were some decorative gold hair-beads. Charmed to snap closed over the end of a plait – having discovered the best way to tame her curls was to plait it all together, he'd insisted on buying her a packet of twenty goblin-made gold beads.

The problem was that her hair was too dark for such a colour without drawing all manner of attention that Hermione didn't want to be attracting. She'd never worn them but she still carried half a dozen of them around with her. They might not suit her hair colour, but they would blend right into the golden mane Thorfinn sported. Twisting her fingers carefully into the hair just behind his left ear, Hermione sectioned off a small segment and began to plait it until he had one long, narrow blond plait, making him look all the more like a Viking warrior.

Fishing one of the gold beads from her purse, Hermione closed it around the end of the plait, watching it clasp the hair and hold, securing it in place to keep it from unwinding once more. The colour was almost a perfect match, the bead gleaming in the firelight from the torch across the hall.

"What are you doing, Kitten?" the sleep-rasp voice of Thorfinn Rowle startled her so violently that Hermione squeaked and almost toppled right out of his lap. She would have done if not for the way his arm tightened around her once more, continuing to hold her against him.

He hadn't tensed other than his arm, giving no indication of when he'd woken and how long he'd been watching her play with his hair.

"You scared me," Hermione whispered, wide-eyed as she lifted her gaze from the bead she'd put in his hair to meet his gaze.
He still looked tired, his eyes ever so slightly bloodshot, but he looked a little bit better rested.

"Were you playing with my hair?" he asked, her, tipping his head to one side.

"It kept falling in your face," Hermione defended, her cheeks turning crimson as she averted her eyes.

"It always does," he agreed. "What did you do?"

"I... plaited a small section," Hermione admitted.

He reached for the section she'd been playing with and missed. She'd done the plait small and narrow, almost unnoticeable amid the thick locks. When he combed his fingers through it, trying to find it and missed again, Hermione reached for it, picking it up and guiding his hand to it. His fingers slid the length of it slowly until they encountered the bead at the end.

"What's this?" he asked, his brow furrowing slightly.

"One of these," Hermione dug into her purse again to fish out another one. She held it on the palm of her hand to show it to him.

His frown deepened for a moment before he reached for it, lifting it up to the light and examining.

"You put one of these in my hair?" he asked carefully, his gaze drifting to her face.

Hermione was still too embarrassed at being caught to look at him and she resisted for a moment when she felt his fingers press gently against her chin, tipping her head up until she had no choice but to meet his gaze.

"You can take it out," Hermione said, feeling self-conscious and bracing for his rejection of the unsolicited gift. "I just thought... well, the colour suits your hair better than mine. Makes you look more like a Viking too."

His blue eyes darted between each of her brown ones for several long seconds in silence.

"Do you know what these are? What they represent?" he asked, tipping his head to one side.

"They're just beads," Hermione shrugged. "I got them at Diagon Alley when I turned eleven but they don't suit me. Give it back if you don't want it."

He blinked at her slowly before something flashed in his blue eyes and a mean grin flew across his face. Just for a moment. Then it was gone again and a curious expression replaced it.

"And if I keep it?" he challenged.

Hermione shrugged again, "Looks better in your hair than mine. I can put more in, if you want? I've got a few of them."

He smirked at her slowly, his fingers still pressed under her chin to make her hold his gaze.

"Maybe another time, little lion cub," he murmured. Hermione's cheeks turned crimson again when he brushed the pad of his thumb over her lips gently, making them tingle. "How long have I been asleep?"

"A little over an hour," Hermione admitted softly.
"Couldn't you get free?" he asked, his thumb still tracing her lower lip while she perched on his left thigh.

"I..." Hermione blushed again, trying to look away from him when he looked so intrigued and so amused.

He didn't say anything as he waited for an answer but it was very clear from the expression on his face that he was waiting for an explanation about what she was doing on his lap an hour after he'd fallen asleep.

"You're really warm," she whispered finally. "And comfortable. And I didn't want to go back to the common room and listen to Ron nagging me for help with his homework because he was rude to me in class today. I knew he'd find me in the library and no one else ever seems to use this corridor since it takes longer to get to Gryffindor Tower. So I just..."

"Stayed put," he smirked at her, finishing her sentence. "I take it this is yours too?"

He reached for the book she'd set aside before she'd begun playing with his hair.

"It got too dark to read and I had to squirm a lot to make the torch keep coming on," Hermione explained.

"So you started playing with my hair instead?" he chuckled, teasing her lightly when Hermione blushed again.

"Sorry," Hermione whispered, nervous and jittery in his presence now that he was awake and tormenting her.

"Don't be," he murmured. "You can play with my hair any time you like, Baby-girl."

Hermione blushed at the pet names he insisted on using every time he spoke to her. This was not at all conducive to the idea of her keeping from fancying him.

"I should go," Hermione whispered, noting how sleepy he still looked and feeling rather unsettled by the way he was looking at her.

There was cunning in those blue eyes of his and Hermione had to remind herself that he was a Slytherin first. Any means to achieve his ends would undoubtedly be used and Hermione worried that he might do any number of things to her in order to achieve his final goal of revenge upon her.

"Probably," he agreed with a small nod, still watching her.

Hermione nibbled her bottom lip and began to wriggle, intent on climbing off his lap. He stopped her before she could, holding the bead he still clutched out to her.

"Do you want me to put this one in too?" Hermione asked softly, taking the small gold trinket from his hand.

"If you want," he nodded, smirking at her just a little.

Hermione looked him over carefully.

"Do you want me to?" she asked, frowning it him slightly. "I'm not sure I trust you, Thorfinn Rowle."

His mean grin was back at her words.
"That's good, because you really shouldn't," he replied evenly. "But I'm not going to prevent you from playing with my hair if it takes your fancy, Princess. Put it wherever you want."

"You're not just going to pull them out later when you're friends spot them?" Hermione asked. "They'll probably tease you about them. They look like the immature type."

"I hardly think they'll find anything funny about being given such a gift," Thorfinn told her quietly. "I don't know about muggles but wizards find very little amusement in the trading of body-adornment trinkets."

"Don't say it like that," Hermione wrinkled her nose at him. "They're just beads."

"They're designed to be worn so that others can see them and know I was given them," he disagreed. "Trust me Granger, no one who sees them is going to laugh at me."

There was something in the way he said it, in the way he seemed so sure, that made her feel a bit brave. Shifting across his lap to sit on his other thigh, Hermione combed her fingers through his long blonde locks carefully, her cheeks turning pink once more. Thorfinn held still as she did it, selecting several strands of hair that rested against his temple. She made sure to pick the hair from the under-layer, sectioning it off carefully and beginning to wind it into a tight plait.

When she clamped the bead closed on the end of the plait once more, Hermione smiled softly, feeling a little hum of something inside herself that felt alarmingly like happiness.

"You like doing that, don't you, Baby-girl?" Thorfinn asked her, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Yes," Hermione admitted bravely, her cheeks still pink.

"Good, you can put more in whenever you want, alright?" he asked.

Hermione nodded her head, climbing off his lap and watching as he handed her bag and her book to her before getting to his feet himself. He was still wearing his mean little grin as she nodded and he stretched before he spoke again.

"Excellent," he hummed. "Then you and I have an understanding, Hermione Granger."

With that said he winked at her cheekily, turned her by her shoulders in the direction of Gryffindor Tower and walked away in the other direction, heading back towards the lower levels of the castle. He didn't bid her goodbye as he went but Hermione found herself watching over her shoulder as he left just the same. She felt funny inside at the sound of him saying her name for the first time. She felt another strange buzz of what felt suspiciously like magic inside herself at the way he'd said they had an understanding, as though there was something significant about it.

Shaking her head to herself, Hermione pushed the silly thoughts aside, scolding herself for her ridiculous and growing infatuation with the boy. She walked away and put the entire exchange out of her mind.
When the pop of Apparition announced the arrival of a House Elf two floors later, Thorfinn Rowle couldn't say he was even a little bit surprised.

"Master? Is you alright?" Quincey asked in a squeaky voice. The little thing dashed around in front of him to block his path, looking over him for injuries.

"I'm peachy, Quincey," Thorfinn smirked at the elf.

"But Master... my bonds to you... they is..." Quincey blinked at him before the tiny female elf snapped her fingers, her eyes narrowed as she looked up at him.

Thorfinn watched in some amusement as the elf levitated herself to be on eye level with him, her sharp eyes picking up the gleam of the two gold beads in his hair easily enough. He held still as his personal elf reached for the beads and examined them closely.

"Master... you is...?" Quincey asked, her eyes lit up with all the hope only elves seemed able to express at the prospect of having someone extra to serve.

"It's an understanding, Quincey," Thorfinn told the elf quietly. "One she doesn't know that she's just initiated and one I've yet to reciprocate."

"But you has acknowledged it, yes," Quincey nodded. "They is not the usual trinkets given for such things, Master. She is special, this one."

"She is young, yes," Quincey nodded, still fiddling with the solid gold beads in his hair. "But she is strong. Quincey feels, Master. This one is strong. She be good for Master, Quincey thinks. She be same as Mistress Pandora, yes?"

"A muggleborn?" Thorfinn nodded his head slowly. "My Father will throw a fit when he finds out. Don't you go telling him either, Quincey. I'll not have him knowing and trying to do the girl in. I forbid you from sharing her identity with him unless not doing so would end a life."

"Of course, Master," Quincey agreed smiling toothily. "Mistress Pandora will be so pleased when you tells her, Master. What is her name, Master?"

"Hermione Granger," Thorfinn told the elf. "And don't get too excited, Quincey. This isn't permanent and won't be formally acknowledged for a long time. She's still just a kid."

"Magic don't care about age, Master. Quincey knows," Quincey argued quietly. "Why is it not permanent?"

"Because I'm going to use it to destroy her," Thorfinn told the elf. "She nearly got me expelled last term. Nearly ruined my life. I plan to ruin hers."

Quincey blinked her big owlish at him and looked sceptical.

"If Master says so," was all the elf said on the matter.
"I need you to find me everything you can on her, Quincey. Health records. Grades. Don't worry about things like property. I've already got hold of those things. Dig into her family. How many cousins does she have? Aunts and uncles? Where do they all live? Everything you can get for me. I also want a daily report on what she's up to, alright?"

"Master is Quincey to show Quincey to the little Mistress?"

"Not if you can help it," he shook his head. "Not unless she's in danger or I ask you to. She'll be confused if she sees you and I don't want her catching onto our arrangement and my plans until I'm ready to reveal her undoing."

"Quincey understands, Master," the little elf nodded, smiling softly as she allowed herself to levitate back to the floor where she stood, peering up at him.

"Master?" Quincey asked after a few moments of silent debate.

"Mmm?" he asked, raising one eyebrow at the little thing.

"Quincey is pleased you changed your mind Master. When you was home you telled Master Talon that you would never have such understanding or bond with a witch. Quincey cried all night when you said that, Master."

Thorfinn's mouth twisted grimly at the reminder of the explosive argument he'd had with his Father over the Christmas holidays when his father had begun discussing the notion of seeing him engaged and beginning to settle down. He'd even invited several witches and their families over for dinner in the hopes of arranging a match. Thorfinn had smirked his way through every one of them when the little trollops all tried not to blush crimson over the fact that he'd already fucked most of them, either whilst at school with them or outside of it at the number of Pureblood Elite functions he was expected to attend.

Astrid Parkinson had dropped her wine glass when he'd winked at her across the table while no one was looking. Druella Carrow had choked on her appetizer when he'd put his hand up her skirt under the table during the meal. Cassiopeia Greengrass had tripped on her high heels when he'd been escorting her around the gardens of Rowle Tower and had whispered in her ear that he had plans to get grass-stains on her knees before he was letting her leave for the evening.

He'd done it too and Thorfinn knew his father had spotted the stains on Cassie's knees as she was ushered out the door with her parents later that evening. The argument that had followed had been beyond explosive and if not for his grandmother discreetly dousing the fireplaces, they likely would have burned the place down. His father had screamed at him about the indecency of seducing his potential wife out of wedlock, about the disrespect to the witches to have shagged them all before entering into any kind of formal arrangement.

The man had just about blown the roof right off the house when Thorfinn had told him that he had no intention of marrying any of the uppity little pureblood swots his father was trying to marry him off to, no matter the political alliances it might buy them. When he'd gone on to insist that if his father tried to have any hand in seeing him married before he was good and ready for marriage - many years from now - he would never take a wife and the name Rowle would die with him unless his little sister were to conceive out of wedlock.

That particular argument had nearly bought him an early grave. All mention of the idea that his sweet, obedient little sister - Reina - would ever do anything but be a proper, pureblood princess, chaste and demure and innocent forever, almost drove his father mad.
The princess of the family, doted upon and adored by both his mother and father, Reina was an angel in their eyes. Admittedly, the mention of the notion had rubbed him the wrong way too. His baby sister was much too special to him to ever consider letting any rotten bastard lay his hands on her. He was grateful he would be out of Hogwarts before she would be attending next year, otherwise he was sure that by the time she was of an age where boys showed an interest in her, he would rip them limb from limb.

Discussion of her conceiving out of wedlock had driven his father into a rage that had ignited ever fireplace in the Tower and almost cost his mother her favourite tapestry. Only his grandmother's intervention had kept him and his father from murdering one another.

"I didn't mean to make you cry Quincey," Thorfinn told the small elf who'd been with him since he'd been just a boy. "I simply didn't like the witches Father was trying to fob off onto me."

"They was no good for you, Master," Quincey nodded. "They be much too amenable to your will."

"You don't think I need a witch who'll do as I ask her?" Thorfinn snorted, raising one eyebrow.

"Oh no, Master Thorfinn needs a witch who won't be afraid to scream at him, even when he makes the fires jump. Master be needing a witch who will push his limits and make him so mad he will want to rip her hair out and wring her neck. The type of witch who will bend to Master's will, she be no good for Master. Master Thorfinn would get bored. Quincey knows. Quincey raises Master Thorfinn. Master always be getting bored when Quincey gives him what he wants, no objections. Master used to throw his toys from the tower tops when he was given them without a fight."

"You saying I need to be challenged or I'll pitch a fit?" Thorfinn chuckled at the elf's assessment.

"Oh yes, Master. No challenge for Master, no interest to Master. This witch with whom you have arrangement, is she challenging, Master?"

"She hits me with books and tells me I'm a Neanderthal and a moron and a sexual deviant," Thorfinn chuckled. "But that's not the point. She's still a kid. Only two years older than Reina. And until I reciprocate with some form of jewellery in kind, it means nothing. Even when I do, it won't be permanent, Quincey."

"Magic don't care about age, Master," Quincey repeated, shaking her head from side to side as she peered up at him. "Quincey fetches records now, Master."

Thorfinn nodded with agreement at her eagerness to fetch what he'd asked her for. The elf bowed deeply before disapparating with a soft pop.

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Weeks passed before Hermione dared to even look in the direction of the Slytherin table after the incident with Rowle in the hallway. Hermione herself had been busy. She'd spent as much of her time studying as she could, going out of her way to borrow as many books as she could from the library, reading them all and returning them once more. She largely put Thorfinn Rowle and his sexual deviousness out of her mind as she went about studying for her classes.

Exams were drawing nearer and Hermione could feel the strain upon the teachers, the other students and even the castle. She often found herself searching for reference books to do her classwork that other students had already checked out or were already using. She was frequently denied permission from Madam Pince to borrow many of the books she wanted for light-reading purposes in case NEWT or OWL students needed them for exam study. People had begun having
breakdowns.

In the Gryffindor common room two weeks prior, Percy Weasley had shouted himself hoarse when some third years decided that a game of Exploding Snap was in order. He'd been red in the face and positively frothing with rage by the time Professor McGonagall had arrived. Matters hadn't been helped by the fact that Ron's elder twin brothers, Fred and George, had further goaded Percy by spilling ink on his homework, tripping over his collection of books and making them all topple and then pretending to apologise to their brother profusely for their clumsiness. Hermione had looked on rather disapprovingly at the way the twins had goaded their elder brother until he'd screamed.

In the Great Hall just yesterday, another breakdown had occurred. This time it was a seventh year Ravenclaw girl by the name of Arabella Hastings. Hermione recognised her as being the Ravenclaw she'd last caught Thorfinn shagging in the corridors. The poor thing had broken out in boils all over her skin, crying and blubbering into her pumpkin juice at breakfast. She'd heard it had all been a build-up of pressure pertaining to exam study, combined with the obvious horror of having Double Potions that morning with Snape. Hermione had been told by a first year Ravenclaw named Terry Boot that Hastings had sobbed in fear of the failing grade she anticipated on her most recent essay.

Things were getting out of hand as exams drew closer and a number of other inconvenient things had been happening for Hermione as well. Harry had taken to wandering the halls late at night beneath his Invisibility Cloak. Muttering about a mirror that showed his parents and how it had been moved. She, Ron and Harry had all received detentions for being out of bed after hours with Hagrid while the man foolishly hatched a dragon egg in his little wooden cabin upon the grounds. They'd been sent into the forest looking for dead unicorns and what might be killing them. Even more alarmingly, poor Harry had encountered just what had been killing them. Hermione had a terrible fear that for all that the history books said He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was vanquished, the thing killing the unicorn was him. Harry had said it had floated like some sort of bodiless wraith.

Hagrid's slips pertaining to Nicholas Flammel and her subsequent research into the wizard had taught her that there was a Philosopher's Stone and that it could make a person immortal. She was convinced that the thing killing the unicorns wanted the stone and that it was acting through one of the teachers to get it. Snape seemed the most likely, given how creepy he was, she just didn't understand why a respected teacher would be trying to assist a wraith at all, let alone one that might very well be You-Know-Who. As such, things had been rather hectic for Hermione.

That, combined with her embarrassment over being caught playing with Rowle's hair whilst sitting on his lap and her embarrassment over having him know she had preferred to sit on his lap while he slept than to seek out one of her friends had meant she hadn't had much time or inclination for keeping an eye on the big blond Slytherin. She hadn't dared to look at him for too long, lest she notice whether or not he still wore the beads she'd put in his hair and whether or not he was looking at her.

Despite her distraction, her interest in him had only grown and Hermione was fairly certain she was nursing a small crush on the boy. Sighing to herself, Hermione glanced towards the persistently giggling Hufflepuff girls a few tables over from here where she was sitting in the library, trying to write the foot long essay Snape had demanded on the uses of moonstone in potions. A group of five fourth-year Hufflepuff girls had wandered their way into the library and Hermione was thinking seriously about hexing all of them.
Every few minutes they would all giggle again, none of them paying attention to their studies. Hermione narrowed her eyes on them as she glared at them again, trying to figure out what they were laughing at. All of them were looking across the library towards something out of Hermione's line of sight. Leaning carefully, Hermione shifted at her table slightly until she could see what had so captured their ridiculous attentions.

There, sitting at a table surrounded by scrunched up wads of parchment, an empty inkwell, a broken quill and more books that she could poke a stick at was none other than the Slytherin boy she was harbouring a crush on. Hermione supposed that the girls must be laughing at his handsomeness, trying to earn his attention or something equally annoying. He was very nice to look at, after all. It was hardly surprising that they would be trying to gain his favour but they were going about it the wrong way.

From the looks of the books surrounding him and the frustrated scowl on his face, he was in the middle of studying and looked like the last thing he wanted was stupid, giggling girls interrupting his train of thought. Hermione blinked when his long hair all fell forwards into his eyes while he was bent over the desk writing something. It was even longer than it had been weeks and weeks ago when she'd been playing with it. Hermione watched in some amusement and sympathy when Rowle loosed a low growl of annoyance, swiping his hands through the blond locks and forcing it all back away from his face so he could continue to study.

As he did so, she caught the gleam of a gold bead hanging from a small plait leading from his temple and she smiled, more pleased than she had any right to be to know he was still wearing her beads in his hair. Closing her own books and beginning to pack up her things, Hermione knew she wouldn't be able to get anything else done with her evening when those stupid girls giggled again.

Tucking her essay, quill, ink and books back into her bag, Hermione got to her feet just in time to see Rowle's hair fall into his eyes again. He cursed quietly before dropping his quill and snatching up his wand. Catching the evil intent in his eyes as he grabbed a fistful of the long blond locks, Hermione realised he was about to use a slicing hex on the strands and potentially give himself the worst haircut of all time. Hurrying over to his table, Hermione fished her hair-accessory purse from the pocket of her robes as she went.

She didn't even stop to think about announcing herself or about how it might look for her to appear out of nowhere and help herself to his person. She simply did so. Scooping her fingers through the long golden strands, Hermione pried them all from his fist, unearthing a long black leather string from her purse. Sweeping all of the strands back from his hairline, Hermione gathered the offending strands that had been annoying him and tied them all together with the leather throng.

"Who…?" Thorfinn was in the process of growling, making her job harder when he turned his head and tried to see who was assaulting him.

His scowl died right there on his face when he spotted her wrapping the leather into his hair to make it look manly rather than like he had a weird ribbon holding his hair back. She made sure to only tie the upper layers, leaving the long mane of tawny locks from behind his ears and his nape loose and free about his enormous shoulders.

"Princess?" he asked, blinking bloodshot eyes at her stupidly for a moment.

"Hold still, could you, Rowle?" Hermione asked him quietly as she tied off the throng until none of the hair was annoying him anymore.

"Where did you come from?" he asked, clearly surprised to see her.
"Over there," Hermione nodded. "Your fan club disturbed me with their asinine giggling over your frustrations here."

He raised one eyebrow and Hermione tipped her head in the direction of the Hufflepuff girls. Her fingers were still toying with sections of his hair and Hermione watched the way he glanced at the girls before looking back toward her and rolling his eyes in disgust. She found herself working another plait into his hair as she looked at him, fixing a bead into the end of it with a soft snap.

She felt a strange little hum of happiness course through her as she did so and she noticed that the girls across the room had stopped giggling now.

"Jealous, Kitten?" Rowle asked her, quirking one eyebrow at her.

"Of what?" Hermione blinked at him in return and he smirked at her widely.

"You can keep doing that if you want," he told her shifting his head slightly when her fingers toyed with the idea of another plait near the nape of his neck.

"I'm not annoying you or distracting you?" Hermione asked as she plaited another one and fixed a fourth bead into his hair.

You stopped it all falling in my face," he told her. "Not sure you could annoy me tonight, after that. Come here, would you?"

He reached for her, scooping one arm around her waist and pulling her towards himself.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked him, frowning. "You're supposed to be studying, Rowle."

"You don't have to keep calling me that, you know?" he asked, grinning. "You can call me Thorfinn or Thor if you like. You've seen me naked, I hardly think formalities need to be observed. Stop squirming, would you? I want you to sit here."

He shifted back slightly on his chair, pointing to the cushion between his thighs.

"How are you going to study if I sit there?" Hermione asked, raising both eyebrows as the butterflies in her tummy all began to flutter violently.

"You're aware that you're tiny, right, little lioness?" he asked her, smirking now. "I mean to work around you. And don't give me that look, I doubt you actually object to sitting in my lap again and I know you can read quietly and not distract me. Hell, you managed to sit quiet and read while I slept and didn't disturb me. It'll be fine."

Hermione blinked at him in confusion even as he pulled her down into his lap and manipulated her over his thigh until she bum was firmly on the cushion between his legs. She hated herself a little bit for the fact that she suddenly found herself craving the physical contact of being pressed against anyone in a hug as she'd done last time she'd been on his lap. She hadn't been hugged or touched so much in weeks. Not since the last time she'd been in his lap. And much like she'd done last time, Hermione found herself relaxing slightly against the warm strength of his body as she sighed softly.

"You're making even more people dislike me than already did," Hermione told him softly, lowering her bag to the floor between her feet when she felt him prop his chin on top of her head.

"Those slags?" he asked, clearly referring to the Hufflepuffs, all of whom were looking scandalized and outraged at her behaviour and the obvious fact that he'd just pulled her into his lap without a care in the world about who might see them or what people might think of a seventh year Slytherin
snuggling with a first year Gryffindor.

"More people who will want to hex me in the hallways," Hermione nodded. "This is all your fault, Thorfinn."

"You're the one who's playing with my hair in public, Baby-girl," he muttered to her his arm sliding around her waist and shifting her slightly on the cushion until she was pressed back against him, her back to his chest until his warmth enveloped her completely.

Hermione hated herself all the more for the riot of butterflies over his continued insistence on using pet-names for her. Rather than commenting and potentially saying something stupid, Hermione reached for her bag between her feet, fishing her textbook back out of it and burying her nose amid the pages. She heard Rowle snort at her behaviour even as he picked up his quill once more and began scratching out information on his essay.

She was surprised by how easily he was able to work with her sitting where she did. He was much bigger than her and the orientation of the chair and the desk meant he could easily reach around her but he didn't at all seem to mind having her pressed to him, her book resting against the edge of the table while he continued his research. Unable to help herself, Hermione found herself reading the essay he was working on, noting it was a detailed, NEWT level Transfiguration essay pertaining to Animagi and how the transformation could be achieved.

Having not yet learned about it, she read the essay avidly and when Rowle put his quill down to reach for another textbook on the subject, clearly looking to double check his facts, Hermione found herself picking it up and correcting the sentence structure he'd been using. She didn't even think about the fact that he might object or that she was interrupting him and drawing attention to herself as she sat there correcting misspelled words, adding the proper grammar needed in parts and scratching out whole sentences before re-writing them in her neat script above his widely spaced, rather messy run-on scrawl.

"Having fun there?" he asked her when she scratched out an entire paragraph about the use of mandrake leaves in unlocking the properties within the magical core to allow for the transformation to begin, re-wording the entire thing.

"Hmmm?" Hermione asked, not really listening as she corrected his work.

He snorted in amusement at her distraction, Hermione noticed idly.

"You're a funny little thing, witch," he accused her softly. "You've pissed those Hufflepuffs right off; you're correcting NEWT level work despite being a first year; you've made an enemy of Dolohov and you're currently snuggled up with the bloke you almost got expelled. This despite the number of times you've seen my cock, my arse or both, all three times in incidents of sexual deviousness that had nothing to do with you. Most first years are terrified to talk to me."

"Are you complaining because you don't want me to correct your poorly worded sentences, Thorfinn Rowle?" Hermione asked him mildly, still scratching away with his quill.

"Hells, witch, don't full-name me unless I'm in trouble, yeah?" he chuckled. "Makes me think my mother's about to rip me a new one. Call me Thor, would you?"

"I can't do that," Hermione shook her head.

"Because you barely know me, despite the snuggling, the seeing me shag and seeing me naked bit?" he scoffed.
"No," Hermione disagreed. "Because Thor is the name of a Norse god and though you might look very much like a lumbering blond Viking, I don't much fancy the idea of referring to you as though you're a deity. Your ego is rather big enough without that, I think."

He began to laugh at her words.

"Only you would think about shit like that, Princess," he muttered, his mouth by her ear sending her tummy-butterflies into a gymnastics routine. "You actually have a problem with calling me Thor?"

"I do," Hermione nodded.

"Too formal calling me Rowle," he went on, musing quietly. "Especially given our understanding."

He was quiet for a moment and Hermione jumped slightly when he reached up and swept all the curls away from her right shoulder before pressing his cheek against the side of her neck, hooking his chin over the top of her shoulder and leaning into her a little more. His free arm curled around her waist once more, pressing her against him in what could only be a cuddle.

"You can call me Finn, if you want?" he said very softly and Hermione got the feeling from the way he pressed his hand flat against her stomach and the tone in his voice that he never let anyone call him Finn. That if she were to do so, she would likely be the only one addressing him that way.

The idea of having something special to call him without using a pet-name she would stammer over and blush about was entirely too appealing to her and Hermione began to suspect she was in trouble. She had had crushes in the past of course, silly little things that meant nothing with muggle boys she'd been to primary school with. But this was different. He was a seventh year student. He would be graduating within the year. He was already seventeen and he undoubtedly did not think of her in any manner that could be considered anything other than platonic. If she was being truthful she doubted he even thought of her all that fondly.

"Finn?" she whispered, rolling the name around in her mouth and getting a feel for it.

"Mmm."

His hum of affirmation made her feel a little more confident.

"You don't mind?" Hermione asked. "Does anyone else call you Finn?"

"No one," he replied. "Except my grandmother when she was really happy with me when I was a kid. Not in more than ten years."

Hermione nodded her head slowly. Just as she was opening her mouth to say something, the words died on her tongue. Across the library, wandering around with an essay dangling from one hand and clearly searching for her was none other than Ron Weasley. He looked confused and frustrated, as though he was annoyed that it was taking him so long to find her. Hermione would bet he'd just realised they had an essay due for Flitwick tomorrow – the one she'd been nagging him about all week. He clearly needed help on it and the last thing she felt like doing was working on Ron's essay for him when he inevitably got bored of it.

The pressure of knowing when it was due and knowing that he would be angry and put out with her if he didn't get it done in time to submit tomorrow would likely result in her writing the stupid thing for him and Hermione was getting rather tired of that already. Her whole body went tense at the sight of the red-haired boy who was clearly on the look-out for her but had yet to spot her, obviously not expecting her to be sitting in the lap of a seventh year Slytherin boy.
"Avoiding your little friends again, Cub?" Finn whispered in her ear, his arm tightening around her middle subconsciously as though he were reacting to the way she tensed and her sharply indrawn breath.

"He's going to try and make me write his essay that's due tomorrow," Hermione whispered. "The one I've been nagging him to write all week."

"That right?" Rowle asked and there was a tone in his voice as though the idea annoyed him.

"It's due first thing. He'll nag me for references and then ask me to read his introduction, check the first paragraph. Then he'll get tired and bored and his mind will wander and I'll be left to finish the essay for him to avoid feeling guilty if it's not ready for class tomorrow," Hermione sighed, shrinking in on herself and pressing back against Rowle even more. She found herself wishing she could drop right off the cushion and hide under the table to keep from being spotted.

"Hold still, Princess," Finn muttered in her ear. "And don't gasp. This will feel funny."

Taking up his wand, the blond wizard tapped her on the top of the head and Hermione shivered when it felt like someone had just poured a goblet of water over her head to trickle down the back of her shirt. Disillusionment charms. Holding perfectly still, Hermione even held her breath as she waited for Ron to scan the section of the library before he moved on, obviously unable to see her. He barely spared a glance in Thorfinn's direction, dismissing the elder Slytherin quickly.

When he moved off again, Thorfinn lifted the charm.

"Tell me again why you're happy to sit here and correct my work but don't want to help your friend with his homework, Kitten?" Thorfinn teased lightly.

"Because you've done the work yourself and have no expectation that I'll write it for you while you goof off playing cards or chess," Hermione replied, sighing. "Thank you for hiding me."

Thorfinn shrugged, jostling her slightly in his lap.

"I take it I don't even need to ask if you've done your essay?" he asked just the same.

"I've had my Charms essay done since the day it was given to us," Hermione told him. "I was working on my moonstone essay for Snape until your fan club's giggling drove me mad and I spotted you trying to give yourself a bad haircut."

"Yeah, saved me from that horror," Thorfinn chuckled. "My mother will be so disappointed. She's been waiting for me to get frustrated enough with my hair that I cut it myself or burn it off, for years. Since I was about fourteen."

"She doesn't like that you wear it long?" Hermione asked.

"Hates it," Thorfinn told her. "Thinks it makes me look scruffy and I that overdo the Viking bit. Descended from them, you know? Dad's side. Mum hates it. Says I'll never get a decent job with hair like this."

"Didn't I hear rumours that you're angling for a professional Quidditch career?" Hermione asked in reply.

"Been keeping tabs on me, Lioness?" he teased.

"Ron follows the leagues extensively. I was under the impression after the last match that you've
been approached by the Bats?" Hermione shrugged, blushing pink at his teasing just the same.

"You really are a know-it-all, Princess," Finn chuckled quietly. "The Bats made me an offer a few weeks ago to play for them when I graduate, but I haven't accepted it yet."

"Why not?" Hermione asked. "If you want to be professional player, why aren't you jumping at the chance to accept their offer?"

"I'm holding out to see if the Arrows will offer me a spot," he admitted. "One of their Beaters will be retiring at the end of the season and I reckon I'm a shoe in."

"The Arrows are your favourite team?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah, plus their home pitch is in Appleby. I don't much fancy moving to Ballycastle to play, but I will if I have to."

"Why would you have to?" Hermione asked, baffled, "You're a wizard, just Floo over there."

"The leagues practice every day," he scoffed. "And International Floo is rough, even between here and Ireland. International Apparition is worse. The likelihood of getting splinched increases tenfold. I'd likely kill myself trying to get to practice. I'd have to move over there to play for them."

"Oh," Hermione said.

"You know what Apparting and Portkeys are, right Kitten?" he asked a few minutes later and Hermione felt her cheeks turn pink.

"I know what a portkey is," Hermione admitted. "Though I've never seen one in action. Apparation is like tele-porting, right?"

"What's tele-porting?" he asked in return.

"Disappearing from one place and appearing in another," Hermione explained.

"Yeah, that pretty much it," he chuckled. "Only it feels like being squeezed through a long straw. Makes you a bit squeamish. Most people vomit the first few times they try it."

"Delightful," Hermione grumbled, taking his quill from him again when he misspelled several words in the sentence he was writing because he was distracted.

"Snippy little thing," Finn muttered to her and Hermione rolled her eyes, giving the quill back and returning her attention to her book.

Thorfinn continued on with his homework, adjusting her against him whenever he needed to bend over and reach for something. Hermione found she didn't even mind. He was warm, he smelled delicious and he didn't interrupt her reading even when he did move her. She didn't know how long she sat there with him, pressed back against his chest, enjoying the silence but for the scratch of his quill and the occasional muttering he loosed when he would read aloud from one of his books when he found contradicting facts.

"Oi, what are you working on?" Dolohov's obnoxious voice intruded sometime later when Hermione was lost in the pages of her textbook and Finn was still muttering to himself about the pros and cons of animagi.

Hermione felt the way Thorfinn's arm around her middle tensed slightly, pressing her to him a little
more firmly as though he were acutely aware of the fact that he ought not to be getting caught with
her sitting in his lap.

"And what the fuck have you done to your hair, you bloody git?" Dolohov was laughing, eyeing
him with amusement before his eyes fell on Hermione as she slowly looked up from her book.

Hermione didn't doubt her eyes were wide with alarm at her position between Thorfinn's legs.

"I see you've captured yourself a mudblood as well," Dolohov's smirk was cruel as he glared at
Hermione. "Holding her hostage for something?"

At that moment his loud voice summoned Madam Pince and Hermione looked back down at her
book, her cheeks burning crimson.

"This is a library, Mr Dolohov!" the librarian scolded. "If you cannot keep your voice down, you
will be removed immediately."

She was so intent on shushing Dolohov and Thorfinn had so many books spread over his work
desk that Pince didn't seem to see Hermione nestled against his chest, trying to make herself as
small and invisible as possible.

"Mr Rowle, I expect you to put every one of these books away when you are finished them or you
will serve another month's detention," Pince went on to scold Finn when she was done with
Dolohov.

She bustled away without another word, obviously not noticing Hermione where she sat or not
objecting to the position she was in if she did notice.

"You've got something foul stuck to your robes, there mate," Dolohov said when Pince was out of
earshot, throwing himself into the seat across the desk from where Rowle was sitting and clearing
enough space for himself to get his own homework done.

"Where've you been?" Finn asked rather than commenting on Dolohov's rudeness.

Hermione decided to hold her tongue for the time being. She still hadn't been able to figure out
what the word 'mudblood' meant, though she could tell it was an insult. She'd tried looking it up,
but hadn't had any luck. She suspected from the vicious way Dolohov liked to use it that it wasn't
something polite to say, even if only uttering it to determine the meaning of the word.

"Just got through with number eighty-seven on the list," Dolohov smirked at his friend.

"Shit, with who?" Thorfinn chuckled, leaning forward a little to whisper across the table.

"One from every house," Dolohov winked. "Hastings was the Ravenclaw, you knew about Kendra
as the Slytherin. Snogged that weird little Metamorphmagus bird from Hufflepuff. And I just got
done with Camilla Brown for the Gryffindor. Not that she was thrilled about it, mind you."

"How many have you got left?" Thorfinn asked the dark haired boy.

"Only eight to go," Dolohov smirked, "I'm going to need a hand with number ninety-three."

"Yeah, I know," Thorfinn chuckled, "Next week. Monday night, I reckon."

"Careful, you don't want to go tipping of the little tattle-tale of what we'll be doing," Dolohov
sneered in her direction, but Hermione ignored him.
"She's not going to tattle on me ever again, are you Princess?" Finn spoke for her, his lips moving to her ear.

"Depends on what you do, Finn," Hermione replied, still not looking up from her book, her cheeks turning pink and the butterflies in her tummy fluttering at the contact. "If you break school rules badly enough, I most likely will."

"After everything I've done for you?"

"I do hope you're not referring to the idea of concealing me from my friends as being a great service worthy of my eternal gratitude to you, Thorfinn Rowle. You will find yourself sorely mistaken," Hermione told him.

"Do I even want to know what she's doing in your lap?" Dolohov asked, raising one eyebrow at their exchange and eyeing Hermione like he might still enjoy hexing her if he could get away with it.

"I call it 'sitting'," Thorfinn drawled in return.

"Bit young for snuggling, isn't she mate?" Dolohov asked. Hermione glanced up to see him wearing an expression that might have been one of concern if not for the lingering disgust and hatred for her that glittered in his eyes.

"Toshka?" Thorfinn asked, lowering his voice slightly.

"Yeah?" Dolohov queried.

"Blow me, mate," Thorfinn told the other boy, causing Dolohov to laugh.

"Perhaps my accusation of being bum buddies wasn't so far off," Hermione muttered just loud enough for both wizards to hear her, though she kept her eyes on her book.

"Keep it up, you little fucking bitch," Dolohov began darkly, "and I'll see to it that your mouth is otherwise occupied in future."

"Don't be disgusting, Dolohov, she's a fuckin' kid!" Thorfinn growled low at the other wizard. "Just back the fuck off. You deserved it for calling her a mudblood. Don't provoke her if you can't handle it when she pokes you back."

"Now you're defending her?" Dolohov asked, looking surprised. "She nearly got you expelled, Thor. She nearly fucked your entire life right up, and you're defending her? Snuggling with her?"

Hermione didn't see the expression Thorfinn shot the other boy. She did see the way the fireplace within the library across the room suddenly roaring, the flames leaping halfway up the chimney and causing several people to exclaim in surprise. She got the feeling Thorfinn was responsible.

"Don't get fiery with me, Thor," Dolohov narrowed his eyes at the blond wizard. "I was just stating the obvious. She's too young for snuggling. She's a tattle-tale. She's a mudblood, and she's a fucking Gryffindor. And she's a rude little swot, to boot."

With all of that said, the dark haired boy lowered his eyes to his paper and Hermione watched the way Rowle's fist clenched around his quill until it looked like it was going to snap. The fireplace grew even more out of control and Madam Pince came rushing over, wielding her wand to try and tame the flames. Plucking the quill from his grip with some difficulty before he could destroy it, Hermione tried to diffuse the tension by pulling his essay closer and editing it again.
"Is she seriously doing your homework?" Dolohov asked a little while later when Hermione was close to finished, re-writing a sentence that made no sense whatsoever.

"Is he seriously this dense all the time?" Hermione asked of Thorfinn in retort, being sure to parrot Dolohov's tone.

"You two are going to be the bloody death of me with this bullshit," Thorfinn grumbled, taking his quill back so he could continue writing his essay.

"Don't you have somewhere else to be, lion cub?" Dolohov asked, his dark eyes lifting to rake over Hermione subjectively for a few long moments.

He looked like he was seeing her for the first time.

"Nowhere that doesn't involve doing other people's homework for them rather than simply correcting Finn's," Hermione replied evenly.

She eyed the boy in return, noticing his faintly scowling features and rather loathing him for how handsome he looked in spite of the scowl. His dark hair had a few waves in it, his cheekbones were chiselled and his chin was sharp. He had just the faintest dusting of stubbled lining his angular jaw and his dislike for her was obvious.

"What'd you call him?" he asked, looking amused by the address and smirking a little.

"Finn," Hermione replied, shrugging her shoulders delicately and feeling the way her body brushed against Thorfinn's.

Hermione watched the way Dolohov's eyes lifted to Rowle's face above her own, his eyes questioning and looking confused and a little scornful as though he were expecting Finn to scold her for calling him something she suspected he discouraged others from calling him. Thorfinn shrugged his shoulders at Hermione had done, his much larger body jostling hers as he moved. As he did so, some of his hair fell forwards to tickle her neck and Hermione brushed at it idly.

When the brushing was ineffective, Hermione set her book on her lap and twisted slightly in Thorfinn's lap. A section of his hair almost directly next to the plait she'd put behind his left ear – the first one she'd put in – was the culprit for tickling her. Hermione didn't even think about it as she began segmenting it off before weaving the long golden strands into another plait, making him look all the more like a Viking by the second. She held the end of the plait one-handed whilst digging into her purse with the other.

Another of those happy little hums of magic seemed to fill her as she closed the bead around the end of the plait and watched with swing before it tinkling softly as it collided with the one beside it. A soft chuckle left Thorfinn, so quiet she felt it more than heard it. The sound of sputtering drew her attention and when she looked back across the table at Dolohov, Hermione found him staring at the pair of them wide-eyed. His jaw dangled, his mouth open in surprise as his gaze darted between Hermione's face, Rowle's, and the plait she'd just put in his hair.

"She just… you…" he spluttered.

Hermione felt Thorfinn's arm around her middle tighten slightly as she shifted to a new position on the cushion, reaching across the table for a book as he went on with his essay, seemingly ignoring his friend, though he stared at him.

Dolohov's eyes flashed with sudden understanding before they widened again, jumping back to meet Hermione's confused look over his reaction to one little plait. When a wretchedly cruel smirk
crawled across his face, Hermione felt a chill run down her spine and she leaned a little more firmly against Rowle, drawing on his warmth to ward off her sudden unease.

It only grew when Dolohov whispered, "Bloody hell!"
Thorfinn found Antonin watching him from his bed in the dungeons several hours later. He had his arms folded over his chest and he was reclining on his bed, watching and waiting for Thorfinn to finish bathing and to be on the way to bed. It had taken him hours to get his essay finished. Hours of sitting in the library with a certain little lioness perched on the cushion between his legs and reclining against his chest as though she belonged there.

"Do you know what you're doing?" Antonin asked without preamble. Their fellow seventh years were already asleep, having turned in much earlier.

Thorfinn could see Pucey's arm hanging off the edge of his bed, one leg thrown free of the sheets. Across the room, snoring obnoxiously, Thorfinn could also see Bulstrode's massive form. The other three boys sharing his dormitory all had their curtains drawn or were yet to retire to their beds for the night. Shaking his head at his fellow Slytherins, Thorfinn focused his attention on his best friend, towel-drying his hair with one hand and making two of the gold beads tangled in it click together repeatedly.

He didn't have to be a genius to know what Antonin was referring to.

Granger.

Granger and her beads and the understanding they'd come to.

"Yeah, I do," Thorfinn nodded his head slowly.

"You've got a bloody understanding with her?" Antonin demanded. "Have you reciprocated? How long have you been wearing those things?"

He nodded his head towards the four beads now at home in his hair.

"She put two in it weeks ago," Thorfinn shrugged. "And I acknowledged it. Haven't reciprocated yet, but I mean to. Waiting for an excuse to give her something without making her suspicious immediately. If she keeps up with editing my bloody homework, I'll give her something as a show of gratitude for getting me through my bloody exams."

"Fuck!" Antonin cursed. "Weeks? You've had an understanding with the witch for weeks and you didn't fucking tell me? She's a filthy mudblood, Thor!"

"It's not like I'm actually going to go through with it, you idiot," Thorfinn rolled his eyes. "She's going to learn what it's like to have her life ruined, I get my revenge, and I can get on with shit without my folks nagging me."

"You…" Antonin began hotly before he stopped, "You're not actually going to marry her?"

"What the fuck do you think?" Thorfinn scoffed. "It's just an understanding. It'll drive anyone who knows what's what in our world away from her and she'll find herself screwed over when she learns what else I've done to exact my revenge. Dropping her at the end of all this mess will only hurt her
"And until then? Those types of arrangements come with fidelity clauses and shit, mate. Violating them has unsavoury effects, alerts the other person, makes them volatile and cranky. What are you going to do when she's old enough to start screwing around and you fly off the handle and kill someone? You already have fuck all control over your temper."

"She's twelve," Thorfinn rolled her eyes. "And she won't know about that. Hell, she won't even know about the understanding unless she looks it up at some later date. Or unless it's still in effect by the time someone else tries to form an arrangement with her or tries to bloody marry her."

"Do those kinds of things even work that young? Magic is about intent, if she doesn't know what it's supposed to represent in our culture, she won't have the intent to spark the bond," Antonin mused.

"Oh, it works," Thorfinn told him, smirking and tossing his towel on top of his trunk. "Every time she puts another bead in my hair, I can feel it strengthening the bond that's already forming."

"How are you going to reciprocate? When we graduate she's not going to keep sending you beads or be putting shit in your hair. And if you keep in contact with her once we're out of here, she's going to think that you're playing her, especially if you ever asked her for more beads. The bond will fizzle out if you don't renew it often enough with physical touch, additional trinkets or regular meetings."

"I'll send her things anonymously," Thorfinn shrugged, "Birthday gifts and that sort of shit. Something new every year will uphold it until I can unveil how thoroughly I intend to fuck her over. Until she grows up old enough that I can actually fuck her, too. She'll think she has an admirer and she doesn't know the meaning of being given jewellery in our culture. She had no clue how serious a thing she'd done when she put the first bead in my hair. Shrugged it off with a "They're just beads," comment."

"And if she doesn't wear them? You won't know if she does or doesn't unless you stalk her."

"You think I'm an idiot, mate?" Thorfinn chuckled. "Quincey knew what had happened the minute Granger put the bloody things in. She's giving me daily reports on every move that little lion cub makes. She and the Potter kid are apparently trying to get their hands on something called the Philosopher's Stone."

"Bloody hell," Antonin sighed, shaking his head slowly though a cruel grin was crawling across his face. "You mean to hijack her entire life, don't you?"

Thorfinn smirked widely.

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"Damn it, Entwhistle, you're not even trying to help!" Thorfinn snarled a week later as he and his friends attempted to pull their senior prank to tick number ninety-three off all of their lists.

"Fuck you, Rowle!" Entwhistle growled in return from the other side of the statue they were all attempting to levitate into the middle of the teacher's lounge. The biggest statue they'd located within the school – a wretchedly ugly piece shaped like the terrible spawn between a troll and a Thestral. Something, incidentally, which had already been dropped on Entwhistles's foot more than once.

"All of you jam the arguing and hurry the fuck up before we get caught," Antonin snapped. "If we
get expelled when I've only got three Merlin cursed things left on my fucking list, I'm going to personally murder the whole lot of you."

"Bite me, Antonin," Pucey snapped, having been put in a sour mood by also have the heavy statue dropped on his foot.

Some shoddy healing spells later and they had been on the move again but the bastard was pouting.

"I'll bloody well start with you, Pucey, you fucking pussy!" Antonin snarled in retort.

Thorfinn laughed as he listened to his friends argue, levitating the statue along the corridor. They'd had to enlist the assistance of a few first years, namely the kid of Nott and the Malfoy brat, to play lookouts for them. They'd decided on a three part prank. Move the enormous, hideous statue into the teacher's lounge; rig up the Great Hall with a surprise for everyone at breakfast tomorrow that would activate the minute Professor Flitwick – always the last to the breakfast table – began eating his porridge; and enlisting the assistance of the Bloody Baron and Peeves to stage a fake-murder scene at the bottom of the moving staircases.

While his friends continued to argue with one another, all of them cranky with this part of the prank, Thorfinn heard the sound of the kid of Nott arguing with someone.

"Shut up, you mob of cunts," Thorfinn hissed. "Someone's coming."

"Oi! Damn it, Granger! Where do you think you're going? I just told you that you can't go down this corridor. You're going to regret it. Peeves is down there and he's got his hands on some fake-blood leftover from Halloween, combined it with all that candy from Halloween that what's-her-name tried to give to Rowle and he's covering people in both. You've heard the tar and feather bit, right? Same concept."

"Theodore Nott, do you actually believe me thick enough to buy that?" the bossy voice of none other than Thorfinn's little lioness could be heard in response. "You're covering for someone, which means you're trying to keep me from going down here where I'll likely find someone breaking the rules."

"What? You don't think I'm a good enough person to stop poor, unsuspecting girls such as yourself from ending up covered in blood and lolly-wrappers?" Theo argued in retort, his voice smooth and even.

The kid had potential to be a great liar one day.

"I might've believed you, Nott, if it weren't for the fact that Malfoy is also trying to stop people going down here. I think we both know that the potential for seeing me come to some misfortune is not something he would attempt to interfere with. Meaning there's rule-breaking going on down here and you're the lookouts," Granger argued. Thorfinn smirked over how quick the girl was, even if it was an inconvenience right then.

"Damn it, Thor," Antonin growled in a whisper as they tried to hurry and move the statues faster. "That fucking lion cub is going to be a problem."

"Granger, I can't let you down there," Nott was saying and Thorfinn heard the sounds of footsteps as the girl obviously tried to step around the kid.

"What you can't do, is stop me, Theodore," Granger argued with the boy. "Get out of my way, or I'll hex you."
"Threats? From the likes of you? What happened to being a rule-follower, Granger?" Nott attempted to taunt her. "Forget about the 'no duelling it the corridors' rule, did you?"

"That kid's good, but he's got no chance of stopping her," Antonin hissed.

"Oi!" Theo shouted, hissing in pain over an apparent hex. Thorfinn was betting it the boy had just been hit with a Stinging Jinx. "Damn it, Granger! That's my bloody wand hand!"

"That'll teach you not to argue with me then, won't it?" the witch's voice could be heard in retort, sounding rather smug.

Her footsteps followed and Thorfinn could hear Theo trying to stop her again, racing after her.

"Fuck, if that one catches us at this, we're done for," Antonin growled. "Fucking meddlesome brat! Thor, get your witch before she gets us all expelled."

"I'm on it," Thorfinn sighed, lowering his wand and watching his friends struggle with the statue for a moment as he strode away to intercept the witch. He kept his wand drawn, ready to hex the little brat if he had to.

"Granger! Don't go down there, I mean it," Theo was arguing with the witch, still trying to stop her from catching the senior boys in the act of rule-breaking. Thorfinn had to admire his spirit and his loyalty to the cause.

"You're only trying to stop me because you're protecting someone, Nott," Granger argued hotly with the boy and Thorfinn rounded the corner in time to see the little witch trying to shove the kid out of her way. He was making a valiant effort of stopping her, despite the way he kept one arm tucked into his side gingerly, protecting the swollen limb where she'd hit him with a Stinging Jinx.

Thorfinn didn't blame the kid. The witch had a mean hex on her. He'd been on the receiving end of it more than once throughout the school year. He knew all too well how it stung like a thousand hornets.

"I should've known you be involved if there's rule-breaking going on," Granger declared when she spotted him striding down the corridor.

"Thor, I'm sorry," Theo spun, beginning to apologise when he saw Thorfinn coming. "I tried to stop her."

"I know, kid," Thorfinn grinned at the first year boy. "Heard you trying to deter this one from around the corner. Don't sweat it. This little lioness is as stubborn as a mule."

He flicked his wand at Granger, who immediately looked scandalized while Nott snorted in amusement.

"Don't try to deny it, Kitten," Thorfinn told the girl, turning his attention to her. "You know you're a spitfire. Now, be a good little lion cub and run on up to your tower via a different route."

"Or you'll what, Finn?" she challenged, narrowing her eyes on him daringly.

"Or I'll hex you, Baby-girl," Thorfinn warned in return, narrowing his eyes right back at her.

"You're breaking the rules again, aren't you?" she demanded, crossing her arms over her chest. Thorfinn noticed she was still clutching her wand like she might use it on him or Nott.
"Don't reckon you want me to answer that, Kitten," Thorfinn smirked, winking at her. "Else you'll be implicated in our misdeeds, too."

"Can't be sex in the corridors again," she rolled her eyes. "You've actually got your trousers on this time. Colour me shocked. And you've got first years on the lookout to warn people away. Meaning you're doing something big and likely extremely against school rules. You know I'm going to report you, don't you?"

Theodore Nott was looking at Granger like she'd lost her brilliant mind, clearly shocked and beyond horrified at the idea of her back-talking him. Thorfinn smirked. The rest of the firsties were all scared of him, but not his little spitfire of a witch.

"You know I'm going to make my revenge on you ten times worse than whatever you even potentially bring down on me, don't you, little lioness?" Thorfinn retorted.

Thorfinn watched the way she began striding up the corridor towards him, planting her feet firmly, defying his suggestion of running along to Gryffindor Tower via another route.

"Granger," he warned, his voice lowering dangerously.

"Did you know that when you try to look intimidating like that, you just look kind of constipated?" she sneered at him, stalking up the corridor and intent on investigating their rule-breaking, especially when he heard what sounded like Antonin cursing foully about something as though he were in pain and furious.

Thorfinn glanced over his shoulder when he heard a bang.

"What was that?" Granger demanded. "What are you up to?"

Thorfinn turned back towards the little witch, letting her come a little closer before he lifted his wand and fired a non-verbal Stunning Spell at her. Her eyes went wide in surprise at the idea of being attacked magically by him. She toppled backwards towards the floor and Thorfinn stepped forwards to catch her before she could hit it and crack her head open. Looping an arm around her back, he caught the suddenly limp and unconscious witch, bending to toss her slight frame over his shoulder before straightening once more. She weighed next to nothing, so it was difficult to tote he like a sack of potatoes.

"Bloody hell," Theo muttered, looking up at him and then at Granger's unconscious form. "I knew she was barmy, but Salazar, she's completely batty, talking to you like that Thor."

Thorfinn smirked at the kid looking up at him with something akin to awe – or as close to awe as a snarky, pompous pureblood kid could get while still maintaining his dignity.

"She's a bloody nightmare, mate," Thorfinn grinned. "Keep watch a bit longer, yeah? Pretty sure those bastards just dropped the statue on Dolohov's foot."

"Shite," Theo said, paling. "I'm staying down here out of his way."

"Probably smart," Thorfinn laughed. He turned away and strode back up the corridor, he was even to the corner before Nott called out again.

"Hey, Thor?" Theo asked quietly.

Thorfinn glanced at the kid over the shoulder that wasn't toting a tiny witch. He raised one eyebrow.
"Did she really catch you shagging?" Theo asked. "Like, saw you naked?"

"Three times now," Thorfinn smirked. "Nearly got me expelled the first time, too. And she'll pay for that."

Theo's eyes darted to the prone form of the witch dangling over Thorfinn's shoulder again before he nodded his understanding. He adjusted his swollen arm slightly and turned his attention back to guarding the corridor and keeping others away from catching them in their mischief.

"For fuck's sake, Bulstrode, when I'm through with you, your grandchildren will be thicker than fucking stumps!" Antonin was growling when Thorfinn rounded the corner with the witch over his shoulder to find Antonin standing over a rather intimidated looking Cygnus Bulstrode.

He was favouring one foot and his nose was bleeding as he snarled threats at the other wizard.

"Got your knickers all in a twist there, Toshka?" Thorfinn needled his best friend and he watched the way the rest of their motley crew looked relieved to see him returning.

Thorfinn knew they were all afraid of Antonin. The bastard was a right cold fucker when he wanted to be and would hex the bollocks off a man, slow and painful, if he lost his temper. He had a nasty habit of inventing curses too, most of which no one knew the counter curses for.

"You better be carrying that little bitch because you need me to help you hide the fucking body, Thor, or so help me I'm cursing the pair of you," Antonin spun on him.

"Dropped the fucker on your foot, didn't you?" Thorfinn smirked, ignoring his threats and the way the dark-haired wizard narrowed his eyes hatefully on Granger.

"Bulstrode tripped over his own fucking feet, shoved the cunt forwards into me, crushed me against the wall and then dropped the ugly fucking bastard of a statue on my damn foot when he lost concentration and broke the spell. Fucking disgrace of a wizard, can't even maintain a simple fucking hover charm! How the fuck are you even still breathing, Bulstrode."

"Oi, Toshka?" Thorfinn asked, drawing the irate wizard's attention once more when he looked like he was about to hit their friend with his signature purple-fire curse that burned a person to a withered, charred husk from the inside out.

"Fuck you, Thor, I'm getting real sick of this bullshit with you not letting me curse people who fucking deserve it," Antonin immediately hissed at him, his eyes narrowing furiously.

"Blow me, mate," Thorfinn told his best friend. "And jam your fucking wand up your arse while you're at it. If you don't point it somewhere else, I'll do it for you right after I lodge my foot so far up there that you choke of the fucking dragonhide of my shoe."

He narrowed his eyes on his friend, one hand resting on Granger's lower back to balance her while he got right up in his friend's face and glared down at the irate Russian bastard. Antonin proceeded to curse in his mother-tongue foully, muttering threats, cuss words and other foul things that would've offended just about anyone who wasn't Thorfinn if they knew what the phrases meant.

"Why the fuck did you bring that cunt of a lion cub down here?" he demanded, glaring at the witch hatefully again. "Is she knocked out."

"I stunned her. She hexed Nott and was coming this way to catch the lot of us."

"Oh yes, makes perfect sense to bring her in here then," Antonin growled, cursing again in Russian.
"Why don't you just wake her up and tell her what we're doing so she can give a full account to fucking Dumbledore."

"You got a better idea of what to do with her that means she won't know and can't rat us out?" Thorfinn demanded.

"Oh, you bet your arse I bloody do," Antonin hissed darkly, lifting his wand once more with murder glittering in his eyes. The rage inside of him thanks to how long the prank was taking, the pain he was in and the frustration he felt at dealing with the other morons of their year mated with his hatred from Granger. Thorfinn just knew the red-haze was covering his friend's gaze and likely to make him do stupid things.

Thorfinn punched him.

He didn't even think about it before his fist - still gripping his wand - was suddenly in motion and colliding with his best friend's cheekbone with a dull thud. Antonin groaned and staggered sideways, clutching at his head and closing his eyes against the pain. He blinked stupidly a few times, trying to right himself and trying to get his bearings. Thorfinn wold bet his ears were ringing.

"So it's like that, then?" Antonin asked when he'd shaken the fuzziness away, his cold brown eyes settling on Thorfinn while he still clutched his head.

"It's like I'm not letting you go to fucking prison over a mudblood kid, you tosspot!" Thorfinn retorted, seeing the betrayal glittering in Antonin's eyes over the idea of him defending Granger. Again. He subtly shook his hand out, his knuckles aching as he suspected he'd just cracked Antonin's cheekbone and two of his own knuckles with that punch.

"One day, mate," Antonin said quietly, lowering his voice and speaking coldly, "You're not going to be able to protect that little cunt from me. And I'm going to relish the things I do to her."

Thorfinn narrowed his eyes in return. That tone in Antonin's voice, that cold expression on his face, they were all indications that he was at his most dangerous. Like Thorfinn, Antonin had a temper. He was slower to anger and more prone to cruel words and deeds than Thorfinn, but he was also quick to let that anger go again when it was over stupid things. Thorfinn was the fiery one. He'd lose his temper, unleash his rage and revel in the destruction that followed. Dolohov was crueler about it. He'd snarl about things, pull a mean prank or arrange some misfortune to befall someone who annoyed him, but he had more control over his rage. And that made him more dangerous. Because when he reached for that control he got quiet and deadly. Like a snake in the wood-shed, he'd lay coiled and quiet, unnoticed until the precise moment to strike and deliver his deadly poison.

"Until I'm done with her, you'll keep you wand and your hands off her or I'll skin you, Dolohov," Thorfinn told him, drawing himself up to his full height and fixing his friend a cold stare in return. He had a number of plans in place to ruin the little muggleborn's life and they would not be cut short by an irate Antonin Dolohov. They sure as hell wouldn't be interfered with just because the bastard was in a foul mood.

Dolohov curled his lip in retort and began cursing foully in Russian once more while Thorfinn glared at him before healing his broken foot, his fractured and rapidly swelling cheekbone and the nosebleed his friend was dealing with. The bastard didn't have the decency right then to say thank you. He fixed his own knuckles with a faint hiss of annoyance, still glaring at the cursing Russian.

"You fuckers need healing too?" Thorfinn asked, turning to Pucey, Bulstrode, Entwhistle, Flint and
Selwyn when Dolohov turned away from him and walked around the far side of the statue once more, still muttering darkly under his breath in his mother-tongue.

"Yeah," Selwyn sighed out a breath. "Pretty sure I cracked a few toes."

Thorfinn rolled his eyes at the lot of the, flicking his wand at each of them and listening to them all groan as he healed their broken bones. Everything else could be dealt with later.

"Do I want to know why you and Antonin are arguing about a firstie?" Pucey muttered to him when they were all once more levitating the statue along the corridor and towards the Teacher's Lounge.

"The little brat's got a smart mouth and too much bravado for her own good," Thorfinn muttered back, adjusting Granger's slight frame over his shoulder. "She got mouthy with him and he's got his wand in a knot over it. She's the one who nearly got me expelled when I got caught in the library, too."

"Then why are you carting her around and letting him go easy on her?" Pucey wanted to know, looking confused.

"I'm ruining her life," Thorfinn smiled. "Revenge is a dish best served cold, my friend. And it will be stone cold when I rip her apart once she's all grown up."

"Details?" Pucey asked, his eyes lighting up at the idea of a well-thought-out long-con on the little witch.

"Win her trust. Dig into her life and slowly, quietly overtake all of it. Follow her every movement. She put these in my hair a few weeks ago," Thorfinn reached for the beads the little witch had plaited into his blonde mane.

"Bloody hell!" Pucey exclaimed when he spotted the small gold trinkets amid the tawny locks. "She initiated an arrangement?"

"She has no clue what they represent," Thorfinn smirked. "Mudblood, see?"

"You're going to ruin her through that?" Pucey asked, raising one eyebrow.

"By the time she's old enough to consider forming an engagement with anyone else, she'll be so thoroughly tied to me that it will ruin her life completely."

"You're a cold bastard sometimes, Thor. You know that, right?" Pucey laughed.

Thorfinn smirked widely at his words, jostling the still unconscious witch upon his shoulder and planning how best to deal with her just as soon as he was done with the boys.
Chapter 8

Hermione Granger woke to a world upside-down with all the blood running to her head. She opened her eyes to the sight of someone's trouser-clad arse that she already knew a little too well, and she realised with annoyance that she'd been slung over someone's shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Someone that was going to get what was coming to him if it was the last thing she did.

"THORFINN ROWLE! You put me down this instant, you wretched monster!" Hermione screeched, feeling all the blood rushing to her head. She beat her tiny fists against his lower back in protest of being held that way.

"Two seconds, Princess," he told her, laughing.

Hermione felt him pat her reassuringly, his hand resting on the small of her back to balance her even when she began squirming.

"Now, Rowle! Put me down now, before I vomit all over you!"

"Demanding, isn't she?" a male voice that didn't belong to Rowle asked. Hermione saw red to know that not only was he manhandling her like some barbarian, he was doing so in front of others. And that voice didn't sound like the snarky, Russian-accented tones of Antonin Dolohov.

"Like a little lion cub. She thinks she's all fierce and scary, but she's just kind of adorably inept right now."

"Inept this, you git!" Hermione said before kicking him in the stomach as hard as she could manage whilst dangling over his shoulder.

"Oi! Watch it, Princess. Easy on the goods, yeah?"

"I swear to Merlin, I will vomit down your back if you don't tip me right way up this second, Finn!" Hermione warned him, actually feeling her stomach beginning to roll from the blood rushing to her head and the sight of the world from this angle as he moved about doing something.

"Bloody hell," Thorfinn sighed. "I'm a little tied up to be moving you right now, Kitten. Can you wriggle?"

He used the hand he was using to balance her, tugging on the hem of her jumper to try and pull her upright and Hermione felt herself begin to slide against him until she was right way up and peering over his shoulder behind him. The corridor was dark but for the light of the wands emitting from the wizards around Thorfinn.

"What are you lot doing?" Hermione demanded, twisting in Finn's grip to try and see.

"Don't look, little lioness," Thorfinn cautioned, reaching up to put his hand on the back of her neck and prevent her from turning to face forwards. "Or you actually will vomit."

"I've seen you naked," Hermione retorted. "What could be more gag-worthy?"

"You're right, Thor," a male voice said, sounding amused. "She is mouthy. Watch it, firstie."

"Bite me, whoever you are," Hermione growled. "Are all of your fiends this interested in defending your non-existent honour as though you're some damsel in distress, Rowle, or is it my lucky day?"
Someone snorted in amusement at her sassy tone.

"You're going to talk yourself into trouble with that mouth, Baby-girl," Thorfinn informed her. "Stop wriggling, would you? It's hard enough to concentrate on this shite without you squirming."

"If you've a problem with people wriggling, maybe you should avoid taking them hostage," Hermione replied coldly. "You hit me with a Stunning spell, you bastard!"

"You were being contrary and difficult. Shut it or I'll do it again, Cub," he warned her, hoisting her a little higher against his chest and pinning her to him with one arm.

"If you let me down you'd be able to concentrate better, you know?"

"If I let you down, you'll see what we're doing. Then you'll scream and wake up the teachers or most likely try to run for it. And I don't have the patience for chasing you," he retorted.

"More rule-breaking. How droll," Hermione sighed, figuring she might as well get comfortable if she was going to be stuck with him until he was done with whatever mess he was involving himself in. It was clear to her that he had no plans for releasing her soon and as indignant as that made her, Hermione didn't bother arguing further. The tone in his voice suggested his impatience and she didn't particularly feel like drawing his ire when he'd already taken her hostage and she was feeling so woozy.

Wriggling some more, despite his protests, Hermione climbed the hulking blond git until she managed to cling to his chest like a child might cling to an oversized teddy-bear. She looped her arms around his neck and wrapped her legs around his waist, locking her ankles against the small of his back.

"If you look, I'm going to take it out of your hide, Baby-girl," Thorfinn muttered directly into her ear though he seemed pleased by her change of position thanks to the way it freed up both of his arms for whatever task he was undertaking.

"She's going to rat when she realises what we're up to," Dolohov's snide voice could be heard.

"Paranoid, isn't he?" Hermione sighed into Thorfinn's neck, burrowing her face through his hair until her nose pressed to the side of his neck.

"With good reason, snitch," Dolohov retorted coldly.

"One day, Dolohov, you're going to do something worse than breaking school rules. And when I read in the paper about the deranged Russian moron being shipped off to Azkaban, I'm going to laugh over my morning pumpkin juice."

"Fucking bitch," Dolohov snarled.

"I'll hit you again if you don't lower that," Rowle warned his friend. Hermione smirked against his skin, figuring that Dolohov must be pointing his wand at her threateningly.

Rapid-fire cursing in Russian followed Thorfinn's threat and Hermione began to snigger.

"That's hardly polite, Antonin," Hermione told the wizard who was currently cursing everything about her from her bushy hair to her ancestors and most of all, her smart mouth.

"You speak Russian?" Thorfinn asked, sounding surprised.
"Do you think that the rest of the school calls me a know-it-all for nothing, Finn?" Hermione asked him without lifting her face from his neck where she clung to him, breathing in his intoxicating scent.

More Russian curses left Dolohov – these ones much fouler than the last – and Hermione sniggered to herself despite being appalled at the older wizard's language.

"Is this going to take long?" Hermione asked, "If I have to listen to him snarling inappropriate things about goats for much longer, I might hex him."

Some of the others began to snicker and Hermione twisted her head away from Rowle's neck to look at them, surprised to hear there were so many of them. She felt her stomach turn when she spotted what they were doing.

Blood. There was blood everywhere. And a dead body. A mess of blood-stained blonde hair hid the identity of a slight girl at the very bottom of the many changing staircases, her mangled form lying in a crimson pool. A choking sound left Hermione's throat as her body went tense and taut with horror.

"Ah, bollocks," Thorfinn hissed, clearly hearing and feeling her reaction. "I told you not to bloody look, didn't I, Princess?"

He clamped one hand over her mouth to muffle the scream she tried to emit.

"Fuck! Shut her up!" Dolohov growled, jumping at the sound.

Hermione's eyes were wide and fearful as he pointed his wand at her and uttered a silencing spell to prevent her from making more noise and potentially alerting a teacher.

"Fuck! I told you this would happen! Damn it, Rowle!" Dolohov was snarling and Hermione was squirming in Thorfinn's hold when he removed his hand from her mouth once she'd been silenced but kept his arm clamped tight around her. He refused to let her down, or to let her move.

Hermione's gaze darted around the morbidly curious faces of seven Slytherin boys where they look down upon the corpse, intrigued. They had their wands drawn for light and one of the big ones looked like he was doing something to the girl's body to further mutilate her. The very sight sickened and terrified her and Hermione fought harder to be released even as she began to dry heave, unable to make a sound but still feeling like she would expel the contents of her stomach.

"Easy, Princess. Easy," Thorfinn was muttering, stepping away from the scene, still carrying her. "It's fake, Baby-girl. It's not a real body. Just a prank. Shhh now, don't vomit on me, come on."

"Don't fucking tell her that!" Dolohov hissed, coming after them.

Hermione spotted his face over Thorfinn's shoulder, twisted with annoyance and hatred for Hermione. His hands were red with blood as though he'd been playing with the corpse too and Hermione gagged again.

"Back off, Toshka," Thorfinn told his friend. "Get back to the others before you make her hurl. You're covered in fake-blood. I'll handle this."

"Oh and how are you going to do that?" Dolohov demanded.

"I'll bloody well initiate her if I have to," Thorfinn retorted.
"She's a Gryffindor!" Dolohov snarled, his expression going blank before morphing to one of disgust at the idea of 'initiating' her into anything. "And she's fucking mudblood. Blast it all, Thor! She's just some stupid kid."

"If you've got a better fucking idea that won't involve murder, I'm all bloody ears," Rowle snarled in return. Hermione clung to him tighter when she heard true annoyance in his voice.

There was a growl in his tone that suggested true anger as she hadn't seen or heard from him in her presence for months. A dangerous sort of feeling that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

"A memory Charm will bloody do," Dolohov hissed. "She can't go giving away the prank and we can't fucking trust her, Thor."

"I'll handle it. Get out of here," Thorfinn replied in a low voice. He tangled his free into her messy curls, pressing her face back into his neck so she wouldn't see Dolohov’s expression or the blood on his hands.

Dolohov walked away after a long moment of what she assumed must be intense staring. Hermione listened to the sound of his footsteps as he retreated and Thorfinn carried her further down the corridor and around a corner. She felt her stomach clench in fear when he nudged open the door of an abandoned classroom and carried her inside it before closing the door tightly behind him.

"Do you believe me that it's a prank, Granger?" Thorfinn asked her seriously, his voice low.

Hermione shook her head forcefully from side to side. She heard him sigh and she squeaked when he carried her over to a high windowsill across the room, lifting her up and depositing her upon it. It was at just the right height that with her sitting on it, they were at eye-level with one another. She leaned back from him when he sat her upon it, noticing the way he flicked his wand to light a long forgotten set of torches along the wall that illuminated the abandoned classroom.

Under other circumstances she might've noticed the collection of dust upon the windowsill that would undoubtedly stain her jeans. She might've noticed the overturned tables and the occasional disturbance amid the dust where some amorous couple had put the privacy of the room to use. But right then her heart was racing with terror over what he might do to her, what he’d been doing with his friends, how that poor girl had died and what they were doing with her body.

Had they murdered her elsewhere on the grounds and were trying to stage it to look like she'd fallen from the moving staircases to land in a bloodied and mangled heap at the bottom? Did they think they would get away with it?

Her stomach was roiling dangerously as she recalled the intrigued expressions most of the boys standing around that girl's body had warn. They'd looked enthralled, amused, even curious about her rather than like they'd committed some terrible deed or like they'd been horrified to discover the mangled body of a fellow student. She shuddered when Thorfinn pressed his hands to the windowsill either side of her denim-clad thighs, staring at her hard.

"It's a prank. She is supposed to look realistic, but it is a prank, Hermione," he told her seriously. Hermione blinked, shocked right out of her fear of him and his friends by the simple sound of her first name on his tongue and by the serious expression on his face. "And I want you to keep it all to yourself, or I'm going to have to perform a Memory Charm on you. Got to tell you, Princess, I'm not very good at them, so you'd likely forget all of your exam study and probably who you are if I tried."
Hermione widened her eyes at him and opened her mouth, trying to speak in protest against that particular idea, but with the Silencing spell still active upon her, no sound came out.

"If I cancel the spell, are you going to scream?" he clarified when she motioned to him to do so.

Hermione shook her head.

"Are you going to shout at me? Attempt to lecture me? Tell me I'm a complete idiot?" he asked. A smirk played at the corners of his mouth.

Hermione nodded her head emphatically and Rowle laughed.

"Might keep it in place, then," he teased.

Hermione kicked him.

"Oi! Easy on the hardware, witch! And don't you glare at me, you little swot. I'll release the spell when I'm good and done talking and not before. Now," he paused to take a deep breath and to fish something out of his pocket. "I need you to do something if we're going to get away with not telling Toshka that you still know about the prank rather than giving you brain damage with the Obliviate."

Hermione watched him as he turned his wand on the thing he'd pulled from his pocket and listening to him muttering charms to duplicate the scroll of parchment and then to reset it.

"I need you to activate this and I need you to swear to uphold the tradition found within this scroll, Princess," Thorfinn told her seriously.

She watched him warily as he held his hand out toward her, palm up, waiting for her to give him her hand. Hermione did so hesitantly and she hissed in a surprised breath when he used a small slicing hex to open her palm. Crimson blood welled to the surface and dropped upon the parchment he suddenly stuck under the flow of blood from her abused hand.

Hermione kicked him again in protest over the act and over the idea that whatever he was involving her in, it called for Blood Magic.

"Blimey, witch! Stop kicking me, would you? It hurts. I'm going to lift the silencing charm and when I do, you're going to say these words and wave your wand in a motion like this," he waved his wand over his own parchment and uttered the words of a spell.

His parchment glowed green for a moment before returning to normal.

Hermione watched with interest, clutching her bleeding hand around the scroll he'd given her. She recognised that whatever he'd just done was Blood Magic and that he wouldn't heal her until she'd activated the spell.

"Per hunc ergo iurate mihi perficere cæremonias istas. Movere," he repeated the incantation to her and Hermione mouth it along with him, listening to the Latin inflections while he brain worked to translate the words. *By this blood I do swear to complete this ritual. Activate.*

Thorfinn lifted the charm and Hermione stared at him for a moment.

"You're making me do Blood Magic, Finn?" Hermione asked him quietly, watching the wizard carefully.
"It's this or the Memory charm, Baby-girl," he told her, holding her gaze stoically. "Say the incantation and wave your wand like I showed you while you hold the scroll in the other hand."

"What ritual am I swearing to complete, Thorfinn?" Hermione wanted to know, all teasing and hostility gone from her voice as she recognised the seriousness of what he was asking her.

"I can't tell you that until you swear to do it. The scroll won't open for you unless you swear," he told her. "I promise it's nothing harmful. Slytherin's boys have been doing it since the days when Phineas Nigellus Black was Headmaster hundreds of years ago. It's a ritual passed from the graduating class each year to the first years. We all go through it, we all survive."

"If it's a boy's thing, why am I swearing to complete it?" Hermione asked. "That doesn't sound safe."

"If it's not safe for you, the ritual won't work," he told her, shrugging his massive shoulders.

"It's harmless?" Hermione confirmed quietly. "I won't do it if it involves the murder of that girl, Thorfinn."

"That's a prank, Kitten," he told her, still holding her gaze, his expression as open and honest as any Slytherin's could truly be. "And it pertains to this ritual I'm giving you. A harmless prank that will scare the shit out of the teachers and leave an impression before the lot of us begin our exams and graduate. Say the words now. Complete the spell so I can heal your hand."

Hermione bit her lip nervously. She didn't exactly trust Thorfinn Rowle, though the part of her that fancied him certainly wanted to.

"Per hunc ergo iurate mihi perficere ceremonias istas. Movere," Hermione whispered, waving her wand over the parchment and activating the magic within it.

She watched with some interest as the parchment glowed the same shade of green that Thorfinn's had done. A shiver rolled through her when she felt the magic rushing through her blood and into the parchment, activating the ritual and securing her oath to complete whatever lay within the scroll.

"Good girl," Thorfinn practically purred, a grin growing on his face as he watched her complete the magic.

Hermione kind of hated herself for the way his words of praise made her heart flutter.

"What is it?" she asked him seriously. "What have you just made me take a Blood Oath to do?"

"It's a Rite of Passage," he explained, taking the parchment from her bleeding hand and setting it on her lap for a moment before turning her hand palm-side up and muttering a healing charm to repair the cut he'd created.

Hermione shivered a second time at the feel of his magic sliding against her skin, feeling butterflies flutter inside her stomach. She held perfectly still while he performed the spell before taking up the scroll he'd given her and unfurling it slowly. Within was a long list of more than a hundred tasks on something of a to-do list.

"I have to complete all of these things?" Hermione asked, aghast as she scanned her eyes over the list.

Some of them were simple things, like finding the kitchens and nicking food. Or stealing a library
book. Others were more complicated – initiating a friendship with Peeves and convincing him to help her with something. Snogging a person from each of the four houses. The further she scanned down the length of the list, the more adult some of the tasks became.

Shagging in a teacher's office. Shagging in the library. Performing oral sex upon someone whilst hiding on the Astronomy Tower. The list went on and on, detailing everything from tricking a first year, getting detention and pranking a teacher, to sexual deviousness - the likes of which she'd caught Thorfinn himself engaging in.

"This is why I've been catching your having sex all over the castle," Hermione sighed. "I can't do all of these things. Every single one of them involves breaking the school rules."

"That's the whole point, Princess," Thorfinn chuckled. "It was initiated as a way to make life within this castle a little more interesting. You have to complete every task on this list. You swore on your magic that you would. You took a blood oath. If you don't get it done, the consequences won't be pretty, love."

"Finn, I'm twelve!" Hermione protested, shaking the parchment in frustration. "Some of these things are entirely based on committing sexual acts. I'm too young for that."

"You've got until the day of your graduation to complete it, little lioness," he smiled at her. "Don't panic. I'm not about to ask a child to get freaky in the corridors. It's bad enough you caught me doing it."

"Until seventh year? I have six more years to complete this stupid thing?" she asked.

Thorfinn nodded his head.

"And when you do, you get a tattoo. A badge of honour, as it were. It's part of the magic of the scroll."

"Do you have one?" Hermione asked, frowning at the idea of being magically tattooed for completing such a collection of rule-breaking tasks, and concerned over what would happen to her if she didn't manage to complete the stupid thing.

"Not yet. Me and the boys just completed number ninety-three," he pointed to the number on the list. "Or will have by breakfast tomorrow. If you think you can avoid screaming and further irritating the boys, I'll take you back there with us and you'll be part of the prank and tick that one off your list."

"You expect me to engage in rule-breaking now, too?" Hermione demanded. "It was bad enough when you were corrupting me by forcing me to witness your rule-breaking. Now you want me misbehaving, too?"

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, love," Thorfinn laughed at her. "It's too late to back out now. Since it's usually something passed down to boys in Slytherin, not little lion cubs like you, I figured you might appreciate the help to get some of your tasks out of the way before I graduate. No one else will be able to play with you on it, unless you get friendly with the Slytherins. Which seems unlikely, given your blood status."

"My..." Hermione frowned at him. "Oh never mind, just tell me what I have to do with this stupid prank?"

"That's my girl," he smiled widely at her, a gleam that looked suspiciously like pride glittering in his eyes as he watched her brush her unruly curls back from her face. "To be in on the prank, you
have to contribute to it. Me and the boys moved a giant ugly statue into the Teacher's lounge – what we were doing when you interrupted and I stunned you – and that bit with the fake girl and the blood – that's designed to look like some poor twit has fallen from the stairs. It will be activated tomorrow at breakfast when Flitwick starts eating his porridge. A scream will sound, followed by the wet smack of a body smashing into things on the way down. The teachers will find the girl and panic."

Hermione frowned at him, shaking her head in horror over the idea. It was awful.

"You'll disrupt the entire day," she protested. "Classes will be cancelled while they do a headcount trying to figure out who the fake-girl is. NEWT and OWL study schedules will be interrupted, people will be in an uproar. That's a horrible thing to do."

"Memorable though," he shrugged in return. "But if you want to tick that one off your list, you have to contribute."

"I don't want any part of such a horrid plan," Hermione shook her head at him, still frowning. "The statue thing is harmless and easy enough to fix. The whole school will be inconvenienced and horrified by the other thing."

"That's the point," Thorfinn told her, pointing to the parchment. "It say the whole school must feel the effects of the prank for an entire day. Otherwise the task isn't complete."

"This list is ridiculous," Hermione informed him.

"Some of the things on it are a bit stupid, yes," he conceded. "Keep in mind it was designed to entertain teenage boys, yeah?"

"Well, no wonder it's idiotic," Hermione muttered. Thorfinn laughed at her words. "Why did you make me activate it?"

"Because you need to learn how to have fun and to lighten up," he told her. "You've been a pain in the butt all year, ever since you got here. You reported me for that BJ in the library and you were threatening to report us again today. Part of the clause of this scroll will prevent you from ratting on people in future for completing tasks on the list. See?"

He pointed to the elegant scrawl of her name, magically input upon the top of it and undoubtedly routed to her magical signatures. There were a number of clauses at the top of the scroll that included the oath she's sworn for every task to be complete, the agreed upon silence pertaining to the list and any of the tasks upon it, and a detailed listing of the reward at the end of the list when every task was complete.

"There's an inbuilt Gag Hex as part of the magic. So if you try to tell anyone about anything that happens on this list who isn't initiated and undertaking the Rites as well, or hasn't done so successfully, you'll choke on your own tongue until you stop trying to discuss it," he told her. "Foolproof way to keep you from tattling on us for the rest of the year."

"Sometimes, I kind of hate you, Finn," Hermione told him, staring at the big blond idiot and wondering if she could get away with hitting him.

"And the rest of the time?" he asked, smirking.

"The rest of the time you're an annoyance who gets on my nerves," Hermione told him, making him laugh.
"In other words, you're madly in love with me and only think about maiming me ten percent of the time," he corrected her and Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Let's try to avoid exaggerations, Finn. I don't love anyone unless they bribe me with copious amounts of the chocolate my parents don't like me eating," she informed him.

"That can be arranged, Baby-girl," he winked at her, making Hermione blush as the butterflies in her tummy rioted at his easy discussion of such things. He was obviously teasing her, but the fact that she fancied him in the first place almost tricked her into thinking he might fancy her back.

"You got any questions about this?" he asked, nodding at the scroll in her hands as Hermione slowly rolled it back up again, not really wanting to contemplate right then just what she was likely going to have to do in the coming years at Hogwarts to uphold her oath.

"How many things do you have left to go?" Hermione asked him.

"See for yourself," he smirked, handing her his scroll.

Hermione unrolled it carefully, noticing the way most of the things upon the list were ticked off. The ones that required information about certain things, such as the names of people he'd shagged and the date it had been complete, were all listed next to each task that was complete.

He only had two left.

The completion of the prank he and his friends were currently instigating was one of the two.

"You've been here seven years and you still haven't snogged a Gryffindor?" Hermione asked, frowning when she spotted one of the easier tasks.

"Ordinarily, little lioness, Gryffindors and Slytherins don't much get along," he reminded her. "And being a Quidditch star hasn't helped me win their affections when I've kicked their arses every year since my second, until this one, obviously."

"Still pouting about Harry winning us the game?" It was Hermione's turn to smirk.

"That kid's trouble, you know?" Thorfinn told her.

Hermione jumped slightly when he dusted his hand on his jeans before reaching for her face and tucking a stray curl behind her ear. He was holding her gaze carefully as he looked at her, making the butterflies in her tummy riot once more. Tucking his fingers under her chin, he made her hold his gaze whilst gently trailing the pad of his thumb along the length of her bottom lip. He didn't actually watch her mouth as he did it, making Hermione think it was a subconscious gesture.

"You should be careful with that one, Kitten," he said, his brow furrowing slightly. "He'll lead you into trouble, too. I know you don't exactly play well with others and you're clinging to him and that red haired kid you avoid so often because they've decided to be your friends… but, watch yourself with them, yeah?"

"People would say the same thing about you," Hermione told him, her brow furrowing slightly. "If anyone knew the amount of time I've spent with you or the wretched things I've been forced to witness you doing… well, I hardly think it is news to you that they'd all warn me away."

"With good reason," Thorfinn smirked at her. "Slytherins have a reputation for a reason, little lioness. We play to win and we're ruthless when it comes to taking down those who get in our way."
"You haven't been ruthless with me," Hermione whispered, her eyes searching his face carefully. "I nearly got you expelled when I reported you. I landed you in months of detention and nearly cost you your future. But you haven't done anything in retaliation?"

"Haven't I?" he asked quietly and Hermione felt a pit open up inside her stomach.

"Have you?" she whispered fearfully. "I'm not naïve enough to think any Slytherin would be overly obvious in their revenge. In Gryffindor, if someone does something wretched to you, you retaliate by hexing them, or getting violent with them. I don't imagine things are that… reckless… in Slytherin."

"They're not," he nodded his head, a smirk on his lips. "Too easy to get caught and blamed if you do the dirty work yourself right there for anyone to see, Princess."

"So I should expect some wretched form of revenge that no one will be able to trace back to you. That no one will know had anything to do with you, except me?" Hermione asked, feeling a little fearful of what he might have done or was yet to do.

"You're just a kid, Baby-girl," he whispered, and Hermione watched him frown slightly, his golden eyebrows drawing together as he stared at her. "And yeah, you were a bit of a pain in the arse about things. And a cock-block."

"We agreed I was merely a sadist, not a cock-block," Hermione retorted and he chuckled softly.

"You punch above your weight too often, Princess," he told her, shaking his head slightly. "And one day it's going to land you in trouble."

"With you?" Hermione asked, blushing when he traced the shape of her lower lip with his thumb again.

"Maybe," he nodded. "You watch yourself after I've graduated, yeah? Don't go talking to the other gits running around this place the way you talk to me, you hear? Don't go antagonizing the boys the way you poke Toshka. I had to punch him tonight to keep him from hexing you."

"You punched your best friend for me?" Hermione asked, surprised.

"Mhmm," he nodded. "He's pissed at me for it, too. And a pissed off Antonin Dolohov is not something to trifle with. He'll hurt you one day, if he ever gets the opportunity, Princess."

"What? Because I called him an inept bum-buddy?" Hermione laughed.

"Yes," Finn answered seriously. "You provoke him constantly. It might be funny to you, but to him, you're inferior and should know your place in the wizarding world. He'll try to put you back there and remind you of it if he gets the chance. He swore tonight that one day I wouldn't be able to interfere and keep you safe from the things he'll do to you."

Hermione felt a chill run down her spine at his words.

"He'll likely never see me again after he graduates," Hermione rolled her eyes. "What about you? Should I expect threats from you too, Finn? I have called you a moron and a number to other names."

He chuckled wickedly at her words.

"Well, you're still a bit young for the revenge I have in mind for you, Princess," he told her softly.
This time his eyes drifted to her lips as he smoothed his thumb along the bottom one again.

The butterflies rioted inside her stomach and Hermione's eyes widened slightly. She didn't dare ask what he meant. When his gaze flicked back up to meet her, he was smirking again, that mean little grin of his playing with his smugness in a way that unsettled her.

"And when I'm not?" Hermione dared to whisper, her curiosity getting the better of her.

"Then I've got a surprise for you," he chuckled.

Hermione didn't know if she should be alarmed, infatuated or terrified.

"Come on, Princess," he said, his hands moving to her waist before he lifted her down from the windowsill. "Let's get you back to your Tower so Toshka doesn't come looking for me and find out you've been initiated to the Rites. You'll need to pretend that I modified your memory about it too, so just pretend tonight never happened, yeah?"

"Why do you call him that?" Hermione asked, frowning as she stared up at the burly blond boy she'd gone and developed a crush on. "You do know that Toshka is the name his mother would use for him, don't you? The nickname is an endearment from when he was a boy, meaning 'cute little Antonin', or 'widdle Antonin'. You do know that, don't you?"

"Of course I know that," he laughed. "I started calling him that to tease him after I met his mother during the holidays at the end of first year. He hated it, for a while, but by now he's used to it. I'm the only one, other than his Mum, who gets to call him that though. Habit, by now. Anyone else who tries meets with one of his nastier, non-lethal hexes of his own invention."

"He's unhinged," Hermione told him, shaking her head.

"A bit, yeah," Thorfinn chuckled. "Go on, get to bed, Kitten. You'll have to sneak. It's past curfew."

Hermione nodded her head absently, her lower lip tingling from his touch. She stared up at him for a minute longer, watching the way he waved his wand to douse the torches in the room they'd been occupying. He winked at her when he'd pulled the door closed behind him, chucking her under the chin and smirking at her before he turned and walked away. She shook her head as she watched him saunter off down the corridor, whistling that same jaunty tune he favoured that so unnerved her.
Chapter 9

Their prank went off without a hitch, throwing the school into chaos the following day and Hermione rolled her eyes to herself over the entire mess when she was relegated to her common room along with the rest of the Gryffindors. Professor McGonagall took the roll and confirmed that every student who belonged under her charge was accounted for. The same went for the other houses and everyone was left rather baffled.

The rumours about the discovery of a body at the bottom of the stairs – hard to miss given the god-awful scream that had sounded the minute Professor Flitwick started eating his porridge that morning had alerted everyone to what had happened. Hermione had been watching for the signal that it would begin from the minute the tiny Charms Professor entered the Great Hall that morning.

Finn had caught her eye across the long House tables and winked at her when the chaos had ensued. Hermione had rolled her eyes at him in return and shaken her head. None of the gits involved in the prank had looked even a little bit guilty. They had looked just as shocked as everyone else and when they'd all been instructed to return to their dormitories, the boys had all gone without question.

When things had been confirmed that no one was missing and the teachers set about trying to determine if the entire thing was some prank done with terribly poor-taste – as Hermione already knew it was – the students had been cleared to use the library and return to their meals in the Great Hall. They were discouraged from wandering the halls and the day's classes had all been cancelled.

Hermione found herself sitting in the library, as she so often did, trying to focus on her History of Magic study for the upcoming exams. Just two weeks away, the end of year exams were looming and she'd been beginning to panic. Harry had been occupying more and more of her time with his obsession over the Philosopher's Stone and the conviction that Snape was trying to steal it. She knew it was only a matter of time before he suggested that they figure out a way to get past Fluffy and go through that trapped door that no one was supposed to know about.

The last thing she wanted to do was go poking her twelve year old nose into things that the Headmaster himself had warned against but she knew that if Harry asked for her help, she would give it. The threat of You-Know-Who potentially returning and getting his hands on something like that stupid stone was too high, and the consequences of such a thing would be catastrophic.

She might not have been able to figure out certain things about the wizarding world – like the meaning of being called a 'mudblood' - but she had been able to research extensively on what had happened during the first wizarding war when Voldemort had been in power. If he ever regained such power, or a body, he would be a terrible force to be reckoned with once more.

Scratching out notes on her History of Magic assignment and muttering to herself about the dates of different Goblin Wars, Hermione squeaked in surprise when she felt a pair of warm hands wrap around the tops of her shoulders from behind. She'd taken up the seat she'd occupied with Thorfinn last week when he'd pulled her into his lap, taking advantage of the larger desk to spread out her excessive notes and the many tomes she'd pulled from the shelves to study for her exams.

"Hey, what do you think you're…?" Hermione began to protest the interruption before she tipped her head back to meet the amused blue eyes of Thorfinn Rowle, "Oh. It's you."

"Scoot forward, Princess," he told her quietly, pressing her forward on the cushion while he grinned at her.
"I'm trying to study, Finn," Hermione protested even as she did as he asked. He climbed onto the chair behind her, settling himself around her small frame easily.

"I can see that," he chuckled. "But you're in my spot."

"Really?" Hermione groused at him, squirming around and trying to gather some of her notes together to move them out of his way when he swung his bag up onto desk and began unloading books from inside it.

"Hush up, kid," he told her. Hermione squeaked when he dropped an absent-minded kiss to the top of her head to soften the blow of his words. "My exams are a bit more important than yours and a whole lot harder. We both know you don't need to actually study this shit to pass your exams. And I concentrate better with you in my lap."

"So you're commandeering my desk and my person for your own uses?" Hermione demanded.

"You got it, Baby-girl," he told her. "Hey, do me a favour?"

"What do you need?" she asked, raising her eyebrows and twisting slightly to look over her shoulder at him.

She noticed idly that he must've recently showered. His golden mane of hair was still damp, loose and sprawling over his broad shoulders. It gleamed gently in the firelight of the library, and Hermione had never thought he looked more like a lion.

"Put these back in for me?" he asked, fishing the beads she'd plaited into his hair from his pocket and depositing them in her palm. "Had to take 'em out and wash this mess after practice this afternoon. Perkins flogged a Bludger my way when I wasn't looking and took me right off my bloody broom."

"Ouch," Hermione winced, noticing the bruise and swelling forming along his strong jaw.

"Had mud everywhere, so I had to wash it properly," he nodded shaking the blonde tendrils loose to give her better access to them in order to put her plaits and beads in once more.

"Do you care where I put them?" Hermione asked him.

"Not really. Liked the one you had here," he pulled on the hair at his right temple, "And the two behind my left ear. You can put the rest wherever you like."

Hermione smiled widely taking the beads from his large hand and setting them on the desk in front of him. She started with the plait at his temple, twining the long strands together in a tight, neat plait and affixing the bead to the end of it. She had to twist around the other way and have him turn his head slightly to put the two behind his ear. She worked quickly, butterflies fluttering about in her stomach as she combed her fingers through the thick locks.

They felt so silky smooth beneath her fingers, especially when compared to her own frizzy curls. Hermione listened to the soft hum of contentment that Thorfinn uttered when she combed her fingers through the thick length of his hair, searching for where best to put the other beads. She tuck one onto the end of a plait behind his right ear and she climbed a little higher in his lap until she was perched on his thigh to reach a section near the nape of his neck before working another plait in there as well.

"Want me to tie it back so it won't bother you while you study again?" Hermione asked him
"Mmm," he nodded and Hermione twisted slightly in his hold to look at him when she heard the soft hum.

His eyes were closed and he had a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. If she didn't know better, Hermione might think he kind of liked having her play with his hair. Combing her fingers through it once more, Hermione gathered the hair from his hairline to his crown, scraping her nails lightly against his scalp as she did so. Her stomach gave a strange swoop when he groaned very softly at the attention and Hermione felt a smile pull at the corners of her mouth. She couldn't resist doing it again. Leaving the mane of hair untied for now, Hermione twisted in his hold until she could kneel on the cushion between his legs before working her fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck, digging her fingertips gently against his skin.

She smiled widely when he sighed contentedly and leaned his forehead against her stomach, surrendering to being touched and having his hair played with. Having spent her life fighting with her own hair, Hermione rather liked the feel of playing with Finn's. Working her fingertips against his scalp, Hermione massaged his head slowly, enjoying the way he completely surrendered to the touch, apparently not caring at all that they were in the library or that anyone might see him being given a head massage by a first year and get the wrong idea. She took her time about it, pressing firmly, digging against him until she made him groan again.

The fact that he was unabashedly given into the feel of what she did to him rather pleased Hermione and she smiled as she continued touching him.

"Bloody hell, Princess," he muttered, his forehead still resting against her stomach while his hands came up to grip both of her hips snugly.

"Feels good?" Hermione murmured.

"Hell yeah," he replied, his voice husky as though he were in heaven.

"We're supposed to be studying," Hermione reminded him, not really wanting to go back to the boring memorization of facts about the Goblin Wars when she could play with Finn instead.

"Later," he muttered. "You just keep doing that."

Hermione laughed at his words.

"You've got a headache from the bludger, don't you?" Hermione asked knowingly.

"Clever little cub," he murmured.

Hermione smiled, working her fingers forward and pressing the tips to both of his temples before working them in circles. Thorfinn groaned again, his arms snaking around her waist and shifting her until she was pressed flush against his chest. He propped his chin against her sternum, his eyes still closed. Hermione eyed the bruise on his jawline. It was rapidly darkening, the swelling obvious and making him look asymmetrical.

She smoothed one hand back into his hair, tangling it in the locks at the nape of his neck while she pulled her wand out of her pocket with her free hand. She hadn't had much chance to practice her healing charms but she muttered them as she trailed the tip of her wand over the bruising and the swelling, watching it slowly recede until his jaw was blemish free once more.

"You're being a cock-block again, Baby-girl," Thorfinn murmured. Hermione slanted her gaze over
to meet his blue eyes.

"How?" Hermione wanted to know. "None of the lovely ladies in the library right now want to shag you enough that they're approaching."

He snorted at her words.

"Too bloody mature for a kid," he muttered. "But I mean the bruise. Hurt like hell, but that would've got me laid later tonight. The girls can't resist a man who looks like he needs pity and to be cared for."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Hermione drawled sarcastically in retort. "I can bloody it back up for you, if you'd prefer?"

"Feisty," he accused, laughing at her. "But it's alright. I already got one shag out of it after practice."

"Did you know that you overshare?" Hermione asked, raising her eyebrows at him even as she pocketed her wand before working both hands into his long hair once more. She felt a prickle of annoyance that she knew she had no right feeling over the idea of him having had sex - most likely in the shower - before he'd come to the library.

A part of her – the idiotic part that had gone and developed a crush on him – had already begun thinking of Thorfinn Rowle as being hers. And the idea of anyone else getting their grubby little hands on what she considered to be hers rather rubbed her the wrong way.

"Jealous, Princess?" he asked.

"Of what? She has to deal with you all sweaty and sticky and gross. Not to mention she has to endure the gag-worthy sight of you naked," Hermione rolled her eyes. "Yet here you are, getting your post-coital cuddle from me. I'm now certain that you're secretly needy in regard to cuddles and affection."

"Cheeky little shit," he laughed boisterously at her words. "Bloody hell, kid, you're going to be trouble when you're all grown up."

"I'm trouble now," Hermione retorted. "Grown-up, I'll be unstoppable."

"Yeah, that's what I'm worried about," he said. "And I didn't say to stop playing with my hair. What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to get back to the study you interrupted. Madam Pince is lurking, looking for reasons to throw you out again and I won't be chucked out along with you just because you're a bad influence."

Hermione extracted herself from his snug hold before turning and settling herself back on the cushion between his legs. She didn't even think about it as she leaned back against him and she bit her lip when she found some extra part of him pressing against her in a way she hadn't felt before.

"Finn?" Hermione asked carefully.

"Don't say a word, Baby-girl," he warned her. "And don't squirm, you'll give it ideas."

"It's already got ideas, apparently."
"Salazar's rod, witch! When you're grown, I'm coming back for you. You know that, right?"

"He says, as though his Quidditch career won't lure enough witches to his bed to make him forget the swotty first year Gryffindor girl who tattled on him for being a sexual deviant," Hermione said dryly. "I hear you accepted the offer from the Bats, after all?"

"Yeah," he sighed, propping his chin atop her head and reaching for his books. "The Arrows guy who was going to retire decided to re-sign with them for another year."

"So you're off to Ireland after graduation, then?" Hermione asked him.

"Yep," he said, sounding like he wasn't overly thrilled about it. "Apparently the team managers have handled accommodation and shit for me, too. I get to take the train home with the rest of the school and then portkey right off over there. My sister's going to cry her heart out."

"You have a sister?" Hermione asked, surprised to hear that.

"Reina," he said. "She'll be starting school next year."

"Oh. I didn't know you had siblings," Hermione said quietly. "And given how much I've seen of your anatomy, I feel like I should've known that."

Thorfinn laughed quietly at her words.

"She's nothing like me," he told her softly. "She's a little angel. Quiet. Shy. Demure. The perfect little pureblood princess. Everything my father expects out of a daughter. Never raises her voice or loses her temper or does anything she shouldn't."

"Sounds more like she's been brainwashed," Hermione muttered.

"It's expected in high-society of the wizarding world. Never see the Slytherin girls getting out of line, do you?"

"Pansy Parkinson does. She's horrid," Hermione argued. "Always being rude to people in class. Always instigating cat-fights with the other girls."

"Ah, now see, that's a different thing. Those bitches are as cold and as cut-throat as they come, but they'll never have a hair out of place even when they're knocking your books from your arms, tripping you over or hexing your from behind."

"In other words, they're total bitches and trained to make sure it looks like they're perfect princesses so they get away with it?" Hermione retorted.

"Pretty much," Thorfinn chuckled. "Not Reina, though. Wouldn't hurt a gnat, that girl."

"You love her very much," Hermione said. "I can hear it in your voice."

"Course I do, she's my kid sister and she worships the ground I walk on. Mum hasn't had the heart to tell her I'll be moving to Ireland after graduation 'cause she'll cry her eyes out."

"She sounds lovely," Hermione told him quietly, taking up her quill and scratching out a few more notes about her study.

"She is. Actually, I need you to do something for me, Princess," Thorfinn murmured, smoothing his hand over her stomach and curling it around her securely. "She'll be the year below you, and likely be in a different house, but could you keep an eye on Reina for me? She's not cut-throat
enough to be sorted into Slytherin, I don't think. And not interested enough in learning for Ravenclaw, or reckless enough for Gryffindor. She'll likely go into Hufflepuff and she'll be upset about it. Dad will probably be harsh with her over it as well. So, you know, if you see her around and she looks upset, could you...?"

"I'll watch out for her, Finn," Hermione promised solemnly, reclining back against his chest and tipping her head slightly so she could look up and meet his gaze.

He tipped his head downwards, causing his unsecured mane to fall in his eyes. He shook his head slightly as he held her gaze, blinking at her slowly.

"You're a pretty decent witch, you know," he murmured to her. "For a Gryffindor."

"Is that supposed to be a backhanded compliment?" Hermione asked, quirking one eyebrow at him.

"Coming from a Slytherin? Baby-girl that's the closest thing you'll get to an outright declaration of your worth," he smirked at her before he leaned down slightly a pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. "Owl me if anything goes wrong with my sister, yeah?"

"Alright," Hermione nodded. "If I can figure out where you live."

"I'll owl you next year to tell you," he chuckled.

Hermione laughed along with him and turned her attention back to her homework, feeling the way he sighed before he pulled his books closer as well.

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He was a right bastard and he knew it. Thorfinn Rowle shifted the slight little lioness against him, reaching for one of his textbooks even though he was having trouble focusing on the content when he felt like shit. His head was aching, despite the healing charms she'd done on his jaw and his mind was focusing on the fact that he'd instigated a wretched plan to ruin this innocent little swot's life. The girl who had tattled on him but not actually gotten him expelled or cut form the Quidditch team. The girl who let him manhandle her. The girl who was brave enough to get right up in his face and go toe to toe with irate Slytherin seventh year. Even the likes of him, someone big enough to break her in half with his bare hands if he really wanted to.

She was also the girl who readily let him pull her into his lap and cuddle her into him just because he felt like it and because she was using the desk he preferred to study at. The girl who agreed to watch out for his sister, despite the weird relationship between the two of them that had existed since he'd first laid eyes on her in the library with some other witch's mouth wrapped around his cock. He was beginning to think his plan to ruin her life was extreme. Shit, he was beginning to think the little brat was worth a bit more to him than just someone to fuck over for his own amusement.

Should he tell her what she'd done by putting the beads in his hair and instigating what essentially amounted to a betrothal between them? Should he go through with his plan to reciprocate in kind with jewellery that would claim her as his witch until she was of age and thus, marriageable?

He couldn't exactly just sell the properties he'd purchased back to their original owners and he couldn't forfeit the amount he'd paid for them by handing the deeds over to the witch reclining against his chest and occasionally correcting the facts he was trying to memorise for his NEWT study. Hell, for all he knew, the effect of the bond forged with the exchange of the jewellery was messing with his head to begin with, making him second-guess himself. Making him doubt his
Clutching his cramping hand around his quill, Thorfinn tried his hardest to get his wayward thoughts in order. Sensing the discomfort in his hand after a hard practice spent flogging Bludgers around the Quidditch pitch and clenching his hand tight around his bat despite the numbness thanks to the driving wind, Granger laid down her own quill and tugged his from his grip. Thorfinn resisted for a moment when she tried to unclench his fist for him. She squeezed a little harder and he let his palm open, wondering what she was up to.

The groan of pained pleasure tore from his throat involuntarily when the little witch dug her tiny fingers into his flesh, beginning at the joints of his wrist and dragging both thumbs across the fleshy part of his hand and down the length of his fingers.

"Fuuuuuck," he hissed, his head dropping back at the way it both stung like hell and felt so damn good, he half wondered if he'd just come.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" she chuckled, doing it again and making him groan a second time.

"What the bloody hell are you doing to me, witch?" Thorfinn asked huskily, feeling his body respond once more to the touch.

"Massaging your hand," she answered. "You carry a lot of tension in here, you know?"

She dug her thumbs into the fleshy part of his hand again and Thorfinn saw stars behind his eyelids.

"How are you doing that?" he groaned softly. "It feels better than having some sexy witch suck the come right out of my cock."

"Must you constantly be crude and disgusting, Thorfinn?" she asked, sounding appalled by his analogy.

"In this instance, yeah, I really must," he muttered. "Blimey, Princess. Do it again?"

She did and Thorfinn realised he was in trouble.

"Do you need me to get off your lap?" she asked delicately, clearly feeling the stirrings of his cock against her back once more at the pleasurable feel of being touched so innocently and yet so intimately at the same time. The same thing had happened when she'd been playing with his hair and when he'd been breathing in the sweet scent of her skin. Thorfinn began to think he was fucked in the head for being sexually responsive to her while she was still so young.

"Don't even think about it, Baby-girl."

"There's hardly room for the three of us here, Finn," she argued and Thorfinn smirked at her frankness.

"Just do that one more time," he said, moving his hand inside hers. "Then we'll deal with the other problem."

"Doing this is causing the problem," she retorted, but she did it anyway.

"Fucking hell, Baby-girl," he groaned into her hair, tightening the arm he'd slipped around her waist and pressing her back against him more firmly.
"You're going to get us both in trouble if you keep making those noises," she informed him, releasing his hand and attempting to shuffle forward on the cushion so she wasn't pressed up against his erection.

"Bloody hell," Thorfinn sighed, burrowing his hand between the two of them and attempting to rearrange himself.

He was hardly concerned about the little witch knowing he had a boner when she'd seen the bloody thing more than once. Didn't mean he needed to go poking the twelve year old with it, though.

"Are you laughing at me, Princess?" Thorfinn asked when he noticed the way she'd pressed her chest to the edge of the table and seemed to be vibrating slightly.

A small giggle escaped her and Thorfinn felt himself smirk, even if the witch was laughing at his expense.

"Watch who you laugh at, Kitten, or I'll rub it on you again," he warned her, trying to be stern. The peel of laughter she unleashed at his words made him chuckle too and caused several people to look over towards their table to see what the excitement was all about. Granger had to bury her head against her folded arms upon the table to muffle the sounds as she continued to laugh at him.

"It's not that funny, Granger," he rolled his eyes, trying to will the erection away by thinking of boring Quidditch facts and other, less savoury things to desist the flow of blood to that particular part of his anatomy.

She was still sniggering about it several minutes later, everyone in the library having gone back to their study, though a few of the senior Ravenclaw students looked annoyed by the sound she'd made to distract them in the first place.

"Having some trouble there?" she asked, her breath coming a little fast after her laughing fit as his expense.

"You're trouble, Princess," he muttered in her ear when he got his body back under control as he scooted up behind her until she was pressed to his front once more.

"Apparently, you like that," she fired back. Thorfinn shook his head at her sass, beginning to think he was definitely in over his head with this one. If she was on a level with him at this age, he could only imagine what kind of adversary she was going to be when she was all grown up.

"Watch it, Granger," he muttered, pressing his lips to her ear a shifting her slightly. "You're meant to be helping me study, not distracting me."

"Sorry," she giggled in return before shaking her head slightly, flicking her hair so the riotous curls all hung over the shoulder opposite to where he was leaning, thus exposing her neck, and focusing entirely on her work.

Too logical for her own good, that's what she was. For the next two hours the little witch sat in his lap without making a noise beyond the occasional sigh as she worked through her own study. She paused a few times to correct some of the answers he was marking on the practice exams he'd been taking, scratching out the answers to the ones he got wrong. She made sure to use her quill for it too, which Thorfinn noticed was loaded with bright purple ink rather than the black of his own, making the ones he got wrong stand out.

She didn't say anything else as she worked, leaning into him comfortably. Thorfinn watched idly as
people came and went from the library around them, looking up every time one of them distracted him. Knowing he already had his career sorted meant he didn't want to try as hard as he knew he should for his exams. He knew he needed to still do well. His family would pitch a fit if he goofed off and didn't make an effort. It was just hard to focus on them when he knew he didn't technically have to.

Pince swooped past several times, at her most vicious thanks to the way so many people were studying for their exams. Others came and went, ignoring him as he worked at his table with the little Gryffindor witch in his lap. When his friends arrived to work on their own study, Thorfinn glanced up at them carefully.

Pucey smirked at the sight of Granger sitting between his knees and dutifully double checking all the answers on her own practice exams. Bulstrode looked puzzled by the sight but obviously didn't note the girl's young age and small stature because he didn't make any comment about cradle-robbing.

Antonin eyed the little witch with annoyance and distaste, but he chose to keep his mouth shut when Pince stalked by, looking ready to breathe down their necks and throw them all out on their arses if they made a sound. The three of them shoved aside some of the many books Granger had accumulated in her many hours spent working. She didn't even look up from her paper as they all joined the table, and Thorfinn chuckled to himself, shaking his head.

He sighed when the movement caused his hair to fall into his eyes suddenly, annoying him immensely. Granger twitched in her seat when the long strands tickled her neck and she reached absently to brush away the annoyance from her neck. Clearly she was focused on her work, because she did it again a minute later when he tried brushing it back from his forehead only to have it fall again.

"Help me out, Baby-girl?" Thorfinn murmured into her ear, watching the way she quivered and jumped a bit in surprise to hear him speaking again.

"Hmm?" she asked, finishing her sentence before turning her head, trying to see what he was talking about.

Thorfinn looked at her through his long hair where it hung in his eyes and her brow furrowed for a moment before she smiled gently.

"Oh," she said, turning in his lap and laying down her quill. She dragged her hand through the offending strands and gathered it at his crown, leaving the rest loose. Thorfinn watched her ferret into her pocket for a leather string to tie it off with. She didn't even need to see it to be able to tie it off.

"Thanks, Princess," Thorfinn smiled at her, ignoring the way all three of his friends had stopped what they were doing to watch the girl play with his hair again.

"Fucking mudblood," Antonin muttered from across the desk and Thorfinn tensed slightly, waiting for the girl to be offended. She hadn't been the last time Antonin had called her that, but if she was in a mood, she was likely to pick a fight with the Russian.

She tensed slightly as well and her chocolate eyes scanned Thorfinn's face for a moment before she turned in his lap once more and focused on her homework again, ignoring Dolohov entirely. Thorfinn watched the way his friend narrowed his eyes at her for ignoring him and treating him like he was beneath notice or acknowledgement.
Silence prevailed once more and for the next hour they all worked without a word, though Pucey snickered to himself a few times and exchanged cruel grins with Dolohov. Thorfinn ignored both fuckers and tried to focus on his work. His hand was cramping again from the writing and he watched the little witch in his lap when she laid her own down, bending her knuckles back against the edge of the desk until they all cracked.

"Hermione?" a confused and rather betrayed sounding voice interrupted just as she was reaching for his hand like she meant to do that thing she'd done earlier to relieve the cramp in his hand.

Thorfinn turned his head, feeling a prickle of annoyance when, from a few paces behind Dolohov, he spotted the two dolts she usually spent time with. Both idiots were staring at her, their mouths open in horror as though they didn't quite believe their eyes.

"Uh oh," Granger whispered, her head snapping up to land on her friends.

He couldn't see her face, but Thorfinn suspected she had just tensed in utter horror.

"What are you doing?" the red haired brat asked in a strangled sort of voice. "Why are you sitting with these people? They're Slytherins, Hermione!"

Thorfinn couldn't help but snort at the kid's obvious disgust. By the looks of him, he was a Weasley, what with the hand-me-down robe and red hair, not to mention the vacant expression.

"Funnily enough, I am aware of that, Ronald," Granger answered evenly. "Did you need something?"

"Why are you sitting with Slytherins? Seventh year Slytherins?" the kid – Ronald, apparently – continued to look confused.

The other boy with them, Harry Potter, was looking a little baffled himself but the kid seemed to recognise from the even, controlled tone in Granger's voice that she wasn't in the mood to discuss her current seating choice.

Not that the redhead seemed to be taking the hint as he continued to gape with his mouth hanging open, his eyes slightly narrowed as though he didn't entirely believe that Granger would be sitting with anyone other than the two of them. Obviously the kid was very aware that Granger had few friends outside those two idiots. And Thorfinn was thinking the kid was kind of jealous over the idea that she'd made... well, he didn't rightly know how to quantify just what sort of relationship he had going with Granger.

He wouldn't exactly say they were friends. He wouldn't really call her an enemy, either. She was, technically, his betrothed. But that was hardly here nor there when he hadn't reciprocated with any jewellery and was now tossing up whether or not he should do so when it would likely land her in trouble. He'd just been thinking she was worth a little more to him than just someone to fuck over. It wouldn't make sense for him to exchange further gifts with her, especially not without telling her what they were for or what they represented.

"Got to tell you something," Potter said, coming closer and continuing to eye Thorfinn and his friends warily. "It's important."

Granger sighed very softly as she leaned against him.

"Can you lot take this horseshit elsewhere?" Pucey asked of the first years. "Some of us are actually trying to study."
Both Gryffindor boys looked wary at the deceptively calm tone in Pucey's voice as he made his request. Meanwhile Granger glanced down at her study before looking up at the two of them again. Potter looked nervous and slightly agitated, Thorfinn noticed. He got the feeling Granger didn't at all feel like moving from where she currently reclined against his chest and that the last thing she felt like doing was dealing with whatever Harry Potter was up to. Based on Quincey's reports to him every day about Granger's movements, Thorfinn was thinking the kid was headed for trouble fast.

"Let me up, please," she said, squirming in Thorfinn's hold.

"Just got comfy, Princess," Thorfinn argued.

"Yeah well," was all she had to say in argument before she climbed to her feet and climbed right over his leg to get free and stalk around the table towards her friends.

"What are you doing hanging out with them, Hermione?" Weasley could be heard hissing.

"That's hardly your concern, Ronald," Granger retorted. "What is it, Harry?"

Potter took her arm and dragged her away several paces until Thorfinn couldn't overhear his words. Whatever it was, it looked serious because Granger's shoulders tensed and she nodded her head, making her curls dance. A frown marred her brow and Thorfinn watched the way she glanced towards him and his friends for a moment.

"You two go ahead, I have to put all my books and things away," she said, coming closer once more.

"We'll wait," Weasley argued. "Can't leave you here with them."

She rolled her eyes at his words but didn't bother arguing, clearly seeing the stubborn glint in the redhead's eyes. Hurrying back over to the desk, Thorfinn watched the way the little witch began gathering up armloads of books. She took out her wand, muttering to the books and whispering to them before they all began levitating back to whichever shelves she had pulled them from. She leaned over and around his friends to get to them all, having had them scattered across the large desk by all four boys trying to get their own NEWT study done.

"Dolohov?" she said quietly, leaning slightly around the Russian wizard.

Thorfinn watched Antonin tense at the sound of her voice coming from behind him. Thorfinn could tell she wanted to reach over and grab the pile of books Toshka had shoved aside, but didn't want to startle the Russian when he was so prone to losing his temper with her.

"I'm just going to grab this pile, alright? I'm sorry," she whispered rather politely, given the history she had of arguing with his best friend.

She leaned forward to grab the pile, having to brush against Toshka's back and his arm to get them. Antonin looked annoyed but didn't protest.

"Oh, and the answer to this one is B," she whispered to Toshka as she used her wand to send all the books back to their shelves.

She leaned over Toshka's shoulder again, pointing to something on his exam paper that he'd obviously gotten wrong. Thorfinn hid his smirk at the fact that he'd just helped the git. Antonin responded by muttering something in Russian that Thorfinn loosely translated to mean that he didn't appreciate being corrected by a first year, and a mudblood at that. When Granger retorted,
also speaking Russian, by arguing that he didn't have to listen to her if he wanted to be a ponce, but that he'd get the question wrong on the exam otherwise, Toshka's eyes narrowed.

"Get off me, witch," Toshka hissed at her.

"I was only trying to help," she argued, even though she did as she was told, moving away from Antonin and around to where all of her study notes were spread across the desk surrounding Thorfinn himself.

She picked up the book he'd found the answer to many of his questions in for a certain section before tossing it across the table with surprising accuracy to land it in front of the irate Russian boy. Thorfinn smirked when Antonin glared at her in fury before looking at the book and obviously realising she was being obnoxious in her attempt to prove she was right and he was wrong, no matter her blood status or young age.

"You alright, Kitten?" Thorfinn asked her when she didn't bother asking his permission or warning him as she leaned all over him to gather her notes.

"Fine," she answered in a tone that certainly suggested otherwise.

"Mhmm," Thorfinn hummed sceptically.

"Could you pass me my bag, please?" she asked politely, pointing towards the floor under the desk. Still working his cramping hand to try and relieve the tension in it, Thorfinn bent down and retrieved it for the witch, passing it over to her and watching her begin piling her things inside. She paused when she went to put her quill away before reaching over onto his paper and correcting several answers he'd obviously gotten wrong.

"You're too smart for your own good, you know?" he told her, shaking his head as he watched her circle the right answers and list the textbooks the answers were apparently listed in.

"You need rest if you're getting this many wrong," she replied before putting her quill away and packing up the rest of her things. "Give me your hand."

Thorfinn raised one eyebrow when she plucked his quill from his grip and set it aside once more.

"Don't start that again," he warned her when she took his cramping hand into both of hers. "You'll start something you won't finish. Again."

"Shush," she replied, grinning at him before she dug those vicious and glorious little thumbs of hers into his flesh.

"Ah, fuck," Thorfinn hissed when she pulled the cramps right from his flesh, dragging them out the ends of his fingers and relieving the pain in his hand. When she pulled his sleeve up slightly, turned his arm and dug her fingers into the top of his forearm in the same manner before doing it again, Thorfinn felt like he really had come.

Black spots danced in his vision and he had to bite his tongue to keep from groaning in front of his friends.

"Where are you going?" he asked her quietly when she worked her thin fingers through his thick ones, bending his knuckles back slightly in a way that relieved even more of the pain in his hand.

"Can't tell you that," she hummed. "But erm…"
She trailed off, biting her lip as she lifted her gaze to his. "If I don't come back… well, good luck in your exams," she said, digging her thumbs into the meat of his palm once more before releasing his hand and turning away.

Thorfinn’s mind was too clouded by her actions and the exquisite torture she inflicted to register her words before she was strolling away, being quietly grilled by Weasley about what she was doing with seventh year Slytherins. He distinctly heard the ginger accuse her of trollop-like behaviour for being curled up in his lap.

"If she doesn't come back?" Pucey asked, leaning over slightly and showing he'd been eavesdropping on every word.

"Your guess, mate," Thorfinn sighed, shaking his head as he watched the little witch go.
Hermione smiled to herself as exams came to a close. She was finally finished. She'd heard the end-of-year exams were frightful, but she'd rather enjoyed them. She was saying as much to Harry and Ron as they all made to escape towards the grounds to enjoy the last few hours of sunshine. The graduation ceremony of the senior students was scheduled for the following day and Hermione found herself wondering if Finn had his tattoo yet.

As though thinking about the burly blond had summoned him, Hermione spotted him sauntering in their direction with the rest of his friends, laughing about something and goofing off.

"You never explained that," Harry pointed out to her, also looking in the direction of the boisterous laughter coming from the group.

"Explained what?" Hermione asked, turning to him. He still had a few scrapes on his face and his arms from their fight against Quirrell and Voldemort beneath the trap-door.

"You and that blond bloke," Harry said, eyeing Ron who suddenly looked stroppy about something.

"There's nothing to explain," Hermione shrugged. "We studied together in the library sometimes."

"I study in the library sometimes with you," Harry challenged. "But you don't see me pulling you into my lap, do you?"

Hermione sighed.

"I don't know what to tell you, Harry. Rowle is my friend. I think. I don't know. He's annoying. And a git. And I almost got him expelled earlier this year."

"You've been spending time with a bloke – a Slytherin – who you nearly got booted out of school?" Ron asked, sounding disgusted. "Yeah. That makes sense. It's not like those gits are the type who'll draw out their revenge until you've forgotten your offense against them in the first place."

"Who is he, anyway? I think I've seen him on the Quidditch pitch a few times," Harry asked.

"Thorfinn Rowle," Ron answered for her. "He just signed with the Ballycastle Bats as Beater for the team. He was beater for Slytherin until the Cup."

"He's going to play Quidditch professionally?" Harry asked, looking slightly awed and rather envious as he glanced back at the big Slytherin.

"Yeah," Ron grumbled.

"Try not to look star-struck, Harry," Hermione chuckled. "He's arrogant enough without hero-worship over his career."

"Why do you hang out with him if you think he's an arrogant, annoying git?" Ron wanted to know, looking defensive.

"Arrogant? Annoying git?" a familiar voice drawled. "Wouldn't be talking about me, would you, Princess?"

Hermione twisted her neck slightly to see Thorfinn Rowle swaggering towards the three of them.
"I'd have said wretched moron if I were, I'm sure," Hermione replied, grinning at him.

"Cheeky little brat," he accused, laughing. "'Scuse me boys, but I'm confiscating this."

Hermione squealed when he invaded her personal space, stooped down and toted her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"Damn it, Finn! I'm wearing a skirt!" Hermione protested, immediately beating her fists against his back.

"Funnily enough, I noticed that, Kitten," he chuckled. "Oi, watch it, Ginger."

Hermione twisted in his hold to see that Ron had drawn his wand threateningly.

"Let her go," Ron demanded, looking like he didn't feel as brave as he acted.

"Don't think I will, kid. Put that away before I jam it somewhere unpleasant, yeah?" Thorfinn told Ron. "Princess? Tell your friend to back off, before I break him."

"Do it, Ron," Hermione sighed. "I'll be fine. Where are you taking me, Neanderthal?"

"Hush up, Baby-girl," Finn retorted.

"Don't shush me, cretin," Hermione hissed. "I swear, Finn, if anyone sees my knickers because you're being a git, I'm going to hex you again."

"Don't get 'em in a twist, Cub," he laughed. "There's no one around to notice."

"Hey, where are you taking her?" Harry protested.

"Easy, Potter," Thorfinn laughed. "I'll bring her back in one piece, I promise. I've got unfinished business with this one. You two just run along and play in the sunshine now. Go on."

Hermione waved her friends away when Finn turned his back on them and strode off down the corridor.

"You're being very rude, you know?" Hermione told him. "This is hardly the way to instigate polite discussion."

"Who said anything about polite?" Thorfinn laughed when he carried her into an abandoned classroom.

Hermione noticed idly that it was the same one he'd carried her into last time as he moved over and perched her on the windowsill so that she was at eye level with him. He flicked his wand at the door to lock it over his shoulder.

"Want to tell me what the hell you were thinking, Princess?" he asked, pocketing his wand once more and pressing his hands either side of her thighs. Hermione noticed idly that he moved close enough to stand between her knees.

"Thinking?" Hermione asked, raising her eyebrows, uncertain of what he was talking about.

"Running off and getting yourself into trouble with Quirrell. Letting Potter lead you into trouble," he clarified

"You know about that?" she asked, surprised.
"The whole school knows about that," he replied. "Didn't I say you'd end up in trouble with those two?"

Hermione stared at him, baffled by his obvious annoyance with her. She blinked at him for a moment, trying to work out what his problem was.

"You were worried about me, weren't you?" Hermione grinned suddenly, tilting her head to one side.

"Why would you think that, little lioness?" he asked rather than answering. His eyes glittered with something she couldn't name as he watched her.

"Because you're interrogating me about it," Hermione smiled. "You wouldn't ask if you didn't care."

He didn't answer her question or comment on her conclusions. He just continued to stare at her.

"What do you want me to say?" Hermione asked defensively, feeling herself beginning to squirm beneath his intense gaze. "Harry's my friend. He needed my help. Quirrell would have gotten the stone if Harry hadn't gotten there in time."

"Potter would have poisoned himself without you there to hold his hand and walk him through every step of the apparent obstacles protecting the Stone," Thorfinn argued.

"How do you know about the obstacles?" she asked, brow furrowed. No one was supposed to know about things like that. It had been hushed up as much as possible. The teachers didn't want anyone knowing their protective enchantments had been overcome by first years. Not that Hermione blamed them.

"Slytherin," Thorfinn said as though that were an answer enough. He pointed to his chest indicatively, identifying himself by that title.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Speaking of your being a Slytherin," she said, trying to change the subject and not liking his intense gaze. "Are you going to show me your tattoo, or do I have to guess about it forever?"

He smirked slowly at her words.

"I don't have it yet. I haven't complete my final task yet," he smirked at her.

"You still haven't snogged a Gryffindor?" Hermione said, her eyes widening in alarm. "You graduate tomorrow, Finn. If you don't do it in time, you'll break your oath. How could you not have snogged a Gryffindor yet? I hardly think all the girls in my entire house are that repulsive to you! I mean, it might be difficult for you to convince them to snog you, but I mean, you did just get signed as a professional player for the Bats. Use your impending fame to lure one of the Quidditch minded little chits and you'll be fine."

"You're cute when you fuss after me," he told her, grinning. Hermione blinked, stopped short in her rambling at his words. When he brought his hand up to her chin, Hermione gulped audibly.

"Fuss?" she protested, attempting to hide her sudden nerves when she met his gaze and found him watching her intently again, only this time he was smirking wickedly and looking entirely predatory. "I don't fuss, Finn. If you're too chicken to kiss a Gryffindor, you'll just give me firsthand knowledge of what will happen to me if I don't complete my tasks in time."
"Your concern for my well-being is touching," he deadpanned. Hermione smiled in spite of herself. There were butterflies rioting in her tummy and she couldn't think straight when he brushed his fingers the length of her jaw and back again.

"I'm a caring person," she retorted, smiling.

"I have something for you," he told her, smiling in return.

"Oh?" Hermione asked, her insides clenching as she wondered what it could be. Would he kiss her to complete her task list?

She felt her smile slip ever so slightly when he dug his free hand into his pocket and withdrew something. It gleamed in the sunlight streaming through the window behind her.

"What is it?" Hermione asked, watching his hand as the glittering things seemed to circle his fingers. He held it apart with them.

"It's for you," he told her softly. "Will you wear it?"

Hermione blinked in surprise when she realised he was offering her a silver bracelet. The fine links of the chain were adorned with little clusters of silver balls dangling from them, looking like tiny snow-berries along the length of it. It was simplistic, but beautiful. Searching his face for a moment when she managed to drag her eyes from the gift, Hermione saw there was the faintest hint of tension in his eyes, his body taut as though expecting a blow of rejection from her.

"Will you put it on me?" she asked softly, holding her wrist out to him.

"You'll wear it?" he asked, sounding relieved. "You like it?"

"It's beautiful, Finn," Hermione whispered, watching as he fumbled the catch slightly, using both hands to fasten the fine chain closed around her slim wrist.

She smiled softly, recalling what he'd said to her when she'd first put beads in his hair.

"We've an understanding, Thorfinn Rowle."

~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~

Thorfinn trembled at the feel of the reciprocated betrothal bond between them solidifying. Hermione's eyelids fluttered at the feel of the magic bonding the two of them to one another.

"Mmm," she murmured, seemingly unaware of the sigh of contentment leaving her.

"Bloody hell," Thorfinn muttered. He'd been debating with himself for a few weeks now over whether or not he ought to do what he'd just done and reciprocate or if he should take the beads out of his hair and try to forget this little witch ever existed. She was trouble and she was going to mess with his head, he was sure of it.

"Are you alright?" she asked him quietly when she opened her eyes.

Thorfinn eyed the way her pupils were blown wide as she looked at him and he knew she was feeling the need to solidify the bond they'd just created - her, unknowingly - just as much as he was.

"Are you?" he asked rather than answering her.

She nodded her head, smiling.
"Thank you for the bracelet," she said, looking away from him to examine the gift. "It's lovely. Though I don't know what I've done to earn a present from someone who barely tolerates me."

"Got me through my exams," he replied evenly. "Let me manhandle you to better focus on my study. And, you know, you gave me jewellery. It's only right that I reciprocate."

He indicated to the beads still plaited into his hair.

"Want more?" she asked, smiling as she reached up with her left wrist - the one he'd fastened the bracelet around - to fiddle with the braid swinging from his temple.

"Do you want to give me more?" he asked, once again avoiding answering her questions.

"Yes," she admitted. "If you don't mind them? It's not like I'll ever use them all."

"Do me one favour?" he asked then, grinning slightly.

"What is it?" she hedged.

"Let me put one in your hair. Just one?" he asked.

"Why?" she asked, tipping her head to one side.

"I don't know. I kind of like the idea of you wearing one, too."

"Where?" she asked, reaching for the tie holding her wild curls in a messy bun at the back of her head. They spilled free of the restraint in a riotous mess, the coils kinking and twisting into a long mane about her shoulders. She wore them long - no doubt to try and have gravity pull some of the body from the kinks - so they reached her waist when they were loose.

"May I?" Thorfinn asked politely, wanting more than anything to sink his hands into the wild tangle.

She nodded her head, holding still when he reached for her with both hands. An unbidden grin crossed his face when he gripped fistfuls of the curls tightly.

"Where can I put one that will be the most manageable for you?" he asked seriously, working his fingers through the tangle with amusement.

"Somewhere at the edge. Maybe under here," she reached for the left side of her neck right behind her ear where he wore two plaits himself. "That way I can just gather it with the rest when I put it up but won't get the brush stuck in by accident."

Thorfinn nodded, continuing to play with the curls while she fished her hair-accessories purse from her pocket and dug out some of the beads. She set them in her lap before reaching for his hair and Thorfinn chuckled when she got her hands stuck in the tangles.

"You never brush yours, do you?" she asked, laughing.

"Not if I can help it," he admitted.

"So it doesn't matter where I put them all?"

"How many do you have?" he asked curiously.

"There were about twenty in the pack when I bought it. You've already got five and you're putting
"one in my hair. Want fourteen more?"

"Probably not that many. Maybe ten in total?" he suggested.

Granger nodded, holding still when he coaxed three of her coiled ringlets to twining together in a plait. The hum of magic at the snap of each bead of the ends of their hair made goose-pimples race across her skin and Thorfinn grinned. She obviously didn't think it was magic to blame, from the way her cheeks turned pink.

"Can I ask you something, Finn?" she said carefully as she was plaiting a ninth bead into his hair, this one nestled next to the one hanging from his temple.

"What is it, Kitten?" he wanted to know, wary but curious when he picked up on her cautious tone.

"What does the word 'mudblood' mean?" she asked in a small voice.

"You don't know what...?" Thorfinn trailed off, catching her hands as she snapped the ninth bead closed and waiting for her to look at him.

"I assume it means dirty blood," she said. "But I couldn't find a definition for it anywhere. And given Dolohov's proclivity for using it only when referring to me whilst wearing an expression of disgust and hatred, I know it's an insult, but what does it mean? Why does he think I have dirty blood?"

"Because your parents are both muggles," Thorfinn told her gently. "There are certain people in the wizarding who value the 'quality' of their blood based on being of 'pure' wizarding descent. Meaning that they and all their ancestors have had parents, grandparents, what have you, as being entirely magical. Witches or wizards. There are people who consider muggles to be lesser beings because they can't practice magic. There are also arguments for and against blood purity - the big one being that 'purebloods' believe the intermingling of magical and muggle blood will be more likely to result in the birth of Squibs. You know what they are?"

"Non-magical people born to witches and wizards," Hermione nodded. "Why does that mean that people like Dolohov think I have dirty blood?"

"Well he thinks muggles are scum, essentially. Making you someone born of scum because of the blood that runs through your veins. A lot of it is bollocks," Thorfinn told her. "These days there likely isn't anyone left who is completely 'pure' or the line would've died out as a result of prolific inbreeding. A fair few families did, in fact."

"This has to do with the Sacred Twenty-Eight, doesn't it?"

"You know what that means?" Thorfinn asked her curiously.

"I was under the impression that it was a list of the families deemed 'more' magical because of the long, uninterrupted bloodlines of magical descent."

"Pretty much. If someone calls you a mudblood, they're essentially saying you're filthy and that your blood is impure. Most of the families on the Sacred Twenty-Eight are prejudiced about blood. Not all, obviously. You're git of a friend, Weasley, is on that list. His lot are considered blood-traitors because they betray their purity by associating with or breeding with muggles or muggleborns."

"So when Dolohov calls me that, he's essentially saying I'm a lesser citizen than him because his parents are magical and mine aren't?" Hermione asked, her brow furrowed.
"Pretty much, Princess."

"That's ridiculous!" Hermione said. "I'm the brightest witch in my year. I can do all the spells the teachers give us long before the class begins. I'm currently studying Transfiguration and Charms at a fourth year level! How dare anyone try to tell me I'm less magical or less of a witch just because my parents are muggles? I can correct seventh years on their NEWT exams and he thinks I'm lesser than him? That arrogant, disgusting arse!"

Thorfinn watched as the tiny witch worked herself into a rage and he looked on with amusement and maybe just a touch of pride when he caught the way blue sparkles of magic crackled through her curls. With his hands still in them, the sparks raced over his skin, electrifying him slightly. Her magical signature ran the length of his and Thorfinn breathed in her lavender and green tea scent. He could feel the power of her magic against his in a way that made him quiver where he stood. She was far more powerful than she knew.

"Do you feel that way?" she demanded, drawing his attention back to her now scowling face.

"No," he admitted. "My grandmother, Pandora, is a muggle-born witch. And she's powerful, like you. Rowles are typically known for our quick tempers and our bad habit of accidental magic manifesting in fire - or, in bad cases, Fiendfyre - when we lose our tempers. That woman can look my grandfather's temper and Fiendfyre right in the face and tell it to fuck off without batting an eye. She's been looking into her bloodline for years. Most of the research she's done finds that when two muggles with magical ancestors anywhere in their bloodline reproduce, magical children result. Meaning somewhere in your family tree on both side of the family, you have a witch or a wizard. Squibs are the reverse, which is another reason 'purebloods' like to argue against the idea of breeding with muggles and muggleborns. No one wants to birth a squib. Muggleborns are a miracle; squibs are just a disappointment."

"Your grandmother sounds amazing," she told him, her hair still crackling. "Do you know why I haven't been able to find any of this out about blood prejudice and why I had such a hard time finding a definition for the slur?"

"Dumbledore's all about embracing everyone, regardless of blood. He had all the prejudiced books hauled form the library and likely burned."

"Oh," she said.

"Yeah. Slytherin house was founded by a notorious bigot, actually. There has never been a muggleborn sorted into Slytherin."

"I knew your House was dodgy," she told him. "Oh, and urgh! This means I'm magically bound to complete a Rite of Passage pertaining to your bigoted house. Why did you do this to me?"

"Not everyone thinks that way, Baby-girl," Thorfinn smirked at her outrage while she worked a tenth plait into his hair before putting her purse of beads and things away once more.

"That's not the point. What's the tattoo look like? If I end up wearing a Slytherin emblem or something, I'm going to maim you, Thorfinn Rowle."

He knew he was twisted when his body twitched at her use of his full name. Thorfinn found his eyes straying to her lips as she continued snarling about blood prejudice, bigots and the Rites he'd roped her into. It had to be part of their betrothal bond making him want to do inappropriate things to her in spite of her young age.
"Princess?" he interrupted her tirade about the idea of taking her chances at breaking her oath if the alternative meant she'd have a snake tattoo at the end of the rites.

"Don't you 'Princess' me, Rowle," she snapped. "You got me into this mess... what are you doing?"

Her words came out muffled when he cupped her jaw in both hands. He had one task left to complete and too-young or not, he was completing it with this feisty little Gryffindor.

"One task left, Baby-girl," he murmured, his eyes darting between her lips and her eyes, waiting to see how she would react.

"On your list? Yes, I know. You have to stop being a chicken and kiss a Gryffindor... oh!" Her cheeks flushed crimson as she realised what she'd just said and what he was intending to do.

Leaning towards her slowly, watching her and waiting to see if she looked scared or if she didn't want him to do it, Thorfinn twitched painfully when her little pink tongue darted out to dampen her soft pink lips. She looked at his own lips before meeting his gaze, her eyes darting back to his mouth again when he felt a smile begin to threaten upon them. She wanted to kiss him too. He could tell. She was nervous and maybe a bit worried that she'd do it wrong, but he could tell she wanted him to kiss her.

He went slow, inching towards her to give her ample chance to stop him if she wanted to. But that wasn't in his little lioness's nature. As she had done with everything else he'd come at her with, she met him head on, tipping her face up slightly. He brushed his lips softly over hers, aware that this was likely her very first kiss. Thorfinn had to ignore the jolt that ran through him at the touch, the one that insisted he deepen the kiss and pull her to him in unbridled passion. Pressing his lips to hers chastely, he gauged her reaction on the way her breath hitched at the caress. When she didn't panic or pull away from him, Thorfinn did it again, pressing his lips to hers a third time as one of his hands left her jaw to slide into her curls.

Pressing his luck, he opened his mouth slightly, flicking his tongue out tentatively to trace the seam of her lips. He expected she would pull away from him in surprise or disgust. She didn't. She flinched slightly at the touch, but she didn't pull back from him and Thorfinn felt a smirk threaten upon his lips when he recalled the number of times she'd taunted him with discussion of sexual acts she shouldn't know anything about. Clearly she'd read all about how to kiss a bloke. When she parted her lips slightly in response and tentatively brushed her tongue against his, Thorfinn thought he might choke on his own need. She was cautious, tentative and clearly new to the experience, but as with everything else, she was a quick learner.

He didn't want to overwhelm her, being careful with her as he gave her the sweetest, most innocent and chaste kiss he'd ever given any witch. Her small hands were hot when she brought them up to rest lightly against his chest as she kissed him back, trying to figure out how to snog a bloke. Thorfinn couldn't resist nibbling her plump lower lip as he slowly pulled back before he let himself push her too far. The little squeak of surprise she emitted made him grin and when he opened his eyes, she looked like she was in a daze.

"Bloody hell, Princess," he murmured, outright grinning at her when she slowly blinked her eyes open, her hand leaving his chest to touch her lips as though they tingled.

"That... you took my first kiss," she murmured in response, her cheeks pink as she looked at him, trying to put her thoughts back in order.

"And I'm keeping it," he smirked at her.
She didn't seem to know what to say in response and Thorfinn grinned at the young witch widely before shooting her a wink.

"You got your list with you, Kitten?" he asked her curiously, fishing his own list from the depths of his pocket and smirking as he watched it glow green for a moment.

When he unfurled it, the last item on his list was ticked off, the name Hermione Granger scrawling itself across the page magically underneath the listing for his Gryffindor snog.

"Ah, shit," he groaned as the magic activated within the scroll, encircling his body and burning along his magical core. He hissed between his teeth when the magic seared against his ribcage on his right side. Hiking his shirt up, Thorfinn watched the way an insignia burned itself into his flesh. Before his eyes the mark darkened and deepened in colour, black and green and silver ink marring his gold-toned skin and taking the shape of the Hogwarts crest as seen on all of his uniforms for the length of his stay at Hogwarts. The banner across it read 'Slytherin', and at the bottom, the year appeared. The full image was roughly the size of his balled fist, all the houses represented on the crest, but all of them shaded the green and silver of his house rather than those of the emblem.

A grin grew across his face when the searing stopped and his tattoo was complete. He'd done it. He'd completed the Rites. He felt a sense of achievement, even if it was only a list of silly antics to complete to better while away the hours breaking school rules and testing the limits of what he could and could not get away with doing.

"I… you took my…. First kiss," Granger muttered, her eyes unfocused as she continued touching her lips and Thorfinn snorted at her disjointed words.

He hoped he could always make the witch that inarticulate with just a bit of snogging.

"Look, Princess," he said, nudging the girl and twisting slightly to let her see the new tattoo. Just below his pectoral muscle, it was wrought into the flesh seamlessly.

"You…" she said and Thorfinn laughed when she still sounded breathless.

"You alright there, Kitten?" he chuckled. "You're not going to swoon, are you?"

She blinked rapidly as his teasing tone, her gaze sharpening before her eyes snapped to his face.

"If mine looks like that, I'm going to be extremely angry with you, Thorfinn Rowle," she warned him, eyeing his tattoo coolly when her eyes darted down to it obediently at his gesture.

"The Slytherin bits?" he asked. "Yeah that might be a bit hard to explain to your little friends if they ever see it, eh?"

"You think?" she asked, rolling her eyes at him, "Did it hurt?"

"Bit like a burn if you touch a hot cauldron," he admitted, "Doesn't hurt now though."

She reached out tentatively and ran her hands over the mark, smoothing her dainty fingers against it and apparently feeling the magic within it.

"It feels alive," she told him. "Like it has its own magical signature that's interwoven with yours."

He nodded his head.

"Your fingers are warm," he told her when she traced the pattern idly with one hand, not at all
seeming to care that he was exposing part of his form to her gaze. He supposed that once she'd seen his dick, she wasn't likely to be shocked by seeing a bit of his abs.

"So are your lips," she replied in a soft whisper.

"Still reeling, Baby-girl?"

"You can't just steal a girl's first kiss and then tease her about it, Finn," she chided him. "It's very rude. I'll never get that kiss back, you know?"

"Do you regret it?" he challenged, smirking at her. "Do you want it back?"

She tipped her head to one side, seeming to legitimately think about it.

"No," she admitted finally. "I... I'm rather pleased it was you."

"Oh?" Thorfinn chuckled, feeling smug.

"Mmm, imagine if it had been someone who wasn't a rake and so had no idea what he was doing; he'd have botched it up," she replied, looking revolted at the idea.

"So glad to be of service," he snorted. "But you should know that you'll never have a kiss like that from anyone else, Princess."

"Just from you, you think?" she asked, raising her eyebrows.

"You bet your cute arse, little lioness," he winked at her. "But if you want another one you better grow up a bit more. Jail-bait's what you are right now."

She rolled her eyes at him in reply, fishing a familiar scroll from her pocket and unfurling it.

"Look at that," she sighed. "Thorfinn Rowle – Slytherin – 1992. Only three more to go and that task will be ticked off."

"Maybe hold off on the adult tasks, Princess?" he suggested. "Do something dull, like... oi, what's all this? You've already ticked a bunch of the early tasks off?"

Hermione grinned, returning her attention to the top of the scroll where a number of the tasks were, indeed, check off as complete. She stolen a library book – though she'd returned it later, claiming that she'd found it in a forgotten corner of Gryffindor Tower. She'd been into the Forbidden Forest at night. She'd smuggled something illicit through the school.

"You took a dragon through the school?" he asked doubtfully.

"Norbert," Hermione grinned at him. "Had to get him through the castle from the grounds and up to the Astronomy Tower to be smuggled out by dragon handlers."

"Break at least ten school rules," Thorfinn read on. "Bloody hell, you've already hit on breaking twenty. Just what the hell have you been doing all year, Princess?"

"Getting away with breaking the rules," she grinned at him. "You're right, Harry and Ron are trouble. And look, some of these are ticked off too."

She slid her finger down the length of the scroll to the tasks pertaining to catching a fellow student in a sexual act – his name was once again listed, along with his crime.
"Ah hell," he sighed. "You're going to have this thing done as quickly as you finish your bloody homework."

He shook his head at her.

"Promise me you'll wait until you're at least fifteen before you try any of the sexual deviant acts, yeah?" he asked, dragging a hand through his hair.

"Maybe," she shrugged. "I'll see how I feel when the time comes."

"Hell, Baby-girl," Thorfinn laughed. "Maybe giving you this thing was a mistake."

"It's a bit late for that, Finn," she replied, rolling her scroll back up and tucking it back into her pocket. He couldn't help but think that it was a bit late for taking back a lot of things between himself and this fiery little witch.
Chapter 11

Hermione watched the graduating class cross the dais and collect some kind of box they were all being given. She had learned the exams results wouldn't be released until after term ended, so she could only guess at what was inside. When Finn crossed it, he was smirking widely, accepting his box and moving along. Held out upon the grounds with parents in attendance to watch their children graduate, the class looked nervous, excited and a little saddened all at the same time.

She supposed she could sympathise.

She had thoroughly enjoyed her first year at Hogwarts, all things considered. At least she had once she'd made some friends and stopped being so lonely. As she watched the hulking blonde Slytherin boy who'd so impacted her entire first year of wizarding school, Hermione couldn't help but smile and cheer along with the rest of the students as he turned to wink at the crowd before pouncing on Professor Vector – the young and pretty Arithmancy teacher. He dipped her and snogged her right on the lips there in front of everyone to a series of gasps, cheers and laughs while the poor Professor flailed in the wizard's hold. She swatted him angrily and scolded him the minute he released her but Finn was having too much fun to care as he turned to the crowd and raised both arms in silent victory.

Hermione knew that many a boy thought the Arithmancy teacher to be extremely fit and lots of them had fantasised about doing what Finn had just done. The scarlet cheeks of the witch he'd snogged accompanied a flare of jealousy from Hermione, whose laughter died off at the sight. She felt a scald of heated fury rush through her and Hermione pinched herself hard to keep from being such a swot. She had no right to be angry at the boy just because he'd kissed her so sweetly yesterday or because she'd gone and developed a crush on him.

"If you're quite finished harassing my staff, Mr Rowle?" Professor Dumbledore asked, raising one eyebrow behind his half-moon spectacles before continuing on with the ceremony when Finn jumped off the dais and retook his seat amongst the graduating class.

When it was all over they were dismissed to mingle with parents and friend who'd come to witness the ceremony. Hermione found herself wandering through the crowd quietly. She'd dug out the wizarding camera her parents had asked her to buy and was clutching it to her chest.

"Harry?" she asked quietly of the messy haired boy next to her.

"Yeah?"

"Will you and Ron take a picture with me?" she asked him, "Mum and Dad want to know what you two look like after listening to me talk about you all the time in my letters and at the holidays."

"Oh, um, yeah sure, Hermione," Harry said, looking alarmed to be asked such a thing.

"I'll just ask someone to take it for us," she said, "Could you grab Ron?"

Harry nodded his head while Hermione scanned her eyes around looking for someone to take the picture for her. She spotted a small blonde girl sitting by herself and looking around quietly, her hands folded in her lap and her ankles crossed under her chair as though she were a princess taking tea. She looked too young to have been a student with them that year, and she sat by herself.

Assuming her to be the younger sister of a graduate, Hermione approached cautiously.
"Excuse me?" Hermione asked politely, "Would you mind taking a picture of my friends and I?"

"Are you talking to me?" the girl asked shyly, her bright blue eyes widening as she turned to look at Hermione.

Hermione nodded recognising those eyes.

"Oh. Um. Alright," the girl said, looking very nervous.

Hermione handed the girl the camera, watching her get to her feet while Harry hauled Ron over to her side. Wrapping an arm around Harry, Hermione felt the messy haired boy throw his arm around her shoulders. Ron looked put out about something on Harry's far side.

"Say 'Humdingers'," the little blonde told them, lifting the camera to her face and pushing the button while they all repeated the word, and Ron began to laugh at her choice of word.

"Got it," the girl smiled shyly, "Erm…"

She shuffled her feet nervously and Hermione smiled at her.

"Thanks so much," Hermione told her, "My parents have been nagging me to send them pictures of me and my friends. It will be good to have this to show them over the holidays. I'm Hermione, by the way."

"My name is Reina Rowle," the little girl told her and Hermione felt a smile slip across her face, unbidden, at the girl's polite response.

"I've heard about you," Hermione told her, pleased at her luck to be meeting Finn's sister, "Finn was telling me you'll be coming to Hogwarts next year?"

"Finn? You know my brother?" the girl asked, "He lets you call him 'Finn'? No one calls him Finn except Gran, and not in a long time."

"He told me I could," Hermione shrugged her shoulder, grinning at the way Reina's eyes lit up and her personality shone through her calm and polite façade at the mention of her brother.

"Why?" Reina asked, "He never lets anyone call him Finn except for Gran. How do you know Thor?"

"We've run into each other a few times," Hermione chuckled, "He's a menace."

"Did you see what he did to that teacher?" Reina asked in a whisper, "Daddy will be so angry with him when we get home."

"It was all in good fun," Hermione shrugged, even if she still felt flares of annoyance over the incident herself.

"It's very odd that Thor would let you call him Finn. Or that he would talk to you. You look like a first year. And you're in Gryffindor. Daddy said Gryffindors and Slytherins don't talk much."

"Reina?" Thorfinn Rowle's voice drawled from away to their right and Hermione watched the little girl turn towards the sound of her name.

"Thor!" she shouted, abandoning Hermione with a wave and something like a curtsy before she raced towards her brother.
He plucked her from the ground and tossed the tiny girl into the air. Hermione looked on, noting the differences and similarities between siblings as she watched them. Both blonde. Both blue-eyed. Both had a similar bone structure despite Reina's obvious delicacy compared to Thorfinn's chiselled and masculine visage. Where he towered over his peers and was rippling with muscle, Reina was tiny. Petite and small, she looked like a tiny waif in comparison to her big brother.

That they were siblings was clear to anyone with eyes and Hermione could tell at a glance that the little girl adored her brother. She giggled when he tossed her into the air again, drawing a scowl from a man who could only be Finn's father. Mr Rowle wore his own blonde hair short and neatly combed. His robes were impeccable and formal for the occasion. He was of a height with Finn too, making him rather tall enough to see over just about any crowd. As hulking and intimidating in size as Thorfinn, he made quite the daunting figure and provided a window that showed what Thorfinn might someday become as he grew older.

There were subtle differences, Hermione noticed as she continued watching the family even as Mr Rowle scolded his children for being inappropriately exuberant and demanded that Finn put Reina down. She could tell the man was shocked when his daughter clung to her brother and refused to be moved from where she perched on his hip. As she looked on, Hermione noted that Mr Rowle's eyes were a dark shade of green rather than the bright blue that both his children sported.

He was softer around the middle and less chiselled than his son as well. Where Thorfinn was all tightly rippling muscle, Mr Rowle was softer. His huge size gave the impression of strength and power, but she noticed that he had something of a soft paunch hidden beneath this robes, a small gut pressing against the fabric that Thorfinn didn't sport. If she had to guess, she'd assume the man worked an office job somewhere and was a little lax with any sort of fitness regime.

"What were you thinking? Embarrassing yourself like that and molesting a teacher of this school!" Hermione heard Mr Rowle growl at his son, clearly displeased by the idea of Thorfinn misbehaving and potentially making him look bad.

She rolled her eyes to herself. She might've been momentarily jealous over the idea of Finn snogging the teacher, but it was really nothing to get worked up about. After all, it wold make him some sort of notorious legend in the eyes of the other students. It was no secret that many of the boys in every year thought that Professor Vector was very pretty and more than one of them had been heard in the past stating that they'd rather like to do inappropriate things with her.

"Just a bit of fun, Dad," Thorfinn shrugged his massive shoulders at the older man, "She's fit."

Hermione chuckled when the man proceeded to lecture Thorfinn about making the family look bad and acting like a delinquent and a number of other things, his voice low and angry as he spoke. Through the entire lecture, Reina Rowle, propped on her brother's hip, seemed to curl in on herself, burrowing her face into Thorfinn's neck as though her father being so irate upset her. Finn himself looked torn between defending himself, trying to make sure he didn't lose his formidable temper with his father when there were so many witnesses, and looking utterly bored with being lectured.

At one stage he looked over in her direction where Hermione was standing with Harry and Ron. The boys were discussing Quidditch and occasionally pointing out the funny outfits that some of the gathered family members of the graduating class wore. She noticed idly that Harry seemed most intrigued to see people dressed in such stuffy look, fancy, yet Victorian style clothing. Being raised by muggles certainly meant he'd never seen so many people dressed in such a way. Hermione was new to it too, though she herself rather liked the robes and things people wore.

She looked forward to the day when she could wear fancy robes of her own, distinguishing between her life in the magical world and her life in the muggle world. She could still remember
the many comments her mother had made to her during their trip to Diagon Alley pertaining to fashion within the wizarding world and how different it was from muggle attire.

Thorfinn caught her eyes while his father was still lecturing him and Hermione found herself smirking at the big idiot. His father had his back to Hermione, so Hermione took the opportunity to get Finn in even more trouble. Pressing the thumb of her right hand to the tip of her nose, Hermione wiggled her fingers and stuck her tongue out at the blonde wizard. She felt her smile grow when his lips twitched at her antics. Determined to make him laugh, Hermione sucked both of her cheeks in between her teeth until she had big pouty fish lips, and rolled her eyes back in her head.

That one earned a laugh that he had to quickly disguise as a cough. From the way Mr Rowle's shoulders tensed, the man wasn't fooled. Hermione was determined to get Finn to crack, having entirely too much fun taunting him from afar.

"Hermione, what are you doing?" Harry asked her when Hermione made a duck-face, pressed her thumbs to her cheeks and wiggled her fingers and Finn.

"He's being lectured by his Dad," Hermione told her friend, "And he'll be in even more trouble if he cracks up laughing mid-way through it. I'm getting my payback for his toting me on his shoulder yesterday."

"You and this idiot are weird," Ron grumbled.

"Think two people will break him faster than one?" Harry asked after a minute of silence where Hermione made several more faces at Finn.

"Yes," Hermione admitted.

"Alright then, on three," Harry laughed, "One. Two. Three."

She and Harry both pulled ridiculous faces just as Mr Rowle began gesticulating harshly and Thorfinn lost it. His eyes darting to them over his father's shoulder he spotted the two of them making faces at him and his face cracked into a wide smile before his boisterous laughter boomed across the rolling grounds.

Ceasing their actions immediately Hermione turned to Harry, grinning widely and pretended they were having an in-depth discussion about Quidditch when Mr Rowle spun around, trying to spot what was so distracting and amusing his son. Harry was shortling with amusement while Ron stood with his arms crossed over his chest looked annoyed at their behaviour. Hermione knew he was just jealous that Hermione was friends with Finn in the first place given that he'd been signed to play in the leagues – Ron's dream career.

"That guy rages like Uncle Vernon," Harry told her when Mr Rowle rounded on Finn again, his voice louder this time, accusing his son of always goofing off and of never taking anything seriously.

"Serves Finn right for snogging a teacher and nearly making me flash my knickers at everyone yesterday," Hermione told him, grinning.

"You know, it's weird that you're friends with seventh year Slytherin boys, Hermione," Harry told her, "But he seems fun."

"He's a menace," Hermione told him, "And I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he one day pays me back for nearly getting him expelled at the start of the year."
"He joined the Bats, right?"

"Yeah," Hermione said, "And he's not at all thrilled about having to move to Ballycastle to play for them. His sister, Reina – the girl he's cuddling – will apparently be heartbroken over the idea of him moving away when school's finished. He asked me to look out for her next year when she starts here."

"She's a tiny little thing, isn't she?" Harry commented, looking in Finn's direction once more.

"Especially next to him and their Dad," Hermione nodded.

"They are huge," Harry nodded, "The only person I've seen who's bigger is Hagrid."

"I'm hungry," Ron complained, "Want to go and get some lunch?"

"Yeah, alright," Harry agreed readily.

"Before you do," a feminine voice came from behind them and Hermione froze before spinning towards the sound, "Might I have a word with you, young lady?"

Hermione stared up into the face of a blonde woman with eyes as bright a shade of blue as Thorfinn's. She was aging a little, though she looked fierce and proud.

"Me, ma'am?" Hermione asked, gulping at the sight of the formidable witch.

Much like Professor McGonagall did, this woman had a certain quality about her that made Hermione pay attention and made her want to be on her best behaviour.

"Yes, you dear," the witch smiled, her eyes trailing over Hermione carefully, "You boys run along and get yourselves something to eat."

"Madame Rowle?" Ron asked, eyeing the witch carefully.

Hermione's stomach dropped at the idea that Ron knew her.

"Hmm… Red hair… you must be a Weasley, yes?" the witch asked, sweeping a gaze over Ron.

"Yes ma'am," Ron nodding, gulping.

"And I hardly think Harry Potter needs an introduction," the witch went on, her eyes turning to Harry, who looked simultaneously resigned to his fame and unnerved by the witch.

"Ma'am," Harry muttered respectfully, clearly intimidated under her direct stare.

He and Ron shuffled their feet until she flicked her fingers at them, dismissing them coolly. Hermione wanted to shout to them not to leave her alone with the witch, but another part of her – the part that fancied Thorfinn – wanted to learn more about this woman.

"As for you," the witch said, her eyes scanning Hermione from head to foot, "I haven't a clue who you might be, making me think you must be muggleborn?"

"I am, ma'am," Hermione nodded, her shoulders squaring at the term now that she knew there were some people who thought less of muggleborns for their heritage. She wasn't about to let anyone push her around or talk down to her for her origins, "My name is Hermione Granger."

She stuck her hand out for the elder witch to shake, waiting to see if the woman would take it.
"Hermione Granger," the woman smiled, "Muggleborn and a fiery little thing. My name is Pandora Rowle."

She shook Hermione's hand firmly.

"You're Finn's grandmother," Hermione smiled, having heard about this woman and pleased to recall she was similarly muggleborn.

"Finn?" the witch's eyes widened, "My grandson allows you to refer to him as Finn, does he?"

"He does," Hermione grinned, "He said that calling him Rowle was too formal and I wasn't comfortable referring to him by the name of a Norse god, no matter how much he might resemble one."

"Oooh, you are a delightful girl," the witch smiled, her eyes scanning over her, "I saw those faces you were pulling at him. Got him in a spot of trouble there, didn't you?"

She nodded her head towards where Finn was still being scolded. He'd lowered Reina to the ground and the girl had hurried off to hold the hand of a witch with lustrous black hair and blue eyes.

"He nearly flashed my knickers to everyone yesterday," Hermione shrugged her shoulders, "He deserves a good scolding. Merlin knows he shrugged it off when I tried."

Pandora Rowle's tinkling laugh was like bells over snow, a sound that warmed the heart of any who heard it.

"Indeed, I would say he does," the woman laughed, "What, might I ask, was he doing to you that your knickers were almost on display?"

"Kidnapping me like a barbarian," Hermione told her, grinning, "He wanted to thank me for helping him study for his NEWTs."

"How old are you, Hermione Granger?" the woman asked her curiously, inviting Hermione to follow her over to take a seat on the abandoned rows where the ceremony spectators had gathered.

"Twelve," Hermione told her, "I'm a first year this year."

"And you were helping Thorfinn study for his seventh year classes?" Pandora asked her, looking rather sceptical.

"I'm widely read," Hermione shrugged modestly, "Mostly the assistance came in the form of sitting with him and correcting things when he got them wrong if I knew the right answer. That and correcting his terrible spelling on his essays."

"You're a very bright girl, aren't you?" Madame Rowle asked her shrewdly, eyeing her.

"I've been told that I am," Hermione admitted, her cheeks turning pink, "Mostly I happen to be blessed with eidetic memory and a love of reading."

"Yet you are not a Ravenclaw," Pandora said, eyeing her uniform and its Gryffindor colours.

"No, ma'am."

"So you are bright. A first year. A Gryffindor. And you have been given permission by my grandson to refer to him by a nickname he refuses to tolerate from anyone except me," the woman summarized, "You are also a muggleborn witch, and from what little I have seen of you thus far,
you are also fiery and don't back down from a challenge very easily. Tell me, Hermione Granger, how did you come to know my Thorfinn?"

"Don't answer that, Princess," Thorfinn Rowle's voice drawled from behind her and Hermine twisted in her seat to look at the Viking of a boy. She felt a smile slip across her face at the sight of him.

"Oh, are you done being scolded?" Hermine grinned at him.

"You're going to pay for getting me in more trouble, you know?" he promised her.

"Oh? And what are you going to do, Thorfinn?" Hermine challenged.

"Give you a right spanking if you keep taunting me, witch," he warned, smirking in return.

"I'm trembling," Hermine said sarcastically, before rolling her eyes at him.

"Do you see what I've had to put up with all year, Gran?" Thorfinn asked of his grandmother, "Cheeky little brat."

"You bring it on yourself," Hermine retorted.

"Did I bring it on myself that you made faces at me when I was being told off?" he demanded.

"Of course you did," Hermine rolled her eyes, "It's hardly my fault you have no self-control, Finn. And you owed me after carrying me off like a barbarian yesterday."

"You like it when I manhandle you," he accused, laughing at her tone.

"Not when you nearly make Harry and Ron see my knickers. I was in a skirt, you big idiot," Hermione accused.

"Now it's my fault that you befriend perverts who'd look up your skirt?" he challenged,

"Says Lord of the Perverts," Hermine rolled her eyes.

"Do tell how the two of you met?" Madame Rowle said, drawing their attention once more.

"Castle's only so big, Gran," Thorfinn chuckled evasively.

"What he means is, it's not big enough that I was able to avoid catching him breaking school rules," Hermione elaborating.

"Oi, don't you go tattling on me again, Kitten," Thorfinn scolded her, though he grinned as he dropped down into the seat beside hers and slung his arm around the back of her chair.

"If I don't, who will?" Hermine argued.

"I'm not sure I want to know," Pandora said, eyeing the two of them.

"You don't," Hermione assured the woman, "I wish I didn't know the things I know about him."

"Lying's rude, Baby-girl," Thorfinn chuckled, tugging on one of her curls playfully.

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Pandora Rowle watched them as they continued to verbally spar with one another. Her sharp blue
eyes scanned over the young witch as she sassed Thorfinn, noticing the amusement that glittered in the girl's warm brown eyes. She was a petite little thing, tiny compared to Thorfinn - almost as small as Reina. Her hair fell in wild coils to her waist, a thick cloud of rich cinnamon curls surrounding her head. Pandora's sharp gaze picked up the gleam of a singular gold bead swinging from the end of a plait nested behind the girl's left ear - a gold bead identical to the number that were gleaming at her from amid Thorfinn's mane of blonde locks.

Upon the girl's slim wrist a gleam of goblin-made silver caught Pandora's gaze, a fine silver bracelet with little silver beads like tiny snow-berries. Pandora's eyes widened slightly before narrowing. She recognised that bracelet. She'd been with Thorfinn in Diagon Alley when he'd purchased it over the Christmas holidays. She had tried, at the time, to subtly probe out whom he might be buying jewellery for. She'd been excited at the idea of her grandson having his eye on a witch who'd taken his fancy enough that he was considering initiating an understanding with the girl.

She had never imagined he would pick a first year girl from Gryffindor. She had never imagined he would pick muggleborn witch. Her grandson had never shown much proclivity toward blood prejudice, but she still hadn't imagined he'd pick a muggleborn for his potential bride. She was surprised he'd picked this one. Like his father and his grandfather before him, her Thorfinnn had a wicked temper on him and he didn't take to being bossed around, sassed or argued with. He barely tolerated it from his father and he didn't put up with it from anyone else. He also didn't take kindly to being called Finn. Pandora's only grandchild until Reina had been born, Thorfinn was her special boy when he'd been little and no one but his Gran had been allowed to refer to him as Finn. All of his friends and his sister called him Thor; his parents used his full name.

Yet this tiny little muggleborn witch was sassing him, calling him Finn, making faces at him to get him in trouble and make him laugh when he was being scolded and otherwise doing all the things that Thorfinn didn't let anyone get away with.

Watching the two of them, Pandora gathered together the facts she'd lured out of the chatty, fiery little witch before Thorfinn had interrupted. She was clever, there could be no doubt about that. But was she clever enough and well-read enough about the wizarding world to know that accepting the bracelet or giving Thorfinn beads was enough to initiate a betrothal bond between them? It seemed unlikely - given her young age - that she would have knowingly entered into such an arrangement. As a muggleborn who didn't appear to be of an ethnic background with propensity towards arranged marriage, Pandora didn't imagine she would keep to the old ideals of betrothal or arranged marriages from such a young age. She also didn't imagine so fiery a girl would tolerate the idea of Thorfinn snogging his teacher without having something to say about it if they were betrothed; though she seemed in good enough spirits with him, suggesting she wasn't angry.

"Thorfinn, darling?" Pandora interrupted the cheeky back-and-forth they had begun.

"Yes, Gran?" Thorfinn asked, turning to his grandmother but continuing to taunt the girl by pulling one of her curls and making her swat at his hand.

"I'm ever so proud of you, graduating today." Pandora smiled warmly at the grandchild who'd stolen her heart the minute he'd opened his eyes, identical to her own.

"Thanks Gran," he smirked, not looking at all concerned by her words of affection being stated in front of Hermione, the way he might have were she to say so in front of his friends.

"Do tell me what possessed you to snog your teacher?"

"She's fit," Thorfinn shrugged his shoulders, "Every bloke in this place has been wanting to snog
her since first year. Toshka dared me."

"Pervert," Hermione accused quietly and Pandora watched the way something very akin to fire danced in the girl's eyes.

"Am not," Thorfinn scoffed.

"You are. Every interaction I have with you continually comes back to the fact that you are, at your core, an incurable, incorrigible pervert, Thorfinn Rowle."

"It was hardly appropriate, dear," Pandora scolded him gently, "Given the... circumstances."

She flicked her eyes towards Hermione very indicatively when Thorfinn's gaze snapped up to meet hers. Ah, so the girl wasn't aware of what she'd entered into. Suggesting no formal courtship had begun taking place and begging the questions of just what he was doing exchanging jewels with this girl without even telling her what they represented and what effect the bond between them would have.

"Exactly, hardly appropriate, Finn. She's still a teacher at this school and just because you've had the graduation ceremony does not mean that you can molest the teachers. Until you reach King's Cross station tomorrow morning, you're still a Hogwarts student and it's immoral to consider doing such a thing to one of the teachers. Not to mention she had no warning whatsoever that you were about to molest her."

"Getting jealous again, Princess?" Thorfinn smirked at the girl as though she weren't lecturing him - something he ordinarily couldn't stand.

"No," the girl denied though her cheeks turned the faintest shade of pink, "I don't envy the poor witch. Speaking from personal experience, I can assure you that much to your undoubted surprise, being manhandled by you is not actually something women hope for."

"Again with the lying, Baby-girl? We talked about this. You've got to be forthright, else you'll delude yourself into thinking you can live without me. We both know you love me."

Pandora hid her smile when the girl had the audacity to roll her eyes and feign vomiting over the very idea.

"Stop, before I actually vomit all over your poor grandmother's shoes," she told him.

"My, aren't you delightful to think of me, dear?" Pandora smiled, reaching out and patting the girl's hand.

Subtly she probed the girl's magical core and Pandora felt certain that, were she standing, she might've staggered in surprise when she felt how truly powerful this one little witch happened to be.

"Don't you try to go buttering up my grandmother, Princess," Thorfinn said, watching the two of them with a wary glint in his eyes as she touched the younger witch.

"Don't be disappointed if she ends up loving me more than you, Finn. No one would blame her," Hermione Granger retorted, needling the boy and flashing him a wicked grin of pure torment.

"And you called me incorrigible?" Thorfinn scoffed, "Little Miss know-it-all thinks she can steal my own grandmother's affection. I'll have you know this woman adores me."
He pointed to Pandora and she smiled indulgently at her grandson.

"Love via obligation through blood doesn't really count, though, does it?" Granger poked the bear, "I mean I 'love' my cousins because they're family, but I also secretly hope they'll trip over their own shoelaces and fall down the stairs every time I see them."

"Oh, that's real charitable of you," Thorfinn scoffed at her, "Some cousin you are."

"What can I say? Their immature little minds are no match for my own advanced one and they find amusement in things like pulling my hair and teasing me for being 'different'," she shrugged, "I mean, I'd kill for the little wretches if I had to; but when I've got to talk to them, I often fantasise about what it might be like if, instead of children, my Aunt and Uncle had just gotten a dog."

Thorfinn snort of amusement grew into a low, boisterous, full-bellied laugh at her words and if Pandora hadn't known the boy so well, she might have simply assumed he truly found the girl's taunt funny. Knowing him as she did, however, Pandora got the feeling that her grandson was hiding a good many things when it came to this little witch and that there was something about the girl's declaration that had greatly amused him on an extremely vindictive level.

She was thinking she might need to have a long chat with her grandson when he came home tomorrow evening before he could be allowed to pack his things and shift off over to Ireland. Clearly he was up to mischief again.

"So, are you going to miss him when he jets off to become famous, Madame Rowle?" the girl asked her politely, shaking her head at Thorfinn as he continued to laugh.

"Oh, yes," Pandora admitted, "The Tower is never the same without Thorfinn setting things on fire and causing trouble, picking fights his father and his grandfather, taunting his sister and nagging his mother for things he wants to eat."

"You make me sound like I'm five," Thorfinn grumbled.

"Darling, no matter how large you grow, you'll always be my bratty little man," Pandora teased the boy gently, sharing a wink with Hermione.

"Hear that, Finn? You're an overgrown man-child."

"One day, witch," he told her, narrowing his eyes on the girl slightly, though there was no true heat in his tone or his eyes, "You're going to eat every taunt you throw at me."

"I'm also going to discover the first live specimen of the Crumple Horned Snorkack and become Minster for Magic," Hermione rolled her eyes. "Do me a favour, Finn? Stick to Quidditch and try not to take any more bludgers to the head? I'm not sure you can spar the brain cells."

"Right, that's it, you sassy little wretch," Thorfinn snatched hold of her and began tickling her mercilessly, causing the young witch to squirm as peals of laughter escaped her.

Pandora shook her head at the antics of the two of them before noticing that her son was heading in their direction, clearly displeased by the idea of Thorfinn once again displaying less than gentlemanly manners in company as he tortured the girl.

"Thorfinn, darling?" Pandora said, laying a hand on his arm to cease his actions.

"Gran?" he asked, freezing in his actions and slowly releasing the little witch when he caught the insistent tone in her voice.
Pandora nodded in the direction of her irate son as he strode towards them, looking like he very much intended to give Thorfinn an earful. The fire was beginning to dance in his eyes and Pandora suspected the last thing the boy wanted was to be scolded, again, in front of the sassy young witch he’d been tormenting.

"Ah shit," Thorfinn cursed rudely when he spotted his father. "Run for it, Baby-girl, while you can still get away before the inquisition begins."

"Told you that you needed to be scolded more often," Hermione taunted even as she straightened her clothing and got to her feet. "It was lovely to have met you, Madame Rowle. If this one hadn't interrupted, I'd have liked to discuss your studies pertaining to muggleborns and your stance of blood prejudice, but perhaps it can be a conversation for another time."

She dropped into something akin to a deferential curtsy that she looked just a bit too practiced performing. Either the girl was from a very well to do muggle family who'd trained her in the old ways, or she'd taken ballet for a good many years and understood the way things ought to be done in the wizarding world. Despite her curiosity about the little creature and her concern over the betrothal bond Thorfinn had initiated with this young witch, Pandora found herself rather impressed by the girl's manners and all the more curious when she mentioned an interest in Pandora's studies – suggesting Finn had been talking to her about his family members.

"It was lovely to meet you as well, Miss Granger. Feel free to owl me at the Tower, anytime, if you've questions or queries about my work," Pandora smiled indulgently at the young witch. "Oh, and Hermione? I like your bracelet."
Hermione watched as Reina Rowle and Ginny Weasley were sorted into their houses along with the rest of their year during the welcome feast. She'd yet to see Harry or Ron again since the holidays and she was feeling rather worried about where they could've gotten to. Neither boy had been on the train, so Hermione had found herself sharing a compartment with Ginny Weasley – who had been rather lively as she introduced herself, claiming she knew all about Hermione from what Ron had said over the summer. In addition to Ginny, she'd shared with Neville Longbottom – who was still having trouble keeping his toad, Trevor, from escaping him at every opportunity. She had also found herself sharing with Reina Rowle, the girl having poked her head into the compartment as the train was leaving the station, before shyly asking if she could join them, claiming that Hermione was the only person she knew currently aboard the train who she wanted to spend time with.

Hermione had been rather flattered by that and as she watched Reina with some of the other girls in her year who were undoubtedly from pureblood families, it became clear to her what Finn had meant when he'd said she wasn't cut-throat enough for Slytherin. The types of girls she'd obviously known from before school were destined for Slytherin like their families before them and Reina didn't fit with them, Hermione could see it at a glance. Midway through the train ride to Hogwarts, a vague and rather odd seeming girl with long hair the same bright blonde shade as Reina's had asked if it would be alright if she joined them.

Reina had introduced the girl as Luna Lovegood, a cousin of hers. Hermione had found the girl rather odd, with her habit of storing her wand behind her ear and her extremely startling sentences that made little to no sense. The girl had been sorted into Ravenclaw, and Hermione thought it a rather good fit for the insightful, but startling witch. She was sitting calmly at the Gryffindor table, cheering along with the rest of her house as each new first year was sorted. She looked on as Reina's name was called and Hermione found herself wondering what the poor girl was thinking as she walked calmly up to the hat.

She recalled doing it herself the previous year and being so nervous that the hat wouldn't place her anywhere at all. Reina shuffled her small frame onto the stool and Professor McGonagall lowered the hat on the girl's golden blonde head. It sipped down over her eyes, she was so small. Having only met the girl briefly at Finn's graduation prior to today's train ride, Hermione could honestly say she had no idea where the girl was going to be sorted, though she recalled Finn saying that he thought she was destined for Hufflepuff. What had he said? Too nice for Slytherin, too shy for Gryffindor and too vague for Ravenclaw.

Watching the girl sit there while the hat debated was rather nerve wracking for Hermione herself. She had promised Thorfinn that she would look out for Reina while she was at school, and she intended to keep that promise, not that it would be easy to accomplish if the other witch was sorted into Slytherin and so, taught to hate or be rude to Gryffindors and muggleborns.

"GRYFFINDOR!" the hat shouted and Hermione wasn't the only one who was shocked by the announcement.

A mutter of surprise ran through the hall from some of the other older students who clearly remembered Finn and the mischief he had caused. The idea that the elder brother had been a Slytherin while the younger sister was sorted to Gryffindor seemed to shock many. Hermione herself was shocked because she been expecting that Finn would be right and Reina would be sorted into Hufflepuff.
As she watched the girl scuttle over to the long, cheering Gryffindor table, Hermione couldn't help thinking that having Reina in Gryffindor would make it infinitely easier to keep an eye on the girl and she hoped that, despite the age difference between the two of them, she could make firm friends with Reina Rowle. The fact that she just happened to be the adored younger sister of the boy Hermione fancied didn't play into it at all.

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"This is getting ridiculous," Antonin growled at him from where he was reclining against the kitchen counter in the flat the Bats had set up for Thorfinn.

"Just jam it, mate," Thorfinn argued with his friend, "I know what I'm doing, alright?"

"Bullshit you do, mudak," Antonin hissed, insulting him in Russian, "You're digging your own chertov grave and you expect me to just fucking stand here and watch you do it!"

"You were on board with this idea last term, you bastard!" Thorfinn reminded his friend, "Don't fucking stand there and snarl at me because you're getting cold feet after she helped you with your bloody homework!"

"I don't give a rat's arse about the little mudblood brat you've grown so bloody fond of, Thor," Antonin snapped at him, his dark eyes flashing as he took a long swig of his whiskey before continuing, "You heard what your bloody Gran said! If you mess with this kind of magic, it's going to fuck you up. Every time she shags someone, you're going to know about it and it's going to hurl you into a murderous rage even if you don't have to bloody look at it."

"Toshka, she's a fucking kid! I'm standing here wrapping a birthday present for the little swot to turn thirteen! She's hardly going to go around fucking people for years yet," Thorfinn argued hotly as he piled the two separate presents he meant to send to the little muggleborn witch for her birthday the following day.

"Have you forgotten so quickly what we were into at thirteen?" Antonin demanded, "Fuck, mate, you lost your virginity at fourteen. I hardly think that mature little swot is going to hold out for her fucking fiancé or husband like a proper little pureblood would. She'll be screwing around within a year or two, you mark my words! And what then, huh? As it is you've got Quincey reporting that every time you fuck a bird, the girl's been getting bursts of rage and fury. And she's still just a kid. You're a grown fucking man with a temper and a penchant for setting thing on fire when you lose your cool!"

Thorfinn narrowed his eyes at his friend over the idea that his little witch would begin sleeping around sooner rather than later, no matter how true or false the accusation might prove. He didn't like the idea of anyone laying a hand on that little witch and he already knew it was a problem, but it was too late to back out now. He'd gone and reciprocated his understanding with her and he'd essentially tied her to him in betrothal. He might be shagging around until it would be appropriate and less immoral to shag Granger instead, but that wasn't really the point of the discussion.

"What are you going to do if you're in the middle of something important and her first shag happens? Going to be awful hard to get yourself out of criminal charges if you unleash Fiendfyre and kill someone, pizda," Antonin went on, swigging from his whiskey again and looking murderous.

"What the fuck do you want me to do, Dolohov?" Thorfinn demanded of the surly Russian bastard when he proceeded to devolve into extremely offensive Russian cursing, "I can't just break off the understanding with the girl."
"You bloody well can," Antonin argued, "Break it off, forget the little bitch exists, move the hell on with your life and don't think about her ever again! Don't think I haven't noticed that ever since you snogged the brat, you've been seeking out curly haired brunettes every time you shag a bird."

Thorfinn chose not to comment on the accusation, knowing it was true. Admittedly, he'd always preferred brunettes, though he'd honestly never been that picky in the past about what attributes a witch had as long as she was pretty and willing to spread her legs for him – something many a witch was willing to do when they got a look at him and something many more were throwing themselves at his feet and demanding they be allowed to do thanks to his rapidly skyrocketing fame among the National and International Quidditch League. The fact that he'd refined his tastes a little meant nothing.

"Why are you so worked up about this? What do you care if she shags someone in a few years and I go on a rampage for a night?"

"Who do you think is most likely to suffer either as the outlet for your rage, or the fucker who has to help you hide the fucking bodies after you kill someone in your fury?" Antonin asked darkly, one eyebrow rising in challenge.

"I'm not going to bloody murder someone just because the girl has sex or snogs some bloke or whatever. I'm shagging people all the time and she's not killed anyone," Thorfinn rolled his eyes at his friend's dramatics.

"Yet!" Antonin hissed, "She's not killed anyone yet. You heard Quincey's report after that mess the other day. If it hadn't been the holidays and she hadn't been at home alone, she'd likely have severely injured herself and several others too. The Ministry had to intervene because there were purple and green flames devouring her house. If Quincey hadn't been attuned to her magical signature, your little witch would've landed in St. Mungo's at best, and Azkaban at worst."

Thorfinn paused in his wrapping of the new season's Ballycastle Bats jersey with his name on it – in his size to make her look adorable as hell – along with a book pertaining to the theory of magic he planned to give her as a signed gift. He had already wrapped the piece of jewellery he was sending her as a 'secret admirer' that would strengthen the betrothal bond connecting the two of them together. He stared at his friend for a long moment in silence.

Antonin had followed him to Ireland, where he was working as a Curse Breaker for the Gringotts Goblins and had made himself right at home in Thorfinn's spare bedroom. He'd claimed it for himself, despite his mother turning up and shouting at him for a solid two hours in fluent Russian, and he refused to be moved on the subject of living with Thorfinn in Ireland. Thorfinn was rather flattered when the surly git had told his mother – a fierce Russian witch of a stout five foot flat with all the ferocity of a Kamchatka grizzly – that he would walk into hell itself before considering moving back home where his father was living, or before he would be talked into transferring to the Russian division of Gringotts in his mother-country.

He knew his friend was loyal and he knew that the shithead loathed his father for the abusive bastard he was, but the idea that he'd rather live in boring Ireland with him rather than going somewhere more exiting, like Egypt, meant a lot. Even if the fucker did have an annoying habit of eating all the food in the chiller while Thorfinn was at training. Poor Quincey was run off her feet trying to feed the pair of them and keeping Thorfinn in daily updates regarding his sister and his little lioness.

"Don't fucking glare at me, Thor," Antonin muttered, catching his stare.

Thorfinn kept watching him. He knew what Antonin had his wand in a knot over, and it was in no
small part eating at him that a little muggleborn witch had so thoroughly wormed her way under Thorfinn's skin. He knew he was bordering on obsessive about the girl. He eagerly looked forward to Quincey's daily report of her comings and goings, even if the most interesting thing she'd done was read a book by herself. When he'd learned his sister had taken his advice and attached herself to Granger when Hogwarts term had commenced, he'd been just a little too pleased about the entire idea.

He'd nudged Reina in Hermione's direction on purpose, knowing Granger could use another friend – one who wasn't a dolt – and that Reina would need someone looking out for her who would likely do anything to protect her, should it come to it. And Thorfinn didn't doubt that Hermione would do it. If he got his way – and every report Quincey passed on suggested that he would – Hermione and Reina would grow to be close enough friends that he'd be able to hint to his sister to invite the little swot to Rowle Tower at the holidays. It would give him a legitimate excuse to see the little brat without coming across as a creep.

"I can handle this, Toshka," he assured his friend quietly.

"You can't," Antonin argued, downing more of his whiskey and looking sullen.

Thorfinn knew the bastard well enough to know his bad mood stemmed from his being worried for Thorfinn's safety. If he was brutally honest, Toshka didn't have a lot of friends. He was cruel, often came across as heartless and more than a little unhinged, and his thick Russian accent combined with his vindictiveness meant that most were wary of Antonin Dolohov. Any who'd heard of his father before him knew to avoid the Dolohovs whenever possible.

He might never say it, but Antonin was worried about what the betrothal bond would do to Thorfinn himself. His grandmother had nearly twisted his ear clean off when he'd admitted to the woman that he'd provoked the betrothal bond between himself and Granger without telling the girl what it meant and without concern over the idea that, as she grew, he would continue renewing the bond by sending her jewellery every year. Especially while the bond she'd provoked in return with her beads would grow tenuous and begin to fracture as she wouldn't be sending him things in return or spending time with him to renew it on her end. Gran had warned him that if he went through with it until she was old enough to act on the bond, it could very well cost him his sanity.

She'd also snarled at him for almost an hour over the wretchedness of what he'd done and over the fact that he'd explained some of his initial reasons for provoking the bond in the first place as a means for revenge. She'd hexed him when he'd told her that. And when he'd showed her the deeds to all the properties he'd been slowly been acquiring, she'd paled in horror and realised that he'd rather fucked himself over as much as he'd done to Granger.

"If I start to really lose it, I'll sever it, alright?" Thorfinn promised his friend.

"You won't!" Antonin snapped, "You know you won't. How can you? You had to be a fucking idiot and go all soft on her just because she's adorable as fuck when she sasses the hell out of you, even if it makes me want to pull her hair out. You bought the properties. You made the bond. You've gotten yourself twisted up enough about the little chit that you're actively seeking out birds who look like her – or what she'll look like when she grows – to fuck until she's of age and you're currently wrapping her a fucking birthday present!"

"What's wrong with that?" Thorfinn demanded.

"Do you know what a mostly one-sided bond will do to you, Thor?" Antonin asked him seriously, "And I'm not just talking about the murderous rage when she starts fucking people. The longer you send her stuff and renew the bond, the more often you're apart from her without her knowing about
"the fucking thing and going about her little life with Potter, the more unhinged you'll get."

"I'll be fine," Thorfinn waved a dismissive hand at him.

"YOU FUCKING WON'T, MUDAK!" Antonin shouted, losing his temper and flinging his whiskey glass across the kitchen at Thorfinn's head.

Years of training to dodge bludgers or flog them in another direction had him batting at the hurtling object with a closed fist as though he were clutching his beater's bat. The sting and throb in his hand when the glass shattered, slivers of glass embedding into his skin, slicing the appendage open and causing blood to begin to drip on the counter, made Thorfinn curse.

Antonin ignored his pain and his wound, a crazed gleam in his dark eyes as he continued shouting in Russian for a minute.

"You won't be chertov fine, Thor! I fucking know, you pizda! I've been betrothed since I was nine to some Russian witch I've only met once because my father made a fucking blood-oath. Every year since then, I've been forced to send her things to renew the bond and every year she refuses to reciprocate because she loathes the idea of arranged marriage as much as your fucking mudblood will when she finds out what you've done!" Antonin snarled, "I haven't always been this fucking nuts! I'm the result of what happens when a betrothal bond is almost entirely one-way. I wrote to her the minute I turned eighteen, telling her how to remove the jewellery, because Merlin knows my old man cursed it all never to come off once she put it on – which her father used the Imperius curse and forced her to do. I severed that fucker as soon as I came into my majority. Do you think I'm living here with your annoying fucking self for kicks, cunt? If I go home, that fucker will murder me for breaking the betrothal, even though her old man kicked off last year, relieving my father from his oath. I ended up this cold, cruel fucker because of that bond. And it's going to happen to you too, Rowle."

Thorfinn blinked at his friend in surprise over the admission he'd never shared before, staring at him blankly while his blood began to pool in the sink when he moved to it, glass everywhere. He was pretty sure he'd cracked a knuckle batting at the fucking thing. Before he could ask questions or register the fact that Toshka had been betrothed and never told him, the surly bastard proceeded to shout obnoxiously in Russian as such speed that Thorfinn couldn't translate it. Toshka stomped away down the hall, snatched up his cloak and left the flat before Thorfinn could say another word.
Chapter 13

When her thirteenth birthday rolled around, Hermione was at Hogwarts, once again among her fellow magical peers and among her friends. She hadn't seen Finn again since Graduation Day the previous year, nor heard a word from him. Therefore, it was something of a surprise, to say the least, when the biggest owl she had ever seen came winging towards her carrying a large, lumpy bundle.

"Oooh, it's Odin," Reina piped up from net to her when people began to point at the huge owl, "He's Thor's familiar. He must've found out it's your birthday, Hermione."

Hermione smiled when the owl swooped down to land in front of Hermione, hopping over to her with the parcel he carried and hooting boisterously in greeting. She had to rescue a pitcher of pumpkin juice before the owl could knock it over in his enthusiasm to deliver his gift as Reina began to coo at the creature in delight.

"Definitely from Finn," Hermione chuckled when she saw the state the present was in. Wrapped in such a way that it was obvious to all that a male had done it, the present was lumpy, thrice wrapped in sections in an obvious attempt to ensure the entire parcel was ensconced inside and wouldn't fall apart. It was covered in enough spell-o-tape to choke a person. Hermione noticed with some amusement and a little concern that the paper – a recycled copy of yesterday's *Daily Prophet* – bore signs of what looks like some spilled whiskey and a few droplets of blood.

"What is it?" Reina asked her, "Oh, and watch out. I think those are coming for you as well."

Hermione looked up from the badly wrapped gift to see where Reina was pointing, noticing three more owls carrying small parcels that seemed to be heading in her direction.

"Who are they all from?" Hermione frowned, "I imagine one is from Mum and Dad, but no one else I know in the wizarding world would send me anything and none of my muggle family other than my parents know about owl-post."

"I don't know," Reina shrugged, "You'll have to open them when they get here. What did Thor get you?"

Hermione looked back down at the present before her, trying to find a section to slip her fingers under the tape so she could tear the paper. When she managed, Hermione began to laugh at the gift.

Nestled inside an obviously Finn-sized Bats Quidditch jersey and a book on magical theory.

"You got a Bats jersey?" Ron asked, sounding awed, "You don't even like Quidditch. Why would anyone send you a… oh, it's from Rowle? Is that one of his jerseys?"

Hermione pulled it out of the parcel and held it up in front of her. It had the number three on the back, front and sleeves, in addition to the name ROWLE slapped across the front and the back; bright red writing splashed across black fabric. The team logo – a pair of crossed brooms embossed with a bat symbol over them inside a circle – was crimson against the dark fabric.

"There's a note," Reina said, plucking a battered looking scroll from inside the parcel and handing it to Hermione.

Hermione frowned slightly when she noticed there was blood on the parchment too, but she
unfurled it nonetheless to read what he'd said.

Hey Princess,

Heard you're keeping a real close eye on my baby sister, corrupting her into Gryffindor and making my father doubt his sanity. Reina tells me you've been taking good care of her, so thanks for that. How's school so far? Into more mischief with Potter and the ginger yet? How's that list of tasks I gave you coming along, Baby-girl?

Don't sweat the blood on this thing, or the messy writing, I'm using my left hand 'cause Toshka threw a hissy fit at me and hurled a glass at my head. Sliced my hand open pretty bad and can't hold the quill with it yet. If you want to get in touch with me, my return address is Flat 5, 89 Dunbar Street, Dublin. Send word back with Odin today, but that's the address if there's anything you need to tell me about with Reina or anything.

Do us a favour, yeah? Keep the jersey warm for me? It's clean, I promise. Figured that since I'm not around to manhandle you into my lap while you read the book I got you, a jersey would have to do for now. I'll turn you into a Quidditch fan yet, you wait.

Happy birthday, Kitten.

~Finn.

Hermione felt a swell of happiness and warmth settle inside her chest at the messy scrawl of her favourite Viking.

"What's it say?" Reina asked.

Hermione handed it to her to let her read what her brother had said even as she turned the jersey around and pulled it on over her head. Hermione grinned when the faint scent of Thorfinn Rowle surrounded her like a warm embrace as she was ensconced in yards of fabric. It was entirely too big on her, obviously made to fit Thorfinn and not meant for a girl a third of his size but Hermione already loved it.

"Bit big, eh?" Harry laughed when Hermione had to roll the sleeves up to the elbow just to uncover her hands.

"Just a bit," Hermione laughed, "I'll have to grow into it."

"Toshka threw a glass at him?" Reina asked, handing the letter back to Hermione a few minutes later.

"Is anyone surprised? I'll bet he deserved it, though there's blood on the wrapping too. He must've cut himself badly," Hermione said to the girl.

"Probably. Antonin does have quiet the temper. He moved in with Thor right after he moved over there," Reina sighed, looking sad as she missed he brother.

"Poor Finn, having to keep living with that git," Hermione grinned.

"Open the others, Hermione," Harry encouraged her, nudging the line-up of owls in her direction. One was a small brown barn owl that she'd sent to her parents with a letter a few days prior. She reached for that one first, eager to see what her parents had sent her given that she had spent so much of her childhood with her parents as her only real friends or company of any kind.
She opened their letter first, ignoring Ron when he grumbled about reading the cards later when there were presents to be opened. She smiled at the well-wishes from her parents and their lamentation over the notion of her being away at school for her birthday, even if they had insisted on combining a birthday celebration with a farewell dinner on the last night of the holidays. They had insisted on taking her out to her favourite restaurant and stopping at all her favourite bookshops – including those in Diagon Alley, in the lead up to her departure to school for the term. She knew they both missed her terribly when she was away, even if they were happy for her that she was making friends and finding her place amid the wizarding world.

When she opened her present from her parents, Hermione smiled at the sight of a book she'd mentioned wanting at Diagon Alley. They must've bought it for her in secret and hidden it away after telling her she couldn't buy every book she'd picked up during their last visit.

"Everyone buys you books, don't they?" Reina laughed when she saw it, having noted that Ginny and Ron had both thrown in to get her a book as well – which they'd given her before coming to breakfast. Harry had insisted that he wouldn't buy her a book simply because he knew she'd be given many others, and because he claimed he didn't want to risk buying her something she might already have a copy of. He'd bought her a collection of sweets and a new quill and ink set instead.

"It's hard to go wrong buying me a book," Hermione smiled, nodding her head and feeling very spoiled to be getting given anything at all. Last year she had only received a present from her parents and some bonus points on a Transfiguration essay when Professor McGonagall had noted that it was her birthday.

"What are the other two?" Ron wanted to know, eyeing the pair of owls still waiting to be greeted and relieved of their parcels.

"I'm not sure," Hermione admitted, "They don't seem to have notes, just small parcels. Hello there."

She greeted the larger of the two owls, this one a handsome black screech owl. The owl didn't hoot in greeting as most birds would, but instead glared at her and tipped forward to bite her fingers when she tried to stroke his smart-looking feathers.

"Hey!" Hermione protested, sticking her now-bleeding finger into her mouth and glaring reproachfully at the bird.

It hooted indignantly before hopping closer and holding its foot out demandingly, waiting to be relieved of his package.

"Rude thing," Reina accused, prodding the bird with the handle of her fork, "It's her birthday, so you just be nice or I'll pluck all you feathers and stuff a pillow with them."

The owl puffed up indignantly and screeched at her, obviously angry at the threat. As soon as Hermione untangled the tie holding the parcel to his feet, the disagreeable bird took flight once more.

"What a grumpy thing," Reina commented, laughing at the behaviour of the bird.

"I've never seen such a contrary owl before," Ginny agreed, "What's in the parcel, Hermione? Whoever sent it to you must be wretched, to own a bird like that one."

Hermione was busy trying to unwrap her parcel, one handed thanks to having her bleeding finger on the other hand still lodged firmly in her mouth. When she finally managed it, inside was an ornate silver snuff box decorated with ancient runic symbols.
"What's that?" Harry asked, eyeing it with interest.

"Is that goblin made silver?" Ginny asked, leaning closer to get a better look.

"What do the symbols mean?" Ron wanted to know.

"They're runes," Reina said, her eyes also fixed on the box with some interest, "Protective runes to guard against any but the owner of the box opening it. Give it a try, Hermione. Just… be careful. You never know what might be inside it."

Harry pulled out his wand, looking ready to have a giant monster spring from the box. Hermione attempted to use her wand to open the box, not trusting that something wouldn't jump out at her from it like some wretched magical jack-in-the-box, but nothing happened. Frowning a little, Hermione reached for it with her free hand and she narrowed her eyes when she felt a hum of magic along her skin as though there were wards and enchantments protecting it.

"It's warded," Hermione told her friends, pulling her hand back slightly and instead reaching out with her magic, attempting to feel along the edges of the magic, searching for any sign that it was cursed or that it was Dark magic, intent on causing her harm should she touched the box.

"That'll be the runes, most likely," Ginny said, "Bill was telling me a lot of the stuff they encounter in the Russian branch of Gringotts is warded with protective enchantments and runes that keep any but the owner from opening them. I think he told me there are lots of things like this. If you can get it open, it signifies you as the owner and master of whatever lies inside it."

"Bill's with the Russian branch?" Hermione asked of the girl, "I thought Ron said he was with the Egyptian branch."

"He was. He transferred to the Russian branch over the summer," Ginny nodded, "Our second oldest brother Charlie – he graduated the year before you three started – is a Dragonologist in Romania. Bill moved over there to be nearer to him – they're really close."

Hermione nodded her head, seeking out the layering of protection over the box and beginning to peel it back until she could delve her magic underneath it. When she managed it, the lock on the snuff box clicked open and the magic washed over hers easily, still humming, but no longer feeling vaguely threatening.

"Oh, what did you do?" Harry asked, eyeing the box curiously when she was able to reach through the magic and pry the lid up on the box.

"What's inside it?" Ron wanted to know.

"Oh, dear," Reina said, peering into the box alongside Hermione when she lifted the lid, revealing what was inside.

It was a dagger.

Of equal length to Hermione's forearm, it was slightly curved, the blade gleaming a bright shade of silver. The tang was ornate and decorated with more of the same runes as the snuff box it had come in.

"Why 'oh dear'?" Harry asked, standing up to peer over the lid and see what was inside it.

"It's a Temnnyy Klinok Smerti," Hermione murmured, eyeing the blade with interest.
Built into the handle was a light-stone – a rune activated stone of pure starlight that aligned with the magical signature of the witch or wizard who'd been gifted the blade.

"What language is that? Romanian?" Ron asked, frowning.

"Russian," Hermione corrected, "It means Dark Blade of Death."

"That sounds… ominous," Harry commented, "It's not cursed, is it?"

"No," Reina answered for her as Hermione reached for the dagger slowly, "No they aren't cursed objects. They align with the magical core of the witch or wizard they're given to. It's a traditional gift in Russia and some of the other European countries to gift a Temnyy Klinok Smerti on the thirteenth name-day."

"Name-day?" Harry asked, looking baffled.

"In the European countries they celebrate name days instead of birthdays," Hermione told him, feeling a shiver course through her as she wrapped her small hand around the handle of the dagger, "It's an ancient practice carried over from harder times, centuries ago, where a baby wasn't named or acknowledged by the Leader of each House until they had lived at least ten days after their birth to prove that they were strong and would survive. You have to understand, these are countries with harsh living conditions and hardened citizens. The practice began when many babies being born didn't live to see their first ten days due to the cold, sickness, or a lack of food if times were lean. It was easier on the magic of each House to let the unnamed baby die nameless and without recognition than it was to name them and then suffer the blow of losing the child too soon."

"What does that have to do with a Dark Blade of Death?" Ron wanted to know, looking rather revolted.

"The Blade is given to every witch or wizard upon their thirteenth birthday as a sign that they are allowed to begin studying the Dark Arts," Hermione told both boys and Ginny quietly, "On the Continent, such things are not abhorred as they are here. Places like Beauxbatons Academy and Durmstrang include the Dark Arts in their curriculum. It's not frowned upon there. Blood magic and even sex magic are taught alongside charms or transfiguration. Dark Spells learned alongside those we consider Light. Due to their seductive nature, the Darker arts can't be studied until a child turns thirteen. Until then they learn the same things we learn here. But after that, everything is fair game."

"That's out of order," Harry frowned, "It's called Dark Magic for a reason."

"It's not out of order," Hermione shook her head, "It's just a different perspective upon what classes as truly evil magic as opposed to only slightly wicked magic. For example, Dark Magic there is classified as anything that will result in the untimely death of a victim. Here, a spell is considered Dark if it can cause any kind of long-term or lasting harm to a victim. On the Continent it's not even considered illegal to practice the Crucius curse on a victim as long as they do not suffer any lasting physical or psychological side-effects."

"What's the Crucius curse?" Harry blinked, frowning further when both Ginny and Ron looked utterly horrified by her words.

"Oh, for goodness sake, Harry!" Hermione rolled her eyes, exasperated, "I know you don't like studying, but you really need to do a little extra-curricular reading to catch up on the parts of wizarding culture and common knowledge that you missed in your first eleven years. The Crucius curse is a torture curse. If used for long enough, anyone enduring it can mentally
fracture, leaving them unhinged and really quite mad, or at the very least, utterly brain-dead."

"That sounds awful," Harry said, his cheeks turning pink over her chastisement.

"It is awful, but it would also be effective in instances where suspects of crimes are being uncooperative or less than forthcoming with their knowledge when questioned," Hermione pointed out.

"When you talk like that you sound like a Slytherin," Ron accused her, looking disgusted by her argument.

"When you divide people as being inherently good or evil based on where an enchanted hat puts them at eleven years old, you sound like a moron," Hermione retorted.

Ron looked affronted by her words, flinching back slightly as though she'd tried to slap him. Hermione ignored his response as she focused on the dagger in her hand, eyeing it with intrigue.

"What's the stone in the end?" Ginny wanted to know, also eyeing the dagger.

Hermione caught the redhaired girl eyed the object with an almost covetous yearning. She'd noticed that there were many odd things about Ginny Weasley in the short length of the term so far, the most obvious of which was that she'd clearly been taught to distinguish between good and bad, light and dark, the same way Ron had, but she still seemed drawn to the seduction of the dark just the same.

"It's a light-stone," Hermione told her, "A piece of fallen starlight, so to speak. It's most practical use is as a light-source, hence the name. But something so pure has the ability to cleanse the magic of any who own one, to an extent. They are mounted into the Temnyy Klinok Smerti because they blade is given as a warning and a privilege. Upon the thirteenth name-day, a witch or wizard is granted permission to begin studying the dark arts. But, as I've mentioned, the dark arts are seductive and dangerous. It grows harder to distinguish between wicked and truly evil."

"Meaning that if Hermione were to delve too deeply into the Dark Arts and become tainted by them, when she touched the blade, the light of the stone would dim," Reina explained, taking up the tale, "Do you know how to activate the light?"

Hermione nodded her head.

"Luxetenebrae," she whispered, and the light-stone began to glow, twinkling brighter than every candle in the Great Hall, brighter even than the lightning flashing overhead on that stormy September morning.

Many people fell silent, turning to look in their direction at the glow of the starlight piece mounted in Hermione's gift. It reflected off the silver of the blade and the snuff box it had come in. It glittered brightly, reflecting from every bit of silver-wear and her goblet of pumpkin juice. Hushed whispers began at the glow.

"Wow," Ginny whispered, eyeing the light as though it were the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

"It is beautiful," Reina agreed.

"Why is it called the Dark Blade of Death if it's so bright?" Harry wanted to know as Hermione cancelled the spell.
"If the owner of the dagger has delved too deeply into darkness, the light will dim. Dark enough and it will extinguish all together," Hermione explained, "They are given when a witch or wizard begins studying the dark arts as a cautionary gauge against going too far. Traditionally, in countries like Russia, Romania, Norway and even Bulgaria, a witch or wizard whose light-stone goes too dark is expected to go before someone they trust, surrender the dagger to that person, fall upon their knees and beg for death. The blade is enriched with runes that will even force the owner to do so. Hence, the name Dark Blade of Death. When it grows too dark, the dagger is to be used to deliver death to its owner."

"That's barbaric," Harry told her.

"Poetic, actually," Reina murmured, "Everyone in my family is given one similar to this on their thirteenth birthday, though the Runes and any engravings upon it are written in Ancient Norse rather than being of Russian origin. Does it say who sent it to you?"

"No," Hermione said, laying the dagger back inside its box before pointing to an engraving along the length of the blade near the hilt, "But it's engraved."

"What does it say?" Ron asked, leaning in, "S dnem rozhdeniya. What's that mean?"

"It means 'Happy Birthday' in Russian," Hermione said.

"How many Russian's do you know?" Reina asked.

"Actually, I've family in Russia," Hermione told her, "It's how I know the language. But none of them are of magical origin, that I know of. I met one Russian witch the last time I visited family in Moscow, but we didn't become close enough to exchange birthdates. And I only know one other Russian."

"Toshka?" Reina asked, "I thought you said he hated you."

"He does," Hermione nodded, "But who else could it be? If he's living with Finn, he would know it's my birthday today."

"Who's Toshka?" Ginny asked, frowning at the idea of not knowing who they were talking about.

"Antonin Dolohov," Hermione told her, "Finn's best friend."

"Why would he send you anything though?" Reina asked, "He's not in the habit of being kind to people in general, let alone to someone he doesn't like."

"Maybe it's a cursed blade after all," Harry said, looking grim.

"I don't think so," Hermione murmured, eyeing the dagger and it's engraving for another long moment, "I think it's a warning."

"A warning?" Reina asked, raising her eyebrows.

Hermione nodded, "A warning that if I go meddling into things I ought not to meddle in, I won't much like the consequences."

"That sounds like Toshka. And who else would own such a wretchedly grumpy owl?" Reina nodded slowly, her lips twitching, "What's the third gift?"

Hermione turned her attention to the final owl sitting before her, patiently waiting beside Odin to
be relieved of his package. She reached for it warily, hoping this owl wouldn't bite her too. It didn't. The package was smaller than the rest she'd received. Wrapped in pretty silver paper and tied with a purple ribbon, it was thus far the most nicely wrapped gift she'd received.

"What is it?" Ginny asked when Hermione untied the ribbon and stopped long enough in her unwrapping to tie the pretty ribbon into her hair.

Peeling back the paper, Hermione revealed a small black velvet box that could only hold jewellery of some kind. When she lifted the lid, a smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. Too long to be a bracelet, but too short to be a necklace, the silver chain resting against the pillow within could only be an anklet. The silver gleamed in the candlelight and Hermione smiled at the sight of tiny charms like little feathers that hung from every link of the fine chain.

"Jewellery?" Reina asked, her expression rather alarmed, "Who is it from?"

"There's no note," Hermione told her, showing Reina the packaging even as she was reaching for the item and lifting it free of the box.

She'd always wanted an anklet, though her parents had never let her have one, claiming they were too hippie-ish. Pulling her foot up onto the seat, Hermione unclasped the anklet and hooked it closed around her right ankle before anyone could protest.

"Oh dear," Reina said, eyeing her ankle while a rush of warm, happy magic swept through Hermione, causing her eyelids to flutter and droop contentedly.

"What's the matter?" Ginny asked, leaning over and looking intrigued, "Ooh, that's lovely, Hermione."

"Lovely?" Reina asked, "That's all you've got to say about the idea that Hermione just donned a piece of jewellery from an unknown source?"

"Well, it's not like she could just spurn such a nice gift," Ginny shrugged.

"Do you…?" Reina began before looking around at her friends and seeing the way they were eying her as though she were mad.

"What's the matter, Reina?" Hermione asked, her voice a little husky from the warm feeling coursing through her as though she'd just been immersed in a warm hug or a hot bath.

"Do none of you know the traditions surrounding the giving and receiving of jewellery within our world?" Reina asked carefully, looking around the four of them carefully.

"What traditions?" Ron asked, "It's her birthday and someone sent her something nice. Why wouldn't she wear it?"

"Jewellery is a physical representation of ownership and symbolic towards courtship in our world – at least, according the older pureblood traditions. How do you not know that?" Reina asked, frowning at both Weasleys for their confusion and obvious lack of knowledge.

"Mum and Dad never bothered to teach us all that rot. Said it was all bollocks," Ginny shrugged, "Why would wearing jewellery signify ownership? That makes no sense."

"It goes back to the days when a magical bond would be formed between man and wife, or a master and his slaves. Much like a brand, the jewellery – like a manacle or a chain – signifies to any who know what they're looking for, that the witch or wizard in question is taken."
"How do you distinguish between being taken and just liking to wear jewellery?" Ginny asked, "I wear this every day and have since I was seven."

She indicated to her neck where a small pendant hung from a leather cord.

"The gift is presented publicly – though usually with a claiming note or something similar. It indicates a certain understanding towards betrothal. Sort of a pre-engagement before getting engaged to be married. The longer it lasts, and the more time spent in the presence of the other party, the stronger the bond grows. In absence of physical presence – such as when a man might not be around to escort his lady – he would give her jewellery to wear to show she is spoken for and therefore not to be prospected by another."

"That's ridiculous," Ron declared, looking revolted, "What if I give Ginny a necklace for her birthday? Does that make her my betrothed?"

"Don't be daft," Reina rolled her eyes, "That's a sibling affection and displays family loyalty and trust. I wear this," she showed them all a fine chain with seven silver rings upon it that hung around her neck, "Because Thor gave it to me before he went away. Luck and friendship, they stand for. Gifts between family are no big deal, but still have deep meaning that provoke familial bonds of magic between parents and their children, between siblings and between extended family, strengthening the core unit of the bloodline. Do none of you know about this?"

"No," Harry shrugged.

"You think that someone sent me jewellery to instigate some sort of betrothal with me?" Hermione asked, frowning at Reina in concern.

"That's what it usually signifies unless you know it's from a family member. And apparently that's only if it's from one of the families that still keep to tradition," Reina said, eyeing both Weasleys as though they were imbeciles for a moment.

"But I've been given jewellery by a wizard before… and we're not… engaged," Hermione said, twisting the bracelet on her wrist that Finn had given her before he graduated last year.

"Are you sure?" Reina asked, raising her eyebrows at her, "Did you reciprocate with anything? Cuff links? A watch? A silver cuff or something? What were the circumstance of being given the gift?"

"He told me it was to thank me for the assistance I'd provided him," Hermione whispered, "I didn't give him anything… back."

She frowned, thinking of the conversation she'd had with Finn about jewellery when she'd first put the gold beads in his hair. Reina was frowning at her subjectively and eyeing the bracelet.

"Did you feel anything when you put the bracelet or the anklet on? Who gave the bracelet to you?" the blonde witch asked her curiously.

"Finn did," Hermione whispered, lifting her eyes to stare into the blue eyes so like Thorfinn's, her own brown pair glittering with concern.  

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"She put it on," Thorfinn smirked across the lounge room at Toshka whilst scarfing down cereal.

"What makes you so sure?" Antonin asked without bothering to look up from the book he was
reading on some dark curses he'd encountered in his work yesterday evening.

"I can feel the bond between us," Thorfinn smirked, "It just strengthened. She didn't even hesitate before putting it on."

"You can feel when she puts them on?" he asked, slowly lifting his head.

"You couldn't? With your witch? What was her name?"

"Tatiana Rasmussen," Antonin admitted, "No, I couldn't feel it when she put them on. I could feel the bond between us, frayed and tattered as it was, but I couldn't feel it strengthening every time my father forced me to send her things."

"You said she never reciprocated, right?" Thorfinn asked his friend.

Toshka nodded his head.

"Well, obviously Granger has or I wouldn't have these in my hair," Thorfinn flicked one of the beads swinging from the plaits she'd put in his hair. He'd been forced to remove, wash and re-plait them all several times since he started with the Bats, but doing so didn't seem to nullify the bond between him and his witch. Perhaps because he always put them back in as soon as he could.

"Could make a difference to what you feel," Toshka nodded, "Perform the charm to show the bonds you bear and find out."

"You can do that?" Thorfinn asked of the Russian wizard where he was lounging about their shared flat in only his flannel pyjama bottoms, not having bothered to don a shirt or any other clothing.

Thorfinn suspected the git just didn't want to return to his bedroom where a sleeping slag was currently making use of his bed after he'd shagged the bitch into the early hours of the morning. Thorfinn knew. He'd been forced to endure the annoying sound of the wench squealing and begging for more from Toshka every half hour. It was a wonder the man could walk.

"Did you take another bludger to the head at training this morning?" Antonin wanted to know, levelling a shrewd glare over the rim of his book and searching for signs of addlement, "Of course you can bloody do that. It's a simple spell often used to determine the bonds between any two people. Here, I'll show you."

Fishing his wand from the waistband of his pants, Antonin cast a spell.

"Ostende Vincula Meis," he muttered, waving his wand in a complex looking motion like a knot of some kind.

Thorfinn blinked when there was suddenly a glowing spiderweb of magical bonds weaving through the room.

"These show my bonds," Antonin pointed out, using his wand to point out the line of magic that led from Antonin over to Thorfinn himself. It glowed an array of colours, something he hadn't expected at all, yellow, green, red, blue, a hint of white.

"What do the colours mean?" Thorfinn asked, eyeing the bond between the pair of them.

"This one?" Toshka pointed at the bond between Thorfinn and himself, "It's an array of things, that's why it's got so many colours. Yellow is the colour of friendship and childish-fun, indicating that we're close enough to goof off like idiots when the mood strikes. Red is about energy and
blood – a familial link. That blood-brothers' oath we swore at thirteen linked us magically as brothers. Blue is about loyalty and stability; it means you and I trust one another and would do just about anything for each other. The green of that bond comes from my end, but probably not yours. Green is about safety. I feel safe with you because you're my family and you usually kept me out of my father's clutches whenever you could."

"And the white?" Thorfinn asked.

"I'll show you," Toshka's lips twitched and he used his wand to peel the strand of white magic from where it coiled around the others in a rainbow of colour.

Thorfinn felt a strange tug behind his navel at the sensation when Antonin flicked the lifted strand with his wand. A scene like watching a memory inside a picture frame played out and Thorfinn felt an odd twist between them. In the haze of white magic, a thousand little moments played out. Swearing their blood oath, building a fort to slay dragons as kids, duelling with sticks in lieu of wands during the holidays when using magic wasn't allowed.

"Innocence," Antonin chuckled, "You own a bit of mine, and I own some of yours. The white is an indication that the rest of the bonds are innocent and not forced or one-sided or being used for nefarious intent."

Thorfinn felt his lips twitch a bit at the explanation. Toshka was always a bit funny about feelings and didn't much like admitting he had emotions when he could avoid it. To hear him lay out the affiliation and the connection between them so baldly rather amused Thorfinn.

"Quit smirking, Mudak," Toshka grumbled, at him, "The rest are other bonds with people. This one's Ma."

He used his wand to point at a blood red line that ran away and disappeared through the wall in the direction of England where his mother resided.

"This one's my Father," he went on and Thorfinn winced slightly at the sight of the red and black coiled around one another.

"Is black hate?" Thorfinn asked quietly.

Toshka nodded his head, "Hate, cruelty or a bond forced upon someone for nefarious purpose through dark magic. My father's got one like this, all in black, only it's broken and weak, that leads from his Dark Mark towards nothingness."

Thorfinn nodded his head in understanding.

"Do I want to know about that one?" Thorfinn asked rather than commenting on Toshka's father, the Dark Lord or Dmitri Dolohov's affiliations during the height of the war.

He pointed to another bond leading from Antonin's chest. It glowed pink, purple, yellow, black, white, red, green and blue all at once, mingling in places to make orange, brown, grey and a number of less easily labelled colours. It was twisted and fraying rather than solid and strong like the others.

"That is what an unreciprocated and broken soul bond looks like," Antonin told him, eyeing the line of magic with distaste.

"The witch you were betrothed to?" Thorfinn asked, "You loved her?"
Antonin’s mouth twisted.

"Loved her. Hated her. Wanted to kill her. The colours of a soul bond are different to the others. They incorporate your soul, hence the name. Bits of who you are, your core magic, they all bleed into the bond connecting you to the other person wretchedly. It's so frayed and tattered like that because she never reciprocated the bond. Do you see the gashes?" Antonin used his wand to indicate to a large tear in the fabric of the magic. It looked almost like a gaping, festering wound, "That's what happens every time you or your betrothed shag around once the bond is established. That's what drives you mad. The more you fuck around on Granger, the more tears you make. And when she starts shagging too? Hell, I can't even tell you what it's going to look like. Physical touch with your betrothed mends them, to an extent. But they'll drive you mad."

"Yours didn't drive you mad," Thorfinn pointed out.

"Didn't it?" Antonin ask, raising one eyebrow, "Look at this."

As he'd done with the white on the link between the two of them, he used his wand to pry each of the colours apart, revealing many a memory – all of them one sided with a vaguely blurry shape of a dark-haired witch, or showing Antonin alone. They were distorted and nonsensical, disjointed as though they didn't connect properly. It was almost like looking at a puzzle with pieces missing. They glitched and stopped every time a gash appeared in the thread of the magic, bumping over the tears with painful-looking flashes of faces Thorfinn knew – witches Toshka had shagged interrupting the connection.

"Now look at the one between you and me again," Toshka showed him, pulling on one of the green coils between the two of them. Moments of feeling safe in Thorfinn's presence or his home flashed up. They played in full scenes, the memory bright and uninterrupted. Thorfinn watched a moment he barely recalled of the first time at King’s Cross when Dmitri Dolohov had grabbed Antonin's ear and twisted it, snarling foul curses in Russian about what a disappointment Antonin was. It showed Thorfinn interrupting the scolding by bounding over and slinging an arm around his best friend, loudly asking that Antonin be allowed to come to Rowle Tower for the holidays and thus rescuing Toshka from his father's wrath and abuse for the summer. A pluck at a red coil showed their familial tie, bonds of brotherhood playing out in fights, moments of hilarity and acts of protection for one another.

"See how they aren't faded or glitchy?" Toshka asked, "The bond isn't in question, isn't damaged like my betrothal bond was."

He waved his wand to cancel the magic.

"Now let's get a look at you," Antonin smirked, "And we'll just see how strong a connection there is between you and your little mudblood."

"You know you insult my grandmother every time you use that word, don't you?" Thorfinn frowned at the man.

"Being brilliant as your Gran is doesn't change her blood," Toshka shrugged, "Ostende Vincula."

Thorfinn hissed at the feel of something yanking at his magic to display it in the real world rather than simply inside of him. Another web of magic wove through the room and Thorfinn narrowed his eyes when he noted there were far more bonds leading from his person than there had been from Antonin.

"I have more," he pointed out.
"You care about more people," Antonin nodded, "That will be Reina."

He prodded his wand at a bond that was blood red, yellow, and white.

"And this is your Mum and Dad," he pointed to two more bonds, both blood red with occasional coils of green surrounding it.

Thorfinn eyed the other links from himself to others. The first could only lead to his grandmother. Red, blue, green, white, yellow and purple looped around and around in a rainbow of colour.

"Gran," he pointed with his own wand.

"Yeah," Antonin smiled, "You and her have a very interesting bond, you know?"

Thorfinn shrugged.

"Orange for me, Thor?" Antonin smirked at him, examining the link between them from Thorfinn end.

"What's orange?" he asked, narrowing his eyes on his friend.

"Desire, usually," Toshka smirked, "Something you want to tell me, mate?"

"Sorry, Toshka, but you don't do it for me. Though it you let your hair get much longer, from behind, in the dark after a bottle of whiskey I could probably go with it," Thorfinn tormented.

"Fucker," Antonin accused, flipping him the forks, "Well, if you don't want to shag me it usually means determination or aggression. Take your pick."

"Bit of both, probably," Thorfinn chuckled, "Got to be determined and aggressive to keep you in line when you try to go all barmy and kill someone."

"One time!" Toshka protested, "It was one time, and that fucker deserved it."

"He ate off you plate," Thorfinn pointed out.

"We're still arguing this? It was bad manners and I was already pissy that day. Not my fault that pizda was dumber than dog-shit. Now shut up so I can mock for you being in love with a…" Toshka trailed off as he turned his attention to the final bond leading from Thorfinn.

"Holy shit," he muttered, eyeing the link like it were a live snake waiting to strike him.

"Bit different to yours, eh?" Thorfinn asked.

"I've never seen one like this," he muttered, moving closer and beginning to prod at the bond with his wand, "Married people have one like this, but it's encased in gold to symbolise the marriage bond…. But even then, most of those I've seen aren't like this."

Thorfinn eyed the colours coiling around and around one another.

"You don't love her yet," Antonin noted, "But you do fancy her a bit."

"How can you tell?" he asked.

"This," he used his wand to draw a very pale pink coil of magic from the heart of the thick magical web of colour, "Pink is for love. It will evolve more than the others, into different shades,
depending on the way you love her. Purple is interesting between the two of you."

"Why?" Thorfinn asked, "There's purple in my link to Gran too."

"From your grandmother it's about admiration and wisdom," Toshka waved a hand dismissively, "Between you and Granger it's about power and pure magic."

"Meaning?" Thorfinn asked, raising his eyebrows at his friend.

"Take a look," Antonin shrugged, using his wand to peel up some of the purple.

Thorfinn noticed idly that it was the same shade of purple as the ink Granger favoured. It showed the brushes of his magic against hers when he'd touched his magic to hers and a number of times when they'd argued and hissed at one another.

"You initiated her into the Rites?" Toshka demanded, watching the blood magic to spark the ritual play out.

"Yeah," Thorfinn rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably, "Had to do something to keep her quiet after she saw that prank. She'd have blabbed otherwise and I suck at Memory charms. Now she can only blab to other initiates. She's a Gryffindor and a muggleborn. Who's she going to tell?"

"She's also a girl," Antonin pointed out, "No way she'll get everything on that list done without a lot of help."

"She was already ticking things off in the few weeks from when we did the prank until when we graduated," Thorfinn frowned, "Her friends are bad influences on her."

"And you're not?" Antonin rolled his eyes, "Two guesses as to who she fucks for the sex tasks."

"Weasley or Potter?" Thorfinn asked, not liking that idea at all, "No way. Quincey's reports and Granger's actions suggest she doesn't much tolerate either of them. Potter's like her brother; and the Ginger is an idiot who uses her for her brain most of the time and inadvertently insults her with every other breath."

"As opposed to the likes of you – the bloke using a betrothal bond to the little brat just to pay her back for almost getting your expelled."

"I'm doing away with all that," Thorfinn retorted, cancelling the spell revealing his bonds and sticky returning to his second breakfast.

"Bullshit, you are," Antonin rolled his eyes, "You might think that now, just because she lets you manhandle her and she let you snog her, but I guarantee that the minute she starts snogging anyone else, you're going to think dark thoughts and set shit on fire and probably kill someone. By the time she's old enough for you to call in the bond and marry the bitch, you and her will both be so fucked up that you'll love her as much as you'll hate her and you'll be only too willing to ruin her life. Trust me."

"Just because your witch didn't return your bond and you want to kill her, doesn't mean I'm going to want to kill Granger," Thorfinn argued, "I'm not bonkers like you."

Just as Antonin was opening his mouth to retort, the pop of Quincey's apparition was accompanied by a high-pitch shout of surprise and Thorfinn was on his feet, wand drawn and aimed in that direction. Toshka, who still had his wand out, was similarly prepare for anything, wand aimed at the intruder.
"Reina?" Thorfinn asked, lowering his wand quickly at the sight of his bewildered looking eleven year old sister.

"Quincey! What are you doing?" Reina was demanding of the elf, "You can't just snatch me out of school and drag me across to Ireland. Hi, Thor. You have to take me back to Hogwarts, Quincey. I'm supposed to study with Ginny soon."

"Quincey?" Thorfinn asked rounding the table to reach his sister and tugging the small girl into a hug, lifting her right off her feet and propping her on his hip despite her being eleven and technically too old for such things.

"Miss Reina was telling Miss Hermione about betrothal bonds, Master," Quincey said quietly, looking up at Thorfinn with a little frown on your face, "And you be telling Quincey she not supposed to know, Master."

"Why do you have Quiney monitoring what Hermione does and doesn't know about understandings, Thorfinn?" Reina asked, squirming until Thorfinn put her down before propping her hands on her hips and glaring up at him.

"Hells, witch. You spend less than a month with that little brat and you're already imitating her postures and her fierceness," Thorfinn grumbled, eyeing his usually shy and demure sister with concern, "Dad's going to pitch a fit when he sees this."

"He already pitched a fit when he sent me a howler at breakfast time two days after the Sorting," Reina retorted, "As far as I'm concerned, Dad can shove it until after Christmas! He embarrassed me in front of everyone, raving about how Gryffindor was for reckless fools and how I needed to demand to be re-sorted."

Thorfinn winced at the idea. He'd heard from Quincey that their father had done as much and he'd written to his sister to make sure she was alright, but obviously she was still smarting over it and clearly she'd been channelling Hermione's penchant of indignant rage over perceived mis-justice.

"You alright? He means well. No one expected you'd end up in Gryffindor, darlin'," Thorfinn told his sister, tugging on a lock of her blonde hair where it had come loose from the pony-tail she'd pulled it into.

"I'm fine. Answer my question. Why is Quincey monitoring Hermione pertaining to marriage bonds? Does this have something to do with you giving her that bracelet and wearing all those beads in your hair that match the one she wears behind her ear?" Reina demanded.

Thorfinn looked over at Toshka, who'd begun chuckling as he searched the immediate area for a shirt to put on – coming up empty thanks to Quincey's efficiency.

"It's not what you think," he offered to his tiny sister with all her indignant rage and that fierce little expression she was wearing.

"Oh, really?" she hissed, "Because I think you've initiated an understanding with my best friend. Without telling her about the tradition and without mentioning the effects of creating a bond like that. You have done so, haven't you? No wonder she's such a moody little thing! She blew up a cauldron last night, probably because of you. She was fine and laughing one second, and the next she upended her cauldron, setting the potion on fire and causing an explosion."

"I told you this would happen," Toshka said from the couch where he'd returned to reading, sans shirt, as though hiding his bare chest behind a book would better maintain Reina's propriety,
"Also, dobroye utro, Reina."

"Hi Antonin," Reina said, sparing the wizard a glance and nod in greeting that barely passed for manners. Thorfinn was going to have to get her away from the Weasleys if she was forgetting her manners this fast.

"Well?" she demanded with a stomp of her foot, hands on hips, glare in place.

"Bloody hell, you almost look like Gran when you glare that way," he told her, "What do you want me to say, Reina? She initiated it, I took advantage of her ignorance and it's too late to back out now."

"It is not too late," Reina stomped her foot for emphasis, "You can't have her, Thor! Hermione is my friend."

"Mine first," he shrugged unrepentantly.

"Break it off with her, or I'm telling her and she'll do it herself," the little brat demanded, immediately resorting to blackmail like any self-respecting Slytherin would do. Too bad she was a Gryffindor instead.

"If you even think about saying a word, I'll Obliviate you so you forget," Thorfinn threatened his sister.

"You wouldn't dare!" she hissed, affronted as her eyes widened in reproach.

"Watch me, little sister," he warned, "You breathe a word to her about the bond between us and I'll do it. Quincey will be watching to make sure you don't say anything."

"Mum and Dad are going to pitch a fit when they find out your engaged to a thirteen year old. Gran will be horrified."

"Gran already knows," Thorfinn retorted, "And she's keeping her mouth shut too. You don't know the full story, but trust me, I can't just back out of the bond and you can't tell Hermione and have her back out either or we're fucked."

"Why?" Reina demanded, "Give me one good reason. She's my best friend. You can't do this to her. I know you're still seeing other witches."

"Well it's not like I can see her, is it?" Thorfinn retorted angrily, his temper flaring in the face of his sister's arguments, "She's still just a kid."

"All the more reason to call it off."

"Quincey, get me the papers," Thorfinn growled.

"Thor?" Antonin said from the couch, "You're sparking again."

Thorfinn looked towards the fireplace, his eyes narrowing as it began to jump higher and higher up the chimney, sparks spitting from the hearth and onto the rug Quincey insisted they needed. An inarticulate snarl of annoyance tore from his throat while Thorfinn returned his glare to his younger sister. She backed up a few steps from him when she saw his face, clearly concerned that she'd pushed too far.

Quincey popped into his room before returning with a thick folder and handing it to him.
"Thanks," Thorfinn hissed as he took it from the elf, "Come here, Reina."

She looked hesitant for a moment as he cleared some space on the kitchen table and began pulling file after file out of the folder. When she moved over to look at them, she frowned.

"What are all these?" she asked.

"Property deeds," Thorfinn told her in a tight voice, "Pay special attention to the names of the business-holders in the corporate buildings and the names of the tenants in the residential properties."

She read them over carefully, leafing through them all as her frown deepened.

"Why?" she asked, lifting her gaze to meet his when she'd looked through the enormous pile.

"I began acquiring them when I intended to ruin the little brat," Thorfinn told her truthfully.

"Why would you want to ruin her?" Reina asked, looking horrified, "She's… Hermione's a good person… why have you done this?"

"She caught him getting a blowjob in the library at the start of last year," Antonin said from the couch, "And she reported him. Granger nearly got him expelled and almost got him thrown off the Quidditch team. She threatened his entire future and she needed to be taught not to do it again."

"Blackmail," Thorfinn told her sister, nodding at the deeds, "Theses were to be blackmail to get her to play nice. The rest of the idea didn't strike until I fell asleep with her in my lap after Christmas last year and I woke to find her plaits these into my hair."

"She caught him getting a blowjob in the library at the start of last year," Antonin said from the couch, "And she reported him. Granger nearly got him expelled and almost got him thrown off the Quidditch team. She threatened his entire future and she needed to be taught not to do it again."

He flicked a few of the beads in his loose mane of blonde hair.

"She had no idea what they were for, she was still making a nuisance of herself and I saw another way to ruin her."

"So you just reciprocated? Just like that?" Reina demanded, shaking her head at him and eyeing him like he was scum, "She's a kid, Thor! She was only twelve and she's muggleborn. And if you were being so disgusting that she felt the need to report you, you probably deserved it."

"You think I should've been thrown out of school and tanked my career over a bit of fooling around?" he asked his sister.

"No, but you didn't get expelled. You didn't even lose your privileges. You're going to ruin her life, and yours, over what amounts to a couple of months' worth of detention," Reina shook her head at him, "You need to break it off, Thorfinn. You can't do this to her. She has no idea what it all means, though I expect, based on what I told her when she went and put on that anklet this morning – which I'm assuming you sent – that she'll be writing to you with some concerns."

"I can't break it off with her," he shrugged his shoulders, "Not when I own all these. It's not like I can sell them all back and it's not like I can just hand them over to her."

"So don't sell them," Reina rolled her eyes, "Keep them as investment properties. It's not as though we don't already have several. What's a few more? You can't use them to blackmail her and you can't keep up with this bond – renewing it with jewellery or popping up to the castle to see her – only to also be sleeping around, Thor. Don't you know what that will do to you? To both of you?"

"I've told him," Antonin told her from the couch, "Your grandmother tried to tell him too."
"So you're just going to ruin your life, and hers, just because you did something stupid and reckless?" Reina demanded, "Damn it, Thor! She's my friend!"

"She's my friend too," Thorfinn shrugged his shoulders.

"Friends don't blackmail each other or trick each other into betrothals."

"I see now why you weren't put in Slytherin, Reina," Toshka chuckled from the couch.

"Shut up, Toshka," Reina snapped at the wizard, "You don't even like her that much, Thor. Just end it and no harm will come of it."

"No," Thorfinn shook his head.

"He fancies her," Antonin told Reina, "I've seen the bond linking them. It might be relatively new – since he only reciprocated just before graduation – but it's powerful. Your little mudblood friend is likely in love with him."

"She doesn't even know him," Reina protested.

"You'd be surprised," Thorfinn chuckled, "Especially after that snog."

"You've kissed her?" Reina asked, her eyes wide, "Dude, she was like, twelve!"

"Shut up," Thorfinn rolled his eyes, "And don't look at me like that, I kept it innocent and she wanted it. Gave her plenty of time to pull away."

"You're betrothed to my best friend," Reina crossed her arms, "This is why you pushed me to be her friend – as an excuse to lure her to the Tower at the holidays so you could see her and renew the bond."

"Shrewd little thing, aren't you?" Toshka chuckled, "Slytherin one minute, and so woefully Hufflepuff the next."

He clucked his tongue at the girl and Reina Rowle did something Thorfinn had never seen his shy, demure little sister do before in her life. She spun towards Antonin, scooped Thorfinn's spoon from his empty bowl of cereal and flung the utensil across the room until it hit Antonin square in the forehead.

"Oi!" Toshka complained, wiping at the milk splatter on his skin and looking shocked by her display of violence.

"Bloody hell, Reina," Thorfinn snorted, "You've been spending too much time with those Gingers and with Hermione. Where's your manners, brat? Mum and Dad will keel over in shock when you go home for Christmas."

"Mum and Dad can jam it. And so can you! I can't believe this. You used me to trick my best friend into visiting our house so you can further your plan to ruin her life. And you're sleeping around. What about when she decides to fancy someone who isn't you, eh? What then? Your bond will go to hell and you'll both lose your minds. I've seen some of the carnage that results from you being wildly inappropriate with other witches for someone who happens to be betrothed. She thinks she's suffering bursts of accidental magic and is concerned she's developing an anger management problem because of you! How could you not tell her?" Reina hissed, glaring up at him furiously.

"Oh yeah, that would go down well. Say, Granger, I know I'm six years older than you and you're
still just a second year, but I bought all these properties that your family live and work in because I meant to ruin your life like you almost ruined mine. You're cool with us being engaged even though we don't really know each other, right? Oh, and don't go shagging anyone because it will send us both mental, but I'll still be sleeping around because you're just a kid. No hard feelings, right?" Thorfinn rolled his eyes, "I can't tell her."

"Then what the hell are you going to do?" Reina demanded, "You refuse to break it off, you refuse to tell her, so what does that leave?"

"Let the magic run its course, watch the destruction and help with hiding the bodies when they kill someone," Antonin said sardonically, "That's my plan."

"You're no better!" Reina rounded on him, "You sent her a bloody Temnyy Klinok Smerti!"

"How do you know it was me?" Toshka retorted without bothering to look up from his book, "I wouldn't send a mudblood anything."

"It's engraved in Russian. She knows it was you."

"She has Russian roots, maybe some distant relative sent it to her," Antonin retorted.

"Are you that distant relative?" Thorfinn asked, narrowing his eyes at his best friend.

Antonin turned the page of his book before bothering to look up.

"Why would you think that?"

"That wasn't a denial, Toshka," Thorfinn growled.

"My, aren't you protective of the little brat, mudak?" Antonin smirked, "I may have dug into her background during the holidays after learning she spoke the mother tongue."

"And?" Reina demanded.

Antonin rolled his eyes.

"Though she was blown off the family tree, a distant, great-great-great aunt of mine was born a squib," Antonin admitted, "That squib left the Dolohov name behind and married a muggle and had nine children with him. One of those nine children immigrated to France, where she unknowingly married a wizard whose magic was so pathetic, he might as well have been a squib. That wizard's name was Malfoy - of the French line, obviously. The pair had six children – among them, Hermione Granger's paternal grandmother – almost all of them muggles with a bit of magic here or there, but nothing to qualify them as wizards or even squibs, really. Her grandmother married an English muggle by the name of Granger and moved to London with him where they, in turn, had four children including Hermione's father. Making Hermione Granger my father's fourth cousin, and therefore making her my fourth cousin, once removed."

"She's technically descended from the Dolohov and Malfoy lines?" Thorfinn began to laugh at the very idea, "Merlin, let me be the one to tell her that, yeah? She's going to pitch a fit. She think you're an ignorant arsehole for believing her to be essentially scum by calling her a mudblood and all along you're actually related to the girl."

"Why didn't the magic manifest when the Dolohov squib's daughter married a Malfoy?" Reina asked, "Gran told me that muggleborns occur when two lines of families with wizarding genes collide. The children of that union - French Malfoys - should have all been born magical."
"One was," Antonin nodded, "But I couldn't find much on him. Seems he tried to claim the Malfoy name and powers but he was pretty weak as far as magical strength was concerned. Pretty sure he was murdered by one of the other Malfoys. If the Squibs or muggles are too weak magically, and the genetic lottery isn't in their favour, they don't get the gene to be magical from both sides and so they don't manifest as wizards. If Granger had any siblings, there's no guarantee they'd be magical. One of her first cousins is magical too, the youngest one from France - her name is on the list to attend Beauxbatons when she comes of age in a few years."

"How closely related is she to Draco Malfoy?" Reina asked, frowning at him.

"No idea," Antonin shrugged, "I wasn't about to try and wade through that shitstorm with the way those idiots bury their muggles, mudbloods and squibs to maintain their purity. They'd be more distantly related than me and the mudblood. Abraxas Malfoy was a third generation Brit. Draco's ancestors diverged from the French line six generations ago. If they're blood related at all they'd be something like sixth or seventh cousins with a few removals."

"But Hermione's paternal grandmother's maiden name was Malfoy?" Reina confirmed.

"Yeah. Not that she'd be on their tree, here or in the French line. Granger's great grandfather was a Malfoy wizard, but a shoddy one. Might as well have been a squib himself, and he married a muggle, so he'd have been blasted off their tree."

"How did you find all this out? Digging through muggle records?" Thorfinn smirked.

"Your Gran helped a lot. She's been looking into the girl too, since she found out about your betrothal. Her extensive records of the magical lines and where they intercept with muggles, squibs and mudbloods were helpful."

"Are we related to her?" Reina asked curiously.

"I didn't dig up her entire history, Reina," Antonin rolled his eyes, "But I doubt it. The Rowle line is out of Norway and hasn't intercepted often with the Dolohov or Malfoy lines. Your lot tend to take in mudbloods pretty often and we Dolohov's have been avoiding that since that Dolohov Squib was born - Granger's ancestress. Nothing but pure lines - mostly Russian and French since then."

"Why did you send her a Dark Blade of Death, Toshka?" Thorfinn asked, eyeing his friend curiously, "Cousin, however distant, or not, you still call her a mudblood and you still don't like her."

"It's important to see to family tradition, and she's powerful," Antonin answered truthfully, "I can't deny that. She's more powerful than she should be actually, given that there are three generations between her and her last directly magical ancestor. And given how weak he was, that's saying something. She should be barely able to perform parlour tricks, according to her bloodline. I couldn't find anyone magical on her mother's side of things directly, so unless there's some magic in her blood from that side of things giving her a boost, she pretty much hit the genetic jackpot."

"But you don't like her," Reina pointed out, "Why send her a gift?"

"She's betrothed to my blood brother," Antonin answered, shrugging his bare shoulders, "And she's got Dolohov blood, distant or not. That, and she's a bloody menace delving into things no thirteen year old should study without something like a Temmny Klinok Smerti to keep them in luck, I'll one day be asked to use it on her."

"You're a bastard, do you know that?" Reina asked him seriously.
"He prides himself on it, Reina," Thorfinn rolled his eyes when Toshka smirked cruelly, "We better get you back to Hogwarts before the teachers realise you're gone. Just keep your mouth shut on the betrothal, alright?"

"I don't like it, Thor," Reina said, looking up at him, "You're going to hurt her and the bond will hurt you too."

"What else can I do, kid?" Thorfinn asked, "Keep the understanding, send her things, see her whenever you drag her to the Tower or here at the holidays, shag other girls until she's old enough that it won't make me a creep. Or break it off and own every property her living relatives currently live or work in for no reason at all other than potential leverage later. Dad will kill me for the second one."

Reina frowned, knowing he was right.

"Promise me you won't use it to hurt her on purpose?" she asked quietly.

Thorfinn couldn't make that oath. Not when he didn't know what kind of effect the prolonged abuse of the bond would have on both of them. But he nodded his head, agreeing without making the oath.

"And don't constantly steal her from me," Reina said, "She's my best friend."

"I can't make that promise, little sister," Thorfinn smirked, "She amuses me."

"You really do fancy her, don't you?" Reina smirked at him, "Fine, I won't tell her and I'll help you see her whenever possible, but if you drive her batty by shagging a new witch every other day, all bets are off, big brother."

"Deal," Thorfinn grinned, shaking his sister's hand, "Now get back to school, brat. Quincey take her back."

The elf nodded and Reina waved at Thorfinn and Antonin before she and the elf apparated with a crack.
Thorfinn Rowle stared at the letter Odin had carried home to him from Hogwarts, the neat purple script across the page familiar and making him grin to himself as he read the words his little witch had seen fit to send him.

Hi Finn,

Thanks for sending me your address. You probably already know by now, but a few days ago your father sent Reina a Howler for being sorted into Gryffindor. She was a bit upset at the time, but my friends and I cheered her up with sweets.

Thanks for the birthday present. I've already begun to read the book. Ginny took a photo of me doing so whilst wearing the jersey. It's a little bit big. I enclosed the photo since I know you enjoy laughing at my expense.

School is going alright so far. I'm ahead on all of my subjects, as usual, and Professor McGonagall gave me special permission today to begin studying Transfiguration, Charms and History of Magic at a fifth year level because she's been having me take some tests when she sees how bored I look in class and has found I've been delving into the extra-curricular reading beyond my level.

Other than that things have been alright. Ginny, Ron's younger sister, was sorted into Gryffindor too, and your cousin, Luna, was sorted in Ravenclaw. They both seem nice. Reina seems to have come out of her shell, based on what I saw of her at Graduation and what you'd told me about her last year. I think being away from your father is having a positive effect on her personality.

She mentioned something this morning when I was opening my gifts that alarmed me a little. Someone anonymously sent me an anklet and I didn't think twice before putting it on, but then she explained that certain families keep to a tradition regarding betrothal bonds being initiated through the giving of jewellery. I remembered you saying last year when I was putting those beads in your hair that the exchange of jewellery in the magical world was a big deal and so I have to ask. I know you'll likely laugh at me, but I'm asking anyway.

Did my putting those beads in your hair instigate some kind of bond between you and I? Did you give me this bracelet on my wrist signify that I... I don't know... belong to you or something? Did you send the anklet?

Merlin, it sounds ridiculous even thinking it and seeing it on the parchment kind of makes me want to scrunch this letter up and start over again. I'm going to send it before I can chicken out of asking. Please answer truthfully.

~Hermione.

P.S. Please tell Antonin that I say, 'spasibo'.
entirely took big on her even as she reclined in what he assumed to be Gryffindor Common Room - his little witch wore his jersey and read the book he'd given her. Her fingers absentmindedly twisted the braid he'd put in her hair, the gold bead glittering in the flash of the camera. The bracelet on her wrist peeked out from one of the sleeves of his Bats jersey – rolled up to the elbows just so she could use her hands, and he caught sight of the anklet he'd sent her glittering from her right ankle where her leg hung over the arm of her chair.

She looked adorable as hell and Thorfinn rather liked the sight of her in his jersey and wearing the jewellery he'd given her. Her letter amused him immensely. So she thought she'd figured it all out, did she?

He could only lie to her. He wasn't about to admit to the witch that he'd done a number of irresponsible things to tie her to him. Hell, he wasn't ready to admit some of them to himself. He might've told his grandmother, his sister and Antonin about the properties and they might know about the understanding, but only Quincey had a vague idea of how far Thorfinn had gone and the things he had done in his initial plot to ruin Hermione Granger's life before he'd realised that she was a decent witch and that she amused him.

The fact was that he wasn't sure he'd be able to break the bond between them if he tried, not only because of the repercussions it would have financially, but because of what it might do to the pair of them. The risk of growing mad enough to kill people in a murderous rage or losing control of his magic for a bit was nothing compared to what would happen if he attempted to sever the bond between the two of them now. There were some things that couldn't be taken back, that couldn't be undone. And Thorfinn Rowle had done a good many of those things.

~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~

Hermione Granger stared at the letter in her hands with some confusion and mild annoyance. A month, it had taken him to write back to her after she'd written to him to thank him for her birthday present and to ask if he'd initiated a betrothal bond between them. A month spent researching everything she could find pertaining to old wizarding customs that she'd thought to be entirely outdated.

She would openly admit that during her studies she had focused more on the wizarding traditions she'd found readily documented because they were still active customs within wizarding culture. Things like the giving of *Temnyy Klinok Sperti*, or the gifting of an engraved wristwatch or pocket-watch on one's seventeenth birthday. These were the things that she'd paid special attention to because they were practices that still took place.

She vaguely recalled reading a book that mentioned outdated and forgotten customs of wizarding culture pertaining to romantic things like betrothal bonds, the issuing of Letters of Intent pertaining to courtship and other such things that nobody bothered with anymore as wizarding culture moved forward with the trends of the era. When she had learned that they were old fashioned, outdated and not commonly practiced, Hermione had put them from her mind and not thought any more about them.

The idea that she might have inadvertently initiated a betrothal bond with Thorfinn simply by putting beads in his hair unsettled her immensely and she'd been on edge all month over it. To make matters worse, if it hadn't been an understanding with Thorfinn, then someone else – an entirely unknown party – had sent her a birthday present that may or may not have been taken as a sign of accepting such a bond and Hermione had been a nervous wreck all month over it.

Her temper had been playing tricks on her, on top of everything else. She'd been perfectly happy one second and the next – usually late in the evenings – she'd feel a rush of rage and what felt
strangely like jealousy. Like a switch being flicked on, it would suddenly seize her for no apparent reason. At first she'd thought it a coincidence to whatever she'd been doing at that time, or that it might be a result of putting up with certain things or certain people for too long before losing her cool. But then other times it would happen while she was fast asleep in bed. She would suddenly wake up furious and she had no idea why. She'd developed a nasty habit of making things explode and setting things on fire with strange purple and green flames and Hermione was a bit worried for her sanity.

Thorfinn's reply to her letter was not at all helping matters.

Hey Princess,

You look adorable as hell in my jersey, do you know that? Sorry it took me this long to get back to you. My training schedule for the Bats is pretty intense leading into the season and they've asked me to play on the International League team for the Irish. I've been wiping out pretty hard whenever I'm not at training. Toshka's been grumbling at me a lot when he wants to go out chasing girls and I end up falling asleep in my whiskey. The bastard did some hex on me the other day and I woke up with a cock and bollocks drawn on my face that took me all bloody day to remove. Had to pummel him to get the counter-curse and ended up with a bloody lip after I blackened his eye, the surly bastard.

Anyway, thanks for looking out for Reina for me. I reckon you and your little friends must be a bad influence on her if she's getting out of hand. She told me Dad sent her a Howler, pompous dick-bag that he can be. Don't you go letting Potter or the Ginger one – what's his name again? – lead my baby sister into trouble, you hear? Don't go letting them lead you into trouble or talking you into doing their homework or breaking too many bloody rules either, witch, or I might just take you over my knee the next time I see you.

How's that list of tasks I gave you coming anyway, little lion cub? Ticking things off?

As for your questions, you've got it all backwards, Baby-girl. The exchange of jewellery can initiate a bond between two people within the magical world, but as with all magic, it's about intent. If there is no intent from either party to create a betrothal party, accepting, wearing or giving jewellery to someone means nothing. Sure, some of the older, more twisted families still like to use that method for ensuring their arranged marriages are adhered to and no one goes laying a hand on a witch not rightfully his, but most folks have done away with the custom.

I didn't send you the anklet, Princess. If I meant to send you something else for your birthday, I'd have put it with your jersey and your book. No sense sending two owls, is there? Sorry to disappoint you, Kitten, but should the time ever come that I ask any witch to marry me, I'll be much less sly and much more obnoxious about it. No, don't cry now, I know you're terrible depressed at the idea of me not belonging to you, but you're too young for me, Baby-girl. At least right now.

Anyway, I got to go. I'm falling asleep with the quill in my hand. Keep on keeping an eye on Reina for me, yeah? Be good, Princess.

~Finn.

She couldn't describe the feeling she had when she read the end of the letter for the third time. He hadn't sent the anklet. So who had? Hermione felt her cheeks turn pink with embarrassment over
the idea that she'd just assumed that exchanging gifts would trigger magic despite how often she'd read that magic was about intent. Clearly she'd worried herself into a tizzy for nothing and her imagination had gotten away from her common sense. Maybe she needed more sleep? The amount of times she'd been waking up furious for no reason were obviously addling her brain.

Grunbling under her breath, Hermione stuff the letter back into her back and tried to focus her energy on the rest of the lesson she was meant to be listening to, realising belatedly that she'd not listened to a single word Professor Binns had said thus far, nor had she taken a single note. Sighing heavily when she looked toward her friends, Hermione rolled her eyes at the vain hope she'd had that they might be taking notes. Harry was doodling in his notebook, drawing what looked like Quidditch formations and tactics. Ron was dozing, his chin resting on his chest and his arms folded. Fat lot of help either of them were going to be.

Annoyed with Thorfinn for taking so long to reply, annoyed with herself for not paying attention in class and for forgetting a basic fundamental of magic, Hermione resolved to focus herself more on her studies and to put the question of her anklet out of her mind until she'd had a decent night's sleep and didn't have more pressing matters to attend to.

~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~

"What the fuck do you mean she's been petrified?" Thorfinn growled at the elf standing before him and wringing her hands together worriedly as she stared up into his face.

Thorfinn had just returned home from a late practice with the Irish team – after spending all day flogging bludgers across the pitch with the Bats prior to that. He was tired. He was cranky. His shoulder was aching. Antonin was being a bloody wanker and insisting that he stop whining like a little bitch and join him for a few drinks tonight. The last thing he needed was more concern over his little muggleborn witch. When he'd found out that the Chamber of Secrets had apparently been opened and his little witch was letting her friends lead her into trouble again, he'd been ticked off. When he'd learned about the mishap at Christmas that had seen the little fool ingest Polyjuice potion seasoned with cat hair instead of human hair, he'd been briefly amused before his concern for the witch had grown when he learned she'd had to spend weeks in the hospital wing coughing up furballs and refusing all company, including that of Potter, either Weasley or Reina – something his sister had written to him in tears over because the girl was as intrigued by his witch as Thorfinn was himself.

"She's… master the monster in the Chamber, it is a Basilisk," Quincey said, wringing her hands together, "It has been tormenting the school all year – the youngest Weasley girl seems to be going into some sort of trance, very dark magic, Master, very dark magic – and controlling the beast. Any who meet the direct gaze of the serpent, they meets Death, Master. But indirect gazes like reflections, they be making the victims go stiff and still – petrified to stone like a statue, but still alive, Master."

"My witch is turned to stone?" Thorfinn asked, feeling a painful twist in his chest and speaking to the girl without even thinking about it.

"No Master, just stiff like one," Quincey explained before demonstrating, putting herself in an awkward positions and holding perfectly still, her bony frame rigid and stiff.

"Is there a cure?" he asked, his insides churning.

"Yes, Master. They be waiting for the mandrakes to mature because they be needing mature mandrakes for the draught to cure them what's been petrified, Master. Miss Hermione, she be petrified now until the mandrakes be ready."
"Is she safe?" Thorfinn asked, his hand tightening on the whiskey glass the elf had given him before divulging her latest report about his witch.

"She in the Hospital Wing, Master," Quincey nodded her head, "She be in the little bed, safe and seen to by the medi-witch. Quincey be helping to make her feels more comfortable and making her be sleeping instead of just frozen, Master. She be fine when potion is ready."

"Is Reina safe, Quincey?" Thorfinn asked of the elf seriously.

"She be as at risk as the rest of them, master, though the dark magic controlling Miss Ginny – it only be sending the snake after them what got blood like Mistress Pandora, master."

"It's not going to go after her, but she could still be petrified or killed if the likes of those friends she's made lure her into trouble with them like they do to Hermione?" Thorfinn clarified.

Quincey nodded her head.

"Can you protect her?" Thorfinn asked the elf seriously, "Can you make sure that whenever the Weasley girl is seized by the dark magic and the beast is on the loose, Reina is shielded?"

"I could if I uses my magics on her, Master," Quincey said thoughtfully, "But she be mad if she finds out."

"I could if I uses my magics on her, Master," Quincey said thoughtfully, "But she be mad if she finds out."

"She won't find out. Protect my sister, Quincey. I don't need daily reports on Hermione if she's just lying there in bed, stiff as a board and unable to move or talk. Keep Reina safe, no matter what, alright? Promise me you'll always protect my sister."

"Quincey promises, Master," Quincey bowed, accepting her orders before disapparating with a pop.

Dragging his tired body to the shower, Thorfinn couldn't stop thinking about the fate of his little witch. Everyday Quincey gave him a report on what she'd been up to. He knew she'd long since grown too distracted to think twice about betrothal bonds or about who had sent her the anklet for her birthday. She'd been writing to him every now and then and Reina had sent him a collection of photos of herself, Hermione and their other witch friend, Ginny Weasley. In almost all of them, Hermione was wearing the jersey he'd given her, seeming to live in it whenever she didn't have to be in uniform.

"Are you going to pout all fucking night, or are we going out for a drink?" Antonin Dolohov's Russian accented voice intruded on his thoughts while he was still showering and Thorfinn blinked his eyes open to find the surly bastard standing with his arms folded as he leaned against the sink of the bathroom, a full glass of whiskey in his hand.

"You heard?" Thorfinn asked.

"I heard," Antonin told him, "So get the fuck out, get dressed and get drunk with me."

Thorfinn nodded his assent to that idea and followed his best mate's directives without any further protest. His worry for his witch nagged at the back of his mind even when he'd drunk enough to keep him from seeing straight and he found himself shaking his head, trying to clear it, trying to dislodge the wretched feeling inside his chest pertaining to his currently petrified little witch.

"You're not going to get past it that easy, Thor," Toshka muttered to him, watching him past the witch the git had pulled into his lap who was currently nuzzling into his neck.
"Then what the fuck do I do?" Thorfinn demanded, throwing back the rest of the whiskey in his
glass even though he knew he had a game the next day that he really shouldn't turn up to hungover
as fuck.

"Forget about her," Toshka told him, "Stop thinking about the little bitch. She'll help."

Thorfinn narrowed his eyes on the Russian bastard when he nodded his head toward a witch across
the room. He shook his head even as he got to his feet. He wasn't feeling in the mood to try and
seduce the little Irish witch Antonin had suggested – he wasn't in the mood for sweet talking his
way between a woman's thighs when all he could think about was that little brat of a witch who'd
so wormed her way under his skin. He wasn't in the mood, but he got to his feet and sauntered
across the bar just the same. Dropping a not-so-subtle hint about being on the Irish team and meant
to play for the Bats the following day, Thorfinn was being led out of the bar and into an alley only
a short-time later.

And when he found himself attempting to bury his problems by burying his cock in a witch who
looked nothing like Hermione fucking Granger, Thorfinn Rowle found himself muttering into
some trollop's clavicle that if it was the last thing he did, he would make sure the little bitch didn't
get to him this way ever again.
Chapter 15

The summer holidays, Hermione decided idly as she lounged in the backyard of her parent's London home, were the most boring part of the year. Both of her parents were at work. Harry was only able to write every so often, Ron wrote even less often and Ginny was still recovering from the ordeal of what had happened to her with Riddle's diary down in the Chamber of Secrets.

Hermione herself had been relegated back to the muggle world where she wasn't allowed to do magic to practice her spellwork. She didn't have access to the Hogwarts library and Madam Pince had refused to give her permission to borrow out books over the summer period – something Hermione was still furious about – and so she had nothing to do. She'd talked her parents into letting her help them out at their dental clinic early into the summer, but when all of the dental nurses and admin staff had threatened to quit – two of desk-girls leaving the place in tears of fury – after coming in to discover Hermione had completely overhauled the entire practice, they'd decided that it wasn't the job for her.

She didn't see what their problem was. As far as Hermione was concerned, the files had needed re-organising, the shelves had been cluttered and the examination rooms had been laid out in completely nonsencial ways. And so she had fixed them all. She'd taken everything apart and put it back together in a way that made sense and was much easier for all involved to use. She'd even found the time to load copies of all of the files and reports on patients into the new computer system her parents had purchased, being sure a full dental history on each patient was found. Of course, she'd needed help for that from other clinics who'd treated patients prior to their coming to Granger Dental, and had naturally rung around to find the answers she wanted.

She'd commandeered the office for all of one day and managed to do more for the future and the organisation of the clinic in that one day than the three desk girls and four dental nurses had managed in ten years. Her mother was secretly pleased with her about it, and her father was suitably exasperated to learn that the world was moving forward and Granger Dental would do so along with it if Hermione had anything to say about it. The office girls and the nurses, however, had been extremely displeased at having one bossy, overbearing thirteen year old ordering them out of her way, stealing their phones, raiding their filing cabinets and handling their computers with far more efficiency than she suspected they'd ever seen.

As such, in order to maintain a staff team for times when Hermione wasn't there to handle everything herself – such as when school would resume on September first – Hermione had been kindly, yet firmly informed by her mother that she wouldn't be working at the clinic anymore. Unfortunately, Hermione had had the same experience when she'd applied for a job in the local bookstore down the street. The owner had been thrilled at the idea of such a young – and therefore less expensive to employ – girl would be interested in helping out with his bookshop. A second-hand and new books trading shop, the store had seen better days and customer turnover was low.

The manager had bitched for a week about the idea of not making enough money and how no one was reading books anymore as the world sped toward the technological age. Hermione had taken it upon herself to re-organise the shop, streamline the ordering system, change suppliers for the ordering of stock when the one the manager had been using turned out to be dodgy – not delivering on the days they said they would, never delivering everything that was ordered and refusing to budge when she asked for a rush order.

She'd talked the man into getting a computer to better log the stock turnover and to better track the store's finances. She'd even agreed to pain-stakingly log every book they had in-store, punching
them into the system, and developing a library-style means of tacking the books they sold. She'd rearranged the stores, convinced the manager to give it a fresh look by applying a coat of paint to the weathered and rather sad exterior and interior of the place and essentially brought the store up to the times to better lure customers in. For the first month, the man had grumbled about all the changes until he saw them beginning to work. Then he'd been thrilled by the profit turnover he began making as people who'd walked past the store every day for ten years without noticing it suddenly began calling it, exclaiming in shock to find the store was there at all and buying books.

And then the manager of that little bookstore had discovered that making money, running a business and selling books was actually about rather more than sitting behind a counter reading the books he kept in stock. He hadn't been so thrilled when the initial hype wore off and he found there was rather more for him to be getting on with than reading. Naturally, he'd blamed the girl responsible for the change, given Hermione the sack and put the store on the market to sell. Apparently he'd decided that he no longer wanted to work and would be retiring anyway, so that was that.

No one had bought the place yet, and Hermione hated seeing her hard work go to waste. She'd gone into the store a week after getting the sack, intent on buying something new to occupy her time on her holidays, and Hermione had been unable to keep from tidying, straightening the shelves, unpacking and logging the newest shipment that had come in and otherwise doing her job before she'd been fired. All while the manager of the store had dozed in his chair, a book open on his lap. When he'd woken when she'd accidentally knocked over a box of labels whilst labelling and shelving the newest stock, he'd been furious with her and told her that she was an interfering little busy body who had no business poking about his store. He'd refused to sell her the books she wanted and he'd informed her that if she came back, he would call the police on her for being a public nuisance.

She may or may not have suffered on of her unfortunate moments of accidental magic right as he was shoving her – none too gently – out the door and not there were several large and unfortunate scorcher marks in the new paint-work on the front of the store. The Ministry had been called – again – to deal with the aftermath of having several muggles see the flames and Hermione had been questioned at length about the incident. When she'd told them what had happened, they had deemed it an overreaction to being rather rudely treated by the shop-owner, claimed raging teenage hormones or PMS were to blame and had proceeded to modify the memory of the muggles before going on their way. She'd been given a slap on the wrist from the Ministry of Magic claiming that if she didn't get a better hold of her accidental magic – something they didn't believe should still be happening to a witch of almost fourteen – she would have to face a Ministry inquiry into why she had such poor control and whether or not her bursts of fury were at all accidental or if they were decidedly more deliberate.

Hermione had thought, up until that incident, that she'd been improving regarding her uncontrolled bursts of rage. She still felt them, but she'd been growing better and refraining from expressing them through magical outpourings that got her into trouble. The store had been the first time all summer when those wretched purple and green flames had occurred since before she'd been petrified at school the previous year, so Hermione had thought she was doing well indeed.

Lounging on the sunbed she'd dragged out into the yard, a glass of lemonade condensing in her hand, Hermione Granger wore only a swimsuit as she soaked up the rare rays of sunshine the season had on offer for her. She was bored out of her mind. She'd read every book she owned – indeed, every book in the house – and she'd already worked her way through all of the books she was interested in exploring from the local library near her house. Admittedly, there were other things she could read, but she didn't want to read them. She wanted to read books about magic and how to do the next level of spellwork and about the history of the magical world.
With just over a little more than a month to go before school was set to resume, Hermione was thoroughly bored of the holidays and she wanted to return the magical world. She kept hoping that Ginny and Ron might ask their mother to invite her to their house to stay, but they'd all been to Egypt recently, so she assumed they didn't have time for an extra houseguest.

Just as she was pondering the likelihood of Reina's parents allowing her to invite a fellow Gryffindor to their house, Hermione spotted an owl winging its way toward her backyard clutching what looked like a letter in its talons.

"Finally, a bit of news," Hermione muttered, sitting up just in time to watch the owl swoop down towards her and land on the edge of her sunbed, "Hello there."

The owl hooted at her in greeting, allowing itself to be petted before offering her its foot.

"Would you mind terribly if I asked you to hang around to deliver a reply to whomever has sent this to me?" Hermione asked of the owl politely as she untied the letter.

The owl hooted at her again, nuzzling her fingers and hopping over to the bowl of crisps Hermione had abandoned on the ground beside her chair before digging in. Hermione chuckled at the creature's enthusiasm before breaking open the seal on the letter.

Dearest Hermione,

How are you? I'm sorry it's taken me so long to reply to your last letter. It sounds like you had a wonderful time in France with your cousins last month. I've been at home mostly, dragged to the ridiculous balls and things that are part and parcel of being in a well-known magical family. It's wretched. Most of the people my age have been scorning me thanks to my being made a Gryffindor, and my father does nothing but encourage them with his judgemental silence.

He's actually the reason it's taken me so long to get back to you. I've been fighting with him about having you come to visit and after Gran stepped in and told him to stop being a ponce just because I'd made friends in the House I was Sorted to. Which is why I'm writing to ask if you would like to check with your parents and find out if they'll let you spent the remainder of the holidays with me. If you want to, obviously. Gods, I should ask you first shouldn't I? Would you like to come and stay at the Tower with me until term resumes in September? Please say yes. I miss you like crazy and I've hardly heard a peep out of Ginny. Luna will be coming for a little while too, towards the end of the month as her father is going away for something that will take longer than intended and so won't be back before term resumes. In any case, I miss you and I was to see you and pretty please say you'll come to visit so you can help me prove to my father that not all Gryffindors are headstrong, reckless idiots who rush into danger without a second-thought.

Owl me back ASAP as soon as you know, alright?

Love, Reina Rowle.

Hermione felt a wide smile crawl across her face as joy filled her at Reina's letter and her request. Finally she'd be able to see her friends and re-join the magical world. She'd be able to stop sitting around her parent's backyard trying to ignore the attentions of the muggle boy who lived next-door. The one who was currently peeking over the fence and spying on her while she sunbathed in her bikini. Two years her senior, he was trouble with a capital T in just the same way boys like Thorfinn Rowle and Antonin Dolohov were trouble. He had an eye for the ladies and he was pretty
enough to lure them in before ruining their reputations. Hermione wanted nothing to do with the smooth talking peeping-tom.

Unable to contain her exuberance, Hermione let out a delighted laugh even as she sat up quickly, intent on getting dressed and running across the city to ask her parents if she could go and stay with Reina.

"Come on, little one," Hermione said to the owl who'd hopped up the to the edge of the sunbed and begun to doze, "I'll take you inside so you can roost while I find my parents to get their confirmation on staying with Reina for the rest of the summer."

The owl blinked at her before hopping onto Hermione's offered forearm and allowing itself to be carried inside. The raced up to her room and showed the owl the best spot for roosting - on the open door of her wardrobe - before madly pulling on a sun dress she'd abandoned earlier and finding her shoes to run down the street to her parents dental practice. As soon as she had her clothes, Hermione tore back down the steps and out the door of the house, her keys in her hand as she raced for the gate.

"Oi, Granger?" her neighbour called to her where he had moved into his parent's garage and was tinkering around with his motorcycle.

"No time to stop, Scott!" Hermione called to the boy even as she pulled the gate to her house shut with a clang and tore off down the street as fast as her feet would carry her.

She was out of breath by the time she reached the dental clinic several block away, but she burst through the door excitedly, her eyes scanning the room quickly to see how much it would inconvenience her parents if she barged in on them right now.

"Hermione? Is everything alright?" one of her mother's nurses asked her, looking concerned to see her while the desk girls both began to scowl at the sight of her.

"Is Mum seeing anyone right now?" she asked, panting from her run.

"Not right now. she's due to see Mrs Gardener in ten minutes," Cindy told her.

"Alright, thanks," Hermione said, dashing down the corridor and into her mother's office.

"Hermione?" Jane Granger looked up, alarmed s her office door burst open, "Is everything alright, love? You look like you've been running."

"I've just run from home," Hermione told her, still breathing hard.

"It's almost twenty blocks, love! Whatever did you run all the way here for?" her mother asked, dismayed.

"I've just had an owl from Reina," Hermione explained, "She's asked me if it would be alright if I spend the rest of the summer with her and her family."

"Oh," Jane said, her concern melting away, "And you'd like to go, I take it?"

"It would save you and Dad needing to take time off to take me to Diagon Alley for my things, or to King's Cross at the end of term. I know going to Diagon Alley made you both a bit uncomfortable last time," Hermione smiled at her, "And with you both back at work and me unable to go to the bookshop, I'm going insane at home. I've been thinking about asking Scott from next door to show me how to fix his bike just to have something to do."
"You really like this girl, don't you, dear?" Jane smiled at her softly.

"She's one of my best friends," Hermione nodded, before biting her lip and looking at her feet, "She actually wants to spend time with me, Mum. Not because I'm clever in a pinch or because she can copy my homework like Harry and Ron like to do. Not because she has no one else to talk to or pities me. She genuinely thinks of me as her best friend."

"This girl is the younger sister of the boy you wrote to us about, isn't she?" Jane asked, "The one who jumper you're always wearing?"

"Finn? Yeah, Reina is his younger sister, but he doesn't live at Rowle Tower anymore. He lives in Ireland for his Quidditch career," Hermione explained.

"He's graduated?" Jane asked.

"Yes," Hermione nodded, "Finn was in his final year when I was in my first year. But it's unlikely he'll be at Rowle Tower over the summer. He'll be in Ireland for work, I imagine."

"You really want to go?" Jane asked her.

Hermione nodded her head.

"Where do they live?"

"Near Appleby," Hermione told her, "They've an estate out there."

"Oh, that sounds nice," Jane told her, "And you'd be spending the remainder of the summer with them?"

"Yeah. Reina's cousin, Luna, will be coming to stay at the end of the month too as her father is going away and won't be back before term starts. Ginny might be coming too, I'm not sure. Reina said she hasn't heard much from Ginny all summer, but Ginny's been in Egypt, so she might've been a bit too busy to write very often."

"I assume, based on you running all the way here, that you very much want to go and that Reina is awaiting a reply to her letter?"

Hermione nodded again, "Her owl is at home in my room waiting until I've written back."

"I suppose we'd better go and talk to your father then, hadn't we?" Jane smiled at Hermione widely.

Hermione followed her mother down the hall and into her father's section where she peeked in on him while he was in the middle of doing a routine clean for a patient. Jane whispered in his ear that they needed to talk to him and Hermione peeked into the room, to see her father smiling in her direction. He had a mask on, of course, but Hermione could tell from the crinkles around his eyes that he was smiling.

Excusing himself from his patient for a minute, he entered his office along with Hermione and Jane and Hermione let her Mum do the talking as she filled him in on Hermione's request.

"You really want to go, sugar bug?" Clarence Granger asked her, "You sick of dear old Mum and Dad."

"I could never be sick of you," Hermione assured him, "But I do want to see my friends. I'm going batty at the house with nothing to do. Spending time with Scott next door is beginning to sound
"Oh dear, well we can't have that," Clarence laughed, "A month is a long time to stay with friends though, love."

"They wouldn't have asked if they didn't think it would be alright to have me there," Hermione shrugged her shoulders.

"How will you be getting there?" he wanted to know.

"I don't know, I'd have to ask," Hermione told him seriously, "At this point I've only got a letter from Reina asking if I'd like to come and stay at all. But I imagine we'd get there by Floo or one of the adults in her family would apparate over to collect me."

"What's apparating again?" he asked.

"Like teleporting," Hermione smiled.

"Right. Sounds like fun. Well, if they're really alright with having you, and you want to go sugar bug, I'm not going to stop you. Not if the alternative is that you begin spending time with Scott Rinkleworth. That's the last thing I need," Clarence smiled at her, winking at her slyly when Jane swatted him for being rude.

"I can go?" Hermione asked, her excitement growing.

"You can go. Owl Reina back and tell her that you're allowed to come. But I want you home tonight, alright? We'll do dinner before you go."

"It might take them a few days to organise the Floo if we're travelling that way," Hermione told them.

"Just the same, they can collect you any time after tomorrow," Clarence told her.

"Thank you!" Hermione smiled widely, throwing herself into her father's arms and hugging him tightly before doing the same to her mother.

"Don't run home, darling," Jane told her, "It's much too far for you to be running by yourself."

"You ran here?" Clarence asked, "That's quite the hike, sugar bug. Take a taxi home. Here's some money. We'll see you at home when we get off, alright?"

Hermione accepted the money from her parents, thanking them profusely as she nodded and headed for the door. As soon as she was outside, Hermione began searching for a taxi to take her home, pleased that London had so many taxis when she found one with little trouble. When she reached the house and paid for her taxi, Hermione was about to hurry inside but her neighbour called her to a stop.

"Hermione!" Scott shouted, crawling out from under the bike he was still tampering with, his hands covered in oil.

"What is it Scott?" Hermione asked impatiently, "I need to make a phone call."

She made sure to lie about the idea of needing to send an owl since that would just confused the muggle boy.

"You've been promising me since before you went to France that you'd hang out and catch up with
me," Scott reminded her and Hermione fought the urge to groan. As children growing up next door, she and Scott had often been forced to interact and while she wouldn't say they were friends, they had been as close as Hermione had come before going to Hogwarts given that she was a witch and too clever for her own good. Scott had teased her often as a kid, making fun of her hair and her buck teeth, but he'd also beat the stuffing out of a few other kids who'd said hurtful things that made her cry and Hermione knew she hadn't given him the time of day in a long time.

"I know," Hermione sighed, "I'll tell you what? I'll make this phone call and find out a little more about what I need to know pertaining to the way I spend the rest of my summer and then we'll hang out, alright? If not tonight, then sometime tomorrow."

"You swear?" Scott asked, "Because the last time you said you'd hang out with me 'tomorrow' you whisked back off to your fancy boarding school and I didn't see you again until last Christmas, through the window."

Hermione cursed to know he remembered that she'd ducked his company last year completely - something she'd done on purpose.

"I swear we'll hang out before I leave again," she sighed.

"I'm going to hold you to the oath, Granger," Scott warned her, "I'll hop the fence and climb right up to your window if I have to."

Hermione shook her head at him, baffled, "Why do you want to spend time with me anyway? The last I checked you were still calling me 'beaver' and laughing with those idiots you usually hang out with."

"I was twelve, what did you expect?"

"A little more maturity," Hermione shrugged, "What difference does you now being sixteen make to that anyway?"

"If you don't know, Granger," Scott grinned at her, "Then those ponces you go to boarding school with must all be gay for each other."

Hermione felt her cheeks begin to warm when he winked at her.

"Explaining why you've been spying on me over the fence," Hermione muttered, "Let me make my call and we'll hang out, alright?"

"Can't tonight, I'm going to a concert with my friends," he shook his head, "But we're on for tomorrow, alright?"

Hermione nodded, relieved she wouldn't be expected to spend time with him tonight and hoping to hell she'd be able to get out of here tomorrow before he dragged himself out of bed. She hurried inside to begin penning her letter to Reina and she prodded the owl in her room awake to send off her reply. As she watched the bird disappear out the window, Hermione smiled to herself, feeling happier than she had all summer and the prospect of being around magical folk again.

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The following day, Hermione found herself roped into spending time with Scott Rinkleworth, much to her displeasure. She'd been roped into it when she'd had a letter from Reina that morning to say that her Gran would be coming by to collect Hermione and ease any of her parent's concerns over the length of the stay. Pandora Rowle was expected at the Granger residence at four o'clock
and Hermione hadn't been able to hide out in her room any longer, finishing off her packing and avoiding her neighbour. Not when the wretched git had done what he'd threatened, jumped the fence, climbed the building to her window and demanded she spend time with him like she'd promised.

"You're doing it all wrong, Hermione," Scott was telling her, having talked her into learning how to fix his bike since that's what he was currently working on.

"If you knew how infrequently I hear that sentence, you'd laugh," Hermione told the older boy dryly as she wriggled the spark-plug of the bike motor, trying to put it back where it was meant to go.

Scott laughed at her words.

"Know-it-all like you, I reckon you've never heard that before in your life, Hermione," Scott told her, "What's your school like, anyway?"

"It's wonderful," Hermione admitted, "I love going there. I actually have friends there... not like out here."

"I've always been your friend," Scott protested, frowning at her.

"You used to pick on me as much as everyone else did," Hermione argued, slanting a glance in his direction.

"I meant it in good fun," Scott frowned, "You used to correct my grammar and tell me I was too thick to function. I thought teasing each other was just how we communicated."

"Oh," Hermione said, frowning slightly.

"I didn't beat up other kids for just anyone, Hermione," Scott told her, grinning at her.

Hermione blinked at him, stunned into silence. She'd never thought of the dark haired boy grinning at her as her friend. He'd been a nuisance when they were kids, always pulling her pig-tails, so to speak, and otherwise annoying her most of the time.

"Who the devil are you?" Clarence Granger's voice could suddenly be heard from next door and Hermione tensed.

"I'm here to pick up Hermione, I understand you're expecting me?" a familiar drawling voice spoke and Hermione's eyebrows shot up.

"Here, let me show you where this bit goes," Scott said quietly, reaching for Hermione's hands when they fell - the spark-plug still clutch ed in her hold. Hermione wasn't listening to the boy.

"I was expecting a woman named Pandora to be picking up my daughter, young man. Just who the devil are you?"

"Finn," Hermione frowned, her brain catching up to register the owner of that drawl.

"Hermione?" Scott asked.

"My name is Thorfinn Rowle," Finn could be heard from over the fence, "I'm here to collect Hermione."

"If you think I'm letting my daughter go anywhere with the likes of you, buster, you better think
again,” Clarence Granger replied stubbornly and Hermione heard Finn snort.

"Oh no," she muttered, "Scott, I've got to..."

"Hermione!" her father shouted from next door where Hermione could hear the boisterous and familiar sound of Thorfinn Rowle laughing. "Get out of that garage and get over here. Do you know this chap?"

Hermione handed the spark plug back to Scott and scrambled to her feet.

"Dad!" Hermione called, dashing out of the garage, heedless of the grease and oil coating her denim cut-offs, her bare thighs and her red tank top.

"Hey! Hermione, is everything alright?"

Hermione stopped dead at the sight of Thorfinn Rowle standing on her doorstep. He turned to look in her direction when he heard her call, and his bright blue eyes raked over her body in a way that made Hermione's insides squirm.

"Finn?" she asked, blinking in shock at the sight of him.

He'd gotten even bigger than he'd been the last time she'd seen him. More muscular, taller, even handsomer. She didn't stand a chance against keeping her wits with him grinning at her like that.

"Hey, Princess," Thorfinn smirked at her.

"What are you doing here?" Hermione asked the Viking of a wizard.

"Picking you up to take you to the Tower," Finn replied, his eyes darting to something over her shoulder and Hermione felt Scott collide with her back, his grease-covered hand coming up to rest intimately on her hip.

"You know this bloke, Hermione?" Scott asked her.

Hermione would swear she saw Thorfinn's eyes narrow hatefully on the muggle boy touching her.

"I know him," Hermione replied, "We went to school together."

"You're filthy there, Kitten," Thorfinn said, "You better run on in and wash up. You can't turn up at the Tower like that."

"Why are you picking me up?" Hermione asked him seriously, "Reina said your grandmother was coming."

"Gran's a bit tied up this afternoon. A friend of hers had her husband pass away this morning so she'd trying to console the grieving widow. Reina said you've been going batty here, so I figured you'd rather I pick you up than wait until everything cools down and Gran can come by."

"She didn't tell me you'd be home," Hermione said, eyeing the hulking wizard and trying not to notice the way the tight-fitting shirt he wore clung to his muscled form deliciously.

"It was a surprise," Thorfinn smirked, "Come on, Baby-girl. I don't have all day to hang around watching your flirt with your little friend."

He snapped his fingers at her and nodded her toward the house.
"Must you constantly be obnoxious?" Hermione demanded, even as she began climbing the fence, "I don't see you in more than a year and this is how you say hello to me?"

"If you think I'm going to hug you when you're covered in filth, you better think again, Kitten," he retorted.

Hermione narrowed her eyes on the big idiot, eyeing the white of his t-shirt for a moment as a vicious idea sparked inside her mind.

"Sugar bug, are you sure you know this chap?" her Dad asked but Hermione ignored him for a moment.

"You know what, Finn?" Hermione asked, moving closer until she was staring up at him.

"Don't even think about it, brat," he warned her, stepping backwards and putting his hands up as though to fend her off.

Hermione pounced. Before he could even think about trying to shove her away or trying to dodge her, she jumped right at him, sliding between the hands he'd put up to stop her before pressing herself to his chest and wrapping her grease-covered arms around his torso, being sure to get lots of oily hand-prints all over his bright white shirt.

"No, no, no…. Ah, dang it, witch," Thorfinn protested, his hands clasping tightly onto the tops of her shoulders and trying to pry her off while he father tried to hide his laughter by coughing. Hermione had begun to laugh as she squeezed Thorfinn tightly, being sure to pressed her entire front against his as she cuddled into him.

She felt a strange warmth wash through her as she breathed in his familiar citrus and smoke cologne. Hermione realised with a jolt as he stopped trying to pry her off him when he realised the futility of the action now that his shirt was ruined, his arms curling around her to press her to him firmly in a warm hug, that she'd missed the big idiot. Closing her eyes, Hermione leaned into him for just a moment, feeling like for those few seconds, all her cares were inconsequential.

"You're ruining my shirt, Princess," Thorfinn told her.

"Just admit you missed me, Finn," Hermione grinned at him, pulling back to smirk into his stupid handsome face.

"Never," he replied, though he grinned, "Go and wash up, urchin."

"Oh, that's rich, coming from you," Hermione retorted, moving toward the house intent on doing as he'd said.

"Hermione?" Scott's voice came from behind her and Hermione paused, feeling a rush of guilt swim through her when she realised that in her exuberance to see Finn, she'd forgotten all about Scott, "I thought we were spending the day together?"

Spinning back to the muggle boy where he was leaning against the fence and watching her, Hermione felt terrible. She'd just run off after having him say he counted her as his friend and hinted at thinking she was pretty.

"I'm um… well, I'm going to stay with a friend for the rest of the summer before school goes back," Hermione told him, dashing back down the steps, shoving past Finn when he tried to get in her way, "This one's younger sister is one of my best friends and she invited me round for the rest of the summer."
"So you won't be learning how to change the spark plugs on a motorcycle, then?" Scott asked, watching her come close.

"It doesn't look like it. I wasn't expecting to be picked up until after four. Finn's early," Hermione told him, "But maybe you could teach me if I'm home at Christmas?"

"If?" Scott asked, and Hermione could tell she'd hurt his feelings and that he wanted to pout about it, but didn't want to look pathetic in front of as intimidating a specimen as Thorfinn.

"I might end up staying at school, depending on what Mum and Dad have planned and whether my friends are staying there too," Hermione told him, "But there's always next summer."

"Right," Scott said, though he looked hurt.

Hermione felt a twist of guilt in her stomach to know she'd upset the muggle boy.

"I had fun today," Hermione offered, "And I could probably muddle my way through changing the sparkplugs if I had to."

"You could not," Scott chuckled, "You were trying to put the plug into the fuel line, love."

Hermione shrugged, her cheeks turning pink.

"Ok, so maybe I couldn't. But you can teach me next summer."

"Yeah," the boy grinned crookedly at her, "You know, one of these days, Granger, you're going to spend an entire day with me and realise I'm not the rude little shit that I was when I was twelve."

"I've already realised that," Hermione smiled at him, "Thanks for trying to teach me about engines."

"Maybe next time you'll learn something and we won't be interrupted," Scott offered, "Next summer, yeah?"

"Unless I'm home at Christmas," Hermine nodded solemnly.

"You do realise that the next time I see you, I'm going to make you come for a ride on it with me, yeah?" he asked.

"You don't even have a license for it yet," she pointed out.

"Nah, but I will by Christmas. You're coming riding with me, Hermione. If it's the last thing I do, I'll get you on the back of that bike," he chuckled, "Go on then, run off with your friends and go back to your fancy school, but the next time you're home, you owe me a full day of your company."

"Deal," Hermione smiled at him, "I'll see you soon."

She didn't even think about it as she leaned over the fence and wrapped her arms around the older boy, pressing a kiss to his cheek warmly as she hadn't done since they'd been just little children.

"Bye, love," Scott whispered in her ear as Hermione pulled away. She smiled at him as she moved back towards the house, giving him a little wave as he made for the garage and his bike once more.

"Hermione, darling," her father said when she raced up the stairs to where he was blocking the doorway, "You know this man?"
"Finn?" Hermione asked, jerking a thumb at him, "Yeah, he's Reina's older brother. He was in his final year when I was in my first. He looked out for me, a bit. I suppose."

"I see. And you're sure he's here to take you to your friend's house?"

"Where else do you imagine him taking me?" Hermione asked, raising her eyebrows at her father.

"I'd rather not even think about the other possibilities, sugar bug," her father whispered, looking rather concerned for her wellbeing as though fearful Finn might haul her off and assault her or impregnate her.

Hermione giggled at the very idea.

"I hardly think he's going to do anything untoward, Dad," Hermione rolled her eyes at him, "Come on, move out of the door so I can wash this grease off. Finn, you coming?"

Hermione glanced back of her shoulder to find the blonde wizard staring after her muggle neighbour and looking kind of like he wanted to hex him in the back. Indeed, he was reaching for his wand in his pocket as though he just might do it. Reaching out to catch his wrist, Hermione tugged on it and shot him a glare.

"Don't you even think about harming that kid, Finn," Hermione warned him when the wizard glanced down to meet her gaze.

"Wouldn't dream of it, Kitten," he told her in a voice that very clearly suggested he would dream of it and was considering still doing something to poor Scott.

"Get in the house before I hex you, idiot," Hermione growled, dragging him inside.

"You're covering me in oil, brat," Finn pointed out, grumbling as he was tugged across the threshold.

"You probably deserve it," Hermione retorted, pulling him down the hall and into the bathroom where she could try to wash the grease from her hands.

"Don't be stupid, Princess, that's not coming off without magic," he rolled his eyes as he watched her, this time fishing his wand from his pocket and aiming it at her.

Hermione squeaked in surprise when he used cleaning charms on her person and her clothing, vanishing the grease in a stream of blue bubbles.

"You're going to pay for my shirt too, shithead," he warned her though he was smirking at her.

"Oh shove it, you bloody ponce, it's just a shirt," Hermione rolled her eyes at him, feeling her own smile threatening to break her face, it was so wide.

"Hermione, love, is everything alright…. My goodness!" Jane Granger exclaimed as she strolled into the bathroom and laid eyes on Thorfinn, "You're enormous, young man. What are you doing in my house?"

"Mum, this is Finn," Hermione laughed when Finn spun towards the woman, his wand still drawn.

"Finn, as in Thorfinn? The boy you've told me about?" her mother asked.

"Gushing about me, Kitten?" Thorfinn smirked when Hermione's cheeks turned pink at the very idea, "Pleasure to meet you, ma'am. I'm Thorfinn Rowle. I'm here to collect Hermione to take her
to my family home to see my sister."

"Jane Granger," her mother said, shaking his hand when Finn had stowed his wand back in his pocket, "Would you like some tea while Hermione gets her things together?"

"Erm…" Thorfinn looked uncomfortable about the idea of being left alone with her parents, "Do you need a hand with your trunk, Princess?"

"No," Hermione smirked at him, though she probably did need help with it, "You go on into the kitchen with Mum and Dad and have some tea, Thorfinn."

He narrowed his blue eyes at her when Hermione chuckled softly while Jane took Finn's hand - which she'd still be shaking whilst staring wide-eyed at the wizard – and tucked it into her elbow to lead him down the hall. Hermione stuck her tongue out at him before she raced off up the stairs to get her trunk, laughing the whole way as she listened to her mother begin quizzing Thorfinn on what he did, how old he was, how he liked his tea and whether he knew how to teleport.

Racing around her room to gather her last few things, Hermione pulled her soiled clothing off her small frame, tossed them into her laundry basket and fished something a little more appropriate from her wardrobe, having left a nice outfit in her cupboard just for this occasion. She didn't want to turn up at Rowle Tower looking like she'd just climbed out of some gutter. Digging out her favourite pair of jeans, Hermione pulled them up her legs before fining one of her nicest blouses and pulling it on over her head. When she was once again properly garbed to be in polite company, Hermione wheeled her trunk out of her room and over to the top of the stairs.

When she got to the landing she frowned. Filled with books, her trunk was excessively heavy and she didn't at all think she'd be able to carry it down the steps without it toppling. She would just have to bounce it. Pulling the handle, Hermione began tugging the heavy luggage towards the lower level, cringing on every.

"You alright out there, Princess?" Hermione heard Thorfinn call from the kitchen where her parents and stopped their inquisition to listen to her struggled.

"Erm…" Hermione said, tugging the trunk against and listening to the terrible crash as it rolled down the last five steps all at once.

She stumbled slightly when the heavy thing collided with her ankles, forcing her down faster and Hermione squeaked when she lost her balance and began to topple towards the floor. She closed her eyes tight, just knowing that there was no way she was going to land gracefully or without hurting herself.

Strong arms snagged her before she hit the ground and Hermione was engulfed in a citrus and smoke scent, drawn up against a strong chest and held firm.

"Easy, Kitten, I've got you," Thorfinn murmured to her.

"You move fast, lad," Clarence commented, "Sugar bug, are you alright?"

"I'm…" Hermione said, blinking open her eyes and staring at Thorfinn, "You caught me."

"Were you hoping I'd let you fall?" he smirked.

"You were in the kitchen," Hermione pointed out.

"I have quick reflexes," he reminded her. Hermione nodded slowly.
"You can put me down now," she said when he continued holding her to himself as though concerned she'd fall if stood her back on his feet.

"I could," he agreed, though he didn't look like he was going to, "You should have told me your trunk was too heavy to carry, Princess. That's what Weightless Charms are for."

"I forgot that you're allowed to do magic," Hermione retorted, "Put me down, would you? You're making me look like some ridiculous damsel in distress, saved by the big burly Viking."

"You are a damsel in distress," he pointed out, grinning at her

"Distress this, moron," Hermione told him, swatting his chest firmly until he put her down.

"Oi, no need to get violent, woman!" he grumbled, lowering her back to the floor while her mother began to giggle behind her hand.

Hermione glared up at him for a moment before turning to his parents.

"This is for you, sugar bug," her father told her, handing her a small purse filled with money, "Get it changed over at that wizarding bank when you go to Diagon Alley, alright?"

"Thanks Dad," Hermione said, sighing softly as she took the money from him and tucked it into her purse.

"Be good, darling," her mother told her, drawing her into a tight embrace and kissing the top of her head.

"I'm always good," Hermione reminded her mother.

She hugged her Dad too before they both released her. Hermione turned back towards the stairs, intent on getting her trunk, only to find Thorfinn in the process of shrinking it and slipping it into his pocket for safe-keeping.

"How are we getting to Rowle Tower," Hermione asked the blonde wizard.

"Apparating," he grinned at her, "You ever done it before?"

"No," Hermione admitted.

"You're in for a treat," he said and Hermione could tell from the look on his face that he was being sarcastic, "It was nice to meet you Mr and Mrs Granger."

Hermione smiled to herself at his show of manners as he led the way out of the house, stopping at the door to bid them both goodbye.

"You too, Thorfinn," Hermione's mother smiled at him, "Please make sure our girl is taken care of."

Thorfinn nodded before looking at Hermione. "You ready to go, little lioness?"

Hermione nodded her head, catching the curious looks on her parent's faces at the many pet names Thorfinn liked to use for her.

"I'll write soon," Hermione promised her Mum and Dad.

"Love you, darling," they both said to her as Hermione followed Finn out the door and down the
"Love you too," Hermione called, waving before turning back to Thorfinn questioningly.

"Come on," he nodded his head, "Down around the corner in the alley so none of the muggle will see us Disapparate."

He offered her his elbow like a proper gentleman and Hermione rolled her eyes even as she slipped her arm through his.

"You might act like a gentleman now," Hermione chuckled to herself, "But I haven't forgotten that one of the last times you saw me you threw me over your shoulder like a barbarian and carried me off."

"Pipe down, Princess, or I'll do it again," he threatened though he was grinning as well.

"You're such a git," Hermione accused, laughing at his words.

"You love me," he retorted.

"No one could, Thorfinn. Not when you've got a mug like that," she nodded up at him.

"You keep telling yourself that, Kitten," he laughed in return, leading her into the alley.

He glanced around for a moment to make sure everything was all clear before unhooking their arms and manipulating her around until she stood in front of him with her back pressed against his chest.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked, tipping her head back and pressing the top of it to his chest.

"Making it so that you won't get splinched when we apparate. And so that I'm less likely to get vomit on me when we land and you hurl everywhere," he replied, grinning down into her upturned face.

"Charming," Hermione rolled her eyes, moving to face forward once more and being stopped when Thorfinn suddenly ducked his head and dropped an affectionate kiss to her forehead.

Hermione blinked at him in surprise even as she felt a genuinely warm and happy smile spread slowly across her face. He smiled at her in return.

"You want to go straight to the Tower?" he asked her seriously, "Or you want to come somewhere with me first?"

"Where?" Hermione whispered.

"It's a surprise," he grinned at her, "Are you game?"

"You recall that I'm a Gryffindor, yeah?" Hermione asked, grinning in return, "Bring it on, Rowle."

Thorfinn laughed at her words before reaching up to tip her head so she was facing forwards once more. With a slight twist and a sharp jerk behind her navel, Hermione Granger discovered what it was like the apparate for the very first time.
Thorfinn felt the petite witch's weight sag against the arm he'd curled around her ribs and his ears filled with the sound of her sickened groan when they landed with a pop. She heaved as though she might throw up, one of her hands clamped over her own mouth.

"Easy, Princess," he murmured, holding her up to prevent her from falling to her knees in the middle of the Quidditch pitch.

"I don't like Apparating," she muttered. Her words were slightly muffled by the hand she still clamped over her mouth.

"It gets easier," Thorfinn chuckled at the witch. "Side-Along is rough too because you're not in charge of the magic. When you learn to do it yourself, it will be easier and make you less nauseous."

"Well, I'm pleased I don't have to start thinking about it until I'm of age," Hermione replied. "Why are we on a Quidditch Pitch?"

"I've got to pick up some of my gear for tomorrow's match," he told her, releasing her slowly and finding himself rather reluctant to do so.

"You're home for a game?" she asked, stepping out of his hold and smoothing a hand over her hair as though it might help her to regain her equilibrium.

"Yeah. The Bats play the Cannons tomorrow. This is the Cannons pitch in Chudley," Thorfinn explained.

"It's bigger than I expected, given that the Cannons haven't won the league since 1892," said Hermione.

"How do you know that?" Thorfinn chuckled. "I thought you hated Quidditch, Princess?"

"I don't hate it," Hermione rolled her eyes. "I simply find it boring when it's the only thing people want to talk about. I don't like being dragged out to sit in the stands and watch Harry at training or to have Ron blurt random facts about the Cannons - his favourite team - to me while I'm trying to focus on a Charms essay. I'm also not very good at flying. I couldn't even get the broom to lift off the ground in our Flying lessons in first year even though people like Harry and Malfoy got it, first go."

"In others words, you're not big on it because it's something you can't do and is therefore a personal affront to your know-it-all, over-achieving nature?" Thorfinn summarised, poking her in the ribs as he chuckled.

"I got it eventually," she retorted, narrowing her cinnamon eyes at him. "I'm not very good at flying, mind you, but I can do it, in a pinch. I'm not a huge fan of heights and despite reading all the books on how the brooms are enchanted to fly in the first place it goes against my muggle-raising to fly around with only a branch between my legs."

"You prefer something a little more solid between your legs then, eh?" Thorfinn chuckled and she swatted at him, her cheeks turning pink at the innuendo.

"Don't be crude, Finn, it's unbecoming," she told him.
"You clearly haven't seen me in a while, Baby-girl. Crude is my middle name. Did you forget?"

"How could I? The point is, I don't dislike flying. I don't dislike Quidditch, either. I understand most of the rules, I even like going to matches to cheer on my House team and my friends who are playing. I simply don't like to discuss nothing but Quidditch in my free time."

"You realise that I play for the British and International Leagues and that I live and breathe this stuff, right?" he asked tipping his head to one side and watching the way she eyed the pitch with mild interest.

"Are you fishing for sympathy here, Finn?" she asked, shooting a smirk in his direction.

"Just making sure you know," Thorfinn chuckled.

"As though I could forget when you send me new team jerseys - none of which are actually in my size - every time you get a new design. Ron had a cow when he saw me wearing the Irish International jersey in the lead up to the match last year," she informed him. "And given that all of them have your name on the back and are in your size, I think I'd have to be thicker than a troll not to realise you play for the Quidditch Leagues, Rowle. Did you have a point in making sure I'm aware of your career? If you're expecting me to swoon at the sight of you because you fancy yourself a celebrity, I'm sorry to disappoint. I don't swoon."

"You swooned when I snogged you before I finished school," Thorfinn argued, enjoying the way her cheeks flushed pink a second time at the mention of the kiss they'd shared.

"You surprised me and you stole my first kiss. I wasn't swooning, I was merely in shock and debating whether or not your murder was warranted," she argued with him.

"Cheeky little brat," he accused. "Come on, down this way. The team will already be expecting me. We're being given out newest brooms today to break them in before tomorrow's match."

"Does this mean I'm going to have to watch you train?" she rolled her eyes. "What do you take me for, Rowle? I'm not some groupie who's going to sit politely while your show off with your friends."

"I don't actually think you know how to be polite, Princess," he retorted. "Quit whining or I'll leave you here and you can find your own way to the Tower once we're done with training."

"Am I going to be here all day?" Hermione sighed, rolling her eyes at him even as she followed him into the dressing sheds under the stands.

"Nah, short one today to break in the brooms for tomorrow, make sure they're not dodgy or anything that might cost us the match," he told her, leading her into the sheds where the rest of his team was already there.

"Oi, Rowle, you're late!" One of his teammates growled at him even before Hermione stepped out from behind him. "And what the fuck is this? It's not groupie day or the day for fans to come sniffing around, Thor."

Thorfinn opened his mouth to tell Mullens to shove it, but his witch beat him to it.

"Fortunately, I'm neither of those things and I guarantee I'm not here by choice," Hermione told the team. "Rowle, if you'd be kind enough to return my trunk to me, I'll be in the stands, reading my books and pretending you don't exist."
"You don't want to watch us practice?" Jenkins asked, looking doubtful.

"I've already seen enough Quidditch practices to last a lifetime, whoever you are," Hermione told him and the look on Jenkins' face at the idea of someone not recognising him was priceless.

"Who's the kid, Rowle?" Team Captain O'Malley demanded, looking amused when Jenkins actually spluttered at Granger's dismissal of him.

"Hermione Granger," Thorfinn told them. "Princess, meet the team."

"Do I have to?" she asked rudely in reply, making Thorfinn smirk at her attitude.

"Are you going to be this snarky all day?" he asked of her.

"Of course not," she had the audacity to roll her eyes. "You're just the most annoying wizard I've ever met - and given that I'm best friends with Ron and that I've had the misfortune to encounter Dolohov and Malfoy, that really is saying something. Give me my stuff so I can pretend you're not trying to force me into supporting your team via blackmail."

O'Malley began to laugh, looking shocked at the way the little witch spoke to him.

"You keep up with that lip and I'm going to flog a bludger at you while your nose is stuck in a book, witch."

"It'd be more exciting that having to talk to you, Finn," she informed him in return before snapping her fingers, obviously wanting her trunk.

Smirking to himself, he fished the shrunken package from his pocket and dropped the coin-sized trunk into her palm. She narrowed her eyes on him when he proceeded to pull his shirt off over his head to get ready for their training session without enlarging it back to its original size.

"You're a right git, Thorfinn Rowle," she hissed. Thorfinn watched in amusement when little flickers of purple magic sparkled through her unruly curls before the trunk enlarged wandlessly and non-verbally in her hold.

"You're not meant to do magic outside of school," Thorfinn reminded her.

"I'm not meant to use my wand outside of school," she corrected. "The amount of wandless magic I've been doing these holidays, the Ministry don't bother to investigate unless I set something on fire."

"You set things of fire, too?" Jenkins asked the little witch. "What? Are you related to Rowle or something?"

"Merlin, no," Granger said, looking revolted by the very idea. "I'm best friends with his sister. Muggleborn. I'm told the accidental magic isn't uncommon for muggleborns, though the Ministry officials eye me funnily whenever they come by to fix whatever I set on fire."

"And you're taking shameless advantage of the problem by teaching yourself wandless magic?" Thorfinn asked her dryly.

"I find it works better if I'm angry," she grinned coldly. "Fortunately having to see your face provides plenty of fuel for the fire - so to speak. Now, I'm going to re-read my books on magical theory. If you fall off your broom, don't land on me, alright?"
"You're a right piece of work, Kitten," Thorfinn said, narrowing his eyes on the brat in return as she turned - without bothering to have greeted or bid goodbye to the team - and dragged her trunk right back out of the sheds and away into the stands.

"Bite me, Finn," she called over her shoulder as she went, flicking him the forks rudely as she did so.

Jenkins laughed again.

"Who the hell is she?" he asked, strolling over towards Thorfinn to watch the little brat go, utterly amused by her antics. "Never seen a witch talk to you like that, Rowle."

"She has done since the very first time she saw me," Thorfinn told his teammate. "When she walked in on me getting a blowjob in the library in my seventh year."

"And she's been tormenting you since?" O'Malley asked. "I'd assume it was about the size of your cock, but you could use the bloody thing in the place of your bat, so it can't be that. Muggleborn, she said? What are you doing bringing her to training, Thor?"

"Had to pick her up to take to the Tower later - she's staying with my sister until Hogwarts goes back," Thorfinn told them, finding a clean jersey in his bag and pulling it on over his head.

"Don't make a habit of bringing randoms in the shed, yeah?" O'Malley told him. "She might be oblivious or just not give a shit about Quidditch, but she could've been a Cannon spy for all we know."

Thorfinn laughed at the very idea.

"Not that one," he told them. "Trust me. She won't even watch us fly unless I drag her onto my broom."

"Well, whatever, let's fly," O'Malley shrugged, heading out of the sheds with his new broom - a Firebolt - thrown over his shoulder. Thorfinn caught the one Jenkins tossed in his direction before following the rest of the team out onto the pitch. When he kicked off the ground he could've shouted for the speed and responsiveness of the new broom, and his eyes scanned the stands to find Granger. True to her word, she wasn't even watching them fly. She was sitting curled up in one of the seats of the stands, her nose buried in a book.

"Fuck yeah! This thing can rocket!" Mullens hollered, shooting past him, flying in tight spiral turns at such speed that he blurred.

Smirking to himself, Thorfinn raced after a bludger when they were released, laughing when he could keep up with it before it veered off towards Mullens. He didn't feel all that bad even when Mullens gave a groan and was nearly thrown from his brand new broom on impact.

"FUCK!" the man shouted, clutching at his shoulder.

"Get control of the bludger, Rowle," O'Malley shouted, jetting past to check on their star Chaser.

"As though it's my fault he didn't move out of the way?" Thorfinn asked, rolling his eyes even as he dove towards the bludger that was now racing towards the only witch on their team - their seeker, O'Brien. She was in the middle of diving after the snitch, catching it and letting it go before jetting after it again, obviously impressed with her ability to dive for it at such high speed. She also wasn't paying attention to the bludger speeding towards her.
"O'BRIEN!" Thorfinn shouted, getting her attention as he sped after the bludger.

Her head snapped around and she dove out of the way of the missile quickly before it could collide with her while Thorfinn continued chasing it, spotting that it was now heading on a direct trajectory towards Hermione.

"Fucker!" he cursed, noting that the witch hadn't bothered to look up from her book.

Before it could reach her the blasted thing veered right and Thorfinn narrowly missed colliding with the bookworm himself.

"Oi! Pay attention, yeah?" he shouted at Granger from his broom as he turned tightly and raced after the bludger once more. He didn't have time to look back, but he got the feeling she'd flipped him the bird. Little brat.

The rest of the fly-around turned training session was spent learning to fly faster and turn tighter with the new Firebolts. Thorfinn was cranky by the time the session ended after being double teamed by the bludgers while Watkins – the other Bats beater – was side-tracked. He'd ended up getting hit in the forearm with a bludger on one side while taking a body-shot with the other as it slammed into his ribs. His teammates were only too keen to avoid him as they flew for the sheds, grumbling about getting a few pints and a good night's rest before tomorrow's game.

When he angled his broom towards the witch still reading in the stands, Thorfinn noted that she was reclining sideways across three of the seats, stretched on her stomach and reading her book. He watched her idly for a moment, gliding towards her slowly. She looked completely at home in the Quidditch stands with her book to keep her occupied. One of her legs was bent at the knee, swaying back and forth slightly over her arse, her shoe dangling from her foot casually as she read.

Shaking his head, Thorfinn rather hated himself for noting the changes to her body since she'd been in first year – the last time he'd seen her in person. She hadn't grown any taller, but she'd begun to fill out towards womanhood. Her waist dipped a little more; there was a little more substance hiding inside the blouse she wore and those jeans she was wearing cupped her arse a little too well given that she wasn't even fourteen yet. An idea filled his mind as he watched her turn the page, brushing her hair back absently with one hand as though she were completely oblivious to the practice session being over and as though she weren't aware that he was gliding towards her.

Landing stealthily in the row behind where she was sitting, Thorfinn was smirking to himself as he bent over the row and slid his arms around her middle before hoisting her into the air.

"Thorfinn Rowle, don't you dare!" she cried out in surprise even as Thorfinn kept one arm wrapped around her midriff, the other snatching up his broom on more. Shuffling her slightly in his hold, Thorfinn worked his broom back between his legs, clutching the squirming witch.

"Finn, no!" she shouted when he kicked off from the ground hard, causing her to grip onto his chest tightly, forced to sit side-saddle on the broom thanks to the way he held her. She clung so tightly that he had a hard time drawing his next breath but Thorfinn began to laugh at her reaction.

"No, no, no, noooooooww!" she shrieked when he began spiralling upwards, shooting like a rocket from the ground into the air high above the stadium.

He couldn't stop laughing when she kept screaming too. She turned her body further and pressed her face into his chest as well, clinging so tightly that Thorfinn was sure he would have bruises. He could tell she was afraid from the way she clung to him and the way she continue to shriek.
"I'm going to kill you, Rowle!" she shouted over the wind roaring in his ears at their speed.

"Not yet you won't, Baby-girl, but maybe, after I do this," Thorfinn laughed, pressing his mouth to her ear and clutching her even closer, clamping both arms tight around her so she wouldn't slip out of his hold.

The scream she emitted when he dove into a spiralling downward plunge, complete with a loop-the-loop, almost pierced his eardrums but Thorfinn laughed the entire time, having the time of his life scaring the hell out of her. Any second now she was going to realise that she couldn't be safer if she tried. Not with him hanging onto her so tightly, pressing her to him so close that she couldn't fall even if she tried to pitch herself from the broom.

"I hate you!" She shouted as he pulled out of the wild dive. "I hate you so much! I'm going to murder you the minute I'm back on solid ground!"

In the distance Thorfinn could see some of his teammates watching from the ground, looking amused and laughing at the way Granger screamed and clung to him so tightly.

"You think I'd actually let you fall, Princess?" Thorfinn asked, still chuckling to himself as he resumed a much more sedate pace, gliding along the length of the pitch to circle the goal posts.

"I think that I told you I'm terrified of heights and you're being a complete arse!" she snapped in return.

Thorfinn hid his smile in her hair.

"You're cute when you're being feisty, you know?" he told her quietly.

"You're never cute. You're just as arsehole," she retorted, obviously too terrified and furious with him to note the sincerity in his voice.

"Hermione?" he asked. "Lift your head. Have a look at where you are."

"I can't," she said tightly. "If I look down, I'll faint."

"I won't let you fall, even if you do, Princess," he promised her. "Please take a look? For me?"

She gripped him even tighter somehow, clinging to him as though her life depended on it. Thorfinn was sure she wasn't going to look until he felt her head turn very slowly, twisting until her cheek was pressed to his chest instead of her forehead. Her eyes were still screwed shut, he noticed, but Thorfinn leaned back slightly, only gripping the broom with his legs as he smoothed one hand over her hair, gathering it back so it wouldn't impede her view. He kept his other arm banded tightly around her waist, knowing she wouldn't dare look if he loosened his hold at all.

"Come on, little lioness," he murmured in her ear. "You're a Gryffindor. You're supposed to be brave."

She tensed even more.

"I'm going to get you for this, Finn," she muttered. "You see if I don't. One day, I'll make you sorry for this."

"That's not very sporting, Kitten. Come on, take a look and I promise I'll take you back to solid ground. One proper look. It's quite the view from up here, you know?"
He held her tightly as she slowly – painstakingly – turned her head even further before blinking her eyes open and drinking in the sight of the stadium far below, the grounds of the Quidditch pitch and the surrounding area all on display from such a height.

"I hate heights," she muttered.

"Pretty, isn't it?" Thorfinn asked the witch.

"I like the view better from the ground," she replied. "Please take me back down, Finn. I'm scared."

"You think I'd let you fall?" Thorfinn frowned.

"No," she whispered. "No, I don't think you would. But I don't like it up here. It makes me feet tingle."

"I reckon I could change your mind about flying, Princess," he told her, chuckling when she turned her face back into his chest and gripped him tighter again when he began slowly descending towards the ground.

"Not today," she replied, her voice muffled as she spoke to his sternum.

"No, probably not today. But eventually you'll be as at home on my broom with me as you were when you sat with me those times in the library back at Hogwarts," Thorfinn said quietly, guiding the broom back to the stands where her trunk sat.

Even when he touched his feet back to the ground, she didn't let him go. Dropping his broom, Thorfinn shuffled her slightly. Standing her on her own two feet, it became obvious to him that she was trembling, she'd been so scared. He felt a bit bad about the tricks he'd been pulling up there when he realised that.

"You can let go now, Princess," he told her even as he wrapped both arms around her and cuddled her to him more fully. "We're back on the ground now."

She nodded her head, but she still didn't let go and Thorfinn let his eyes drift closed for a moment as he held the little witch to him firmly, both hating and enjoying the feeling of warmth that suffused him, telling him that the betrothal bond between them was strengthening with each passing second.
Chapter 17

Rowle Tower was—as the name suggested—an enormous, towering edifice, narrow in appearance, and clearly repurposed from times of old, when it likely served as the watchtower of some larger estate. What it lacked in the width most regular houses, or extravagant castles might have, it made up for in height.

Hermione stared up at the structure from its front lawn, high on a hill that overlooked lush countryside. She had to crane her neck and squint against the afternoon sunlight to even see the pointed tops of the turrets.

Obviously added to over the year, the entire structure was made up in four sections of neat stonework—three additional turrets built much taller, and more extravagant, than the already towering middle of the building, one at each corner. All were rounded, and so high that she thought the top must usually be surrounded by cloud cover.

"Rowle Tower, indeed," Hermione said to Finn, rather impressed by the building.

"Like it?" he asked, smirking as she tipped her head back further to lean against his chest and meet his gaze when he hung his head into her line of sight.

"Yes. It's rather nice. I see why you don't have a problem with heights."

"The view from the top is spectacular." Thorfinn grinned. "I'll take you up there later, if you like?"

Hermione opened her mouth to reply, but before she could, there was a bang and the sound of rapid footsteps.

"Hermione," Reina Rowle shouted.

Hermione tipped her head to face forward just in time to see a summer-dress-clad blonde witch hurtling toward her.

She was grateful she was still pressed back against Thorfinn when Reina collided with her front. Throwing her arms around Hermione's neck, the younger girl clung to her whilst bouncing up and down with glee.

"Oh, it's so good to see you! How are you? I've missed you all summer and I've been driving Gran bonkers because I had no one to talk to," Reina said, her excitement causing her to babble at Hermione. "Come on, let's get you inside. Mum and Dad are anxious to meet you. Gran's out, of course, but I assume Thor told you about that. Sorry for the mix up—I was up at dawn to write to you with the collection plans, but then Gran got an owl at breakfast about her friend's husband and it's a terrible business. And Merlin, it's good to see you!"

"Reina?" Thorfinn asked when Hermione hid her smile, hugging the girl back and thrilled at her enthusiasm. "Take a deep breath, little sister. You're going to talk her bloody ear off and make yourself swoon if you keep that up."

"You're just sour because I didn't greet you as enthusiastically." Reina paused long enough to stick her tongue out at her brother. "Don't mind him, Hermione. I'm so sorry you've had to put up with him. He didn't tell us he was coming home for the Cannons game tomorrow and so I had no idea he was going to be here."
"I don't mind," Hermione said.

"Yeah, leave off Reina. Granger was mine first." Thorfinn gently flicked his little sister on the forehead when she made another face at him.

"She loves me more," Reina told him, her tone snide.

"Doubtful, love." Thorfinn smirked. "Very doubtful."

"You love me more, don't you Hermione?" Reina asked as she held Hermione at arm's length, hopeful as she peered into the other girl's face. "You're not going to ditch me for this idiot the whole time he's home, are you? I haven't seen you in ages!"

"I'd be more concerned about me ditching you to badger your grandmother with my incessant questions about Wizarding culture and the reception of Muggle-borns, Reina," Hermione said, laughing at the girl.

"You won't run off with Thorfinn every chance you get?" Reina wheedled.

"Thorfinn who?" Hermione pretended ignorance of the wizard still standing at her back.

"Real nice, Kitten," Thorfinn grumbled. "I go out of my way to pick you up and treat you nicely and this is how you thank me?"

"Treat me nicely?" Hermione scoffed. "I told you I didn't like heights and you dragged me onto that bloody broom before doing loop-the-loops at top speed. You're lucky I'm pretending I've no idea who you are, else I'd be trying to murder you. I swore that I would."

"You wouldn't," he replied, laughing. "You'd miss me too much."

"No one would miss you, git," Reina teased her brother, "Come on, Hermione, I'll show you where your room is. Do you have your trunk?"

"Finn's got it," Hermione said with a shrug.

"I'll bring it up." He nodded. "Got to put my broom away, anyway."

"How have you been, anyway?" Hermione asked as Reina led her inside the Tower and they began the climb toward the guest wing.

"Bored out of my mind," Reina told her. "I hate not being able to do magic outside of school, and all those snits at the gatherings Dad drags me to are so rude because I was put in Gryffindor."

"Has he been wretched about it to you?" Hermione asked the girl, looping her elbow with Reina's and smiling kindly.

"No, he's gotten over it, mostly. He still grumbles every now and then, and he claims you and Ginny and the boys have been a bad influence on me—especially after I back-talked him the other day when he told me I'd have better luck with the others if I stopped being 'such a Gryffindor.' You should have seen his face when I informed him I was proud not to be anything like those girls, because I didn't want to be a snooty bitch with a stick up my arse. He nearly had a hippogriff."

Hermione laughed out loud as the other girl led her into the room that would be hers for the remainder of the summer, listening avidly as Reina launched into stories about the things the Carrow sisters had said to her, and how she'd inadvertently—or so she claimed—shoved Greg
Goyle into a water fountain when he called her a blood-traitor.

The brunette witch also kept one eye on Thorfinn when he finally caught up with them in the guest room. He fished her trunk from his pocket and enlarged it for her, once more, before he shot her a wink and left the room, intent on grabbing a shower.

~O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O~

"So, you're Hermione Granger, are you?" Talon Rowle asked that evening when they'd all been summoned to dinner. "You look alarmingly like a girl I recall seeing my son behaving inappropriately with at his graduation ceremony."

Hermione felt her lips twitch when Thorfinn coughed, trying to hide a laugh at his father's way of greeting her, and the fact that he clearly remembered her.

"Given how many witches I imagine Finn being alarmingly more inappropriate with than myself, I'm surprised to learn I'm remembered at all, Mr Rowle," Hermione replied, her voice even as she coolly eyed the elder version of her favourite Viking of a wizard.

Mr Rowle was furious as he turned a glare on Thorfinn, who shot Hermione a look that promised retribution for throwing him under the bus.

"However, if you're referring to an incident of tickling that took place following the ceremony when I had the pleasure of meeting Madam Rowle for the first time," Hermione went on, offering Pandora a warm smile whilst maintaining what dignity she could scrape together in the face of such an intimidating man, "Then you would be correct in assuming I am that witch, and that you have seen me before. My name is Hermione Granger and in addition to suffering the misfortune of befriending Thorfinn during my first year, I also happen to be Reina's best friend."

"Aren't you a year ahead of her?" Mr Rowle raised one eyebrow in an expression that reminded her a little too much of his son.

"I am." Hermione nodded.

"Don't you have friends in your own year?" he asked, his tone curt. "What are you doing befriending seventh years in your first year and first years in your second?"

"Dad!" Reina gasped, scandalised at his rudeness.

Hermione's left eye twitched at the question.

"Frankly, Mr Rowle, I find that I am entirely too mature for most of the people my own age, who are intimated by the fact that I'm the brightest in my year. This, in addition to being Muggle-born rather off-puts most of the people with whom I might have otherwise been able to form a friendship. There are four other Gryffindor girls in my year. Two of them are positively perky and thrive on discussions pertaining to hair charms, nail polish and asinine gossip. The other two are tolerable, but I don't find myself close to them, likely due to their annoyance over the better grades I achieve.

"I do happen to have two friends in my own year, however, both of them are male, and therefore are currently not the most enthralling of companions should I wish to discuss something outside of Quidditch or whether I can be talked into doing their homework for them. As such, I relate better to adults than people my age. I have also been fortunate to make friends with Reina, in addition to Ginny Weasley, the younger sister of my friend in my year, Ronald Weasley."
Hermione noted the wizard's look of surprise at her blunt response—perhaps he expected her to blush and stutter, or maybe even cry. She caught the way Pandora and Thorfinn both smirked and looked at their plates, whilst Mrs. Rowle–Finn's mother, Rhonwen–turned her attention to their guest, some intrigue glittering in her eyes.

"So, you see, I find myself befriending people who differ from me in age and school year, but so far it's proved a most fascinating way of going about things. The differing perspectives I encounter by speaking to, and associating with, people outside my own age group offers a unique outlook on the world that I rather enjoy," Hermione said, her voice calm; she refused to rise to the bait of being told she was odd for not having friends in her own year.

Mr Rowle looked rather affronted by her words and her manners.

"It's wonderful to see you again, Hermione," Pandora spoke up after a few minutes of silence followed Hermione's words.

"It's delightful to see you, too, Madam Rowle." Hermione smile. "I've some questions about that text you sent me, when you've got some free time, if you are aren't so busy, as you've been today."

Pandora granted her a broad grin, obviously enjoying the harrumph of sound that escaped her son when he realised Hermione had been in contact with his mother in addition to both of his children.

"Of course, my dear. Perhaps tomorrow during the slow parts of the match we can dissect them?" Pandora offered.

"Oh, that would be delightful." Hermione's smile widened.

"Slow parts of the match?" Thorfinn piped up, appearing insulted.

"Oh don't get your wand in a knot, Thorfinn, darling," Pandora chided her grandson. "Let's not pretend that a game against the Cannons will actually be all that exciting. You'll likely thrash them within mere moments of beginning, and there won't even be time for slow parts, given how they've been playing."

"Have they been given new Firebolts as well, Finn?" Hermione asked, noting the way all of his family except for Reina and Pandora looked concerned by the name she used to address Thorfinn.

"Don't think so. They got the new Cleansweeps," Thorfinn answered. "Start of the season, see? So all of the broom companies are looking for the publicity they get from having the League teams riding their gear, because it makes people want to buy them. Cleansweep has been sponsoring the Cannons for a few years now. Firebolts are faster, though. The Bats have the best sponsors this year because we're the fan favourite for the Cup."

"You playing for Ireland and them doing so well is helping on that front," Reina piped up, grinning at her brother.

"A bit, yeah." Thorfinn shrugged modestly. "O'Malley and Jenkins are favourites for the International League this year, too, what with Fitzgibbon and Chisolm out this season. We're getting some pretty good publicity, and with the new brooms, it will look even better at tomorrow's match."

"Unless you lose," Hermione said, blunt as she pointed out the flawed assessment. "Then Firebolt is going to be rather put out with you lot, I suspect."

"Oh, yeah." Thorfinn chuckled. "Trying to launch their new line only to have us bomb on our
opening game for the season would probably ruin their business."

"Not entirely, given the perks of the broom. I can personally attest to their speed and manoeuvrability," Hermione argued.

"You took her flying on your new broom?" Mr Rowle demanded, interrupting the discussion.

Thorfinn nodded, having just forked a big mouthful of dinner into his gob and therefore rendering himself unable to reply.

"When? You've been with me since you got home," Mr Rowle said, his gaze narrowing suspiciously as he glanced between Thorfinn and Hermione.

"I picked her up before I stopped by the Cannons pitch to get the broom and do our fly-around today." Thorfinn shrugged after he'd swallowed his mouthful. "She was being a brat and I might've punished her by taking her flying."

"How is that a punishment?" Reina rolled her eyes.

"I don't like heights?" Hermione reminded the other girl. "I'm surprised Finn still has working eardrums, to be honest. I screamed most of the flight."

"Thorfinn!" Pandora scolded, swatting the wizard when he laughed at Hermione's expense. "You took her flying knowing she'd be terrified? You wretched boy!"

"She deserved it." Thorfinn laughed. "Sassed the whole team. Sassed me and didn't even have the decency to watch us practice!"

"It's hardly my fault that watching you fly around on an enchanted branch doesn't hold my interest, Thorfinn," Hermione said, though she was smiling a little bit, too. "Matches are different, obviously, but training? Trust me when I tell you that theories on the origin of magic wielding and the migration from group casting to singular casting with the invention of wands is far more enthralling than seven people playing with a few balls."

"A girl after my own heart," Pandora declared, smiling fondly at Hermione and making her husband, Titus, and her daughter-in-law, Rhonwen, laugh. "We really must compare notes on that topic, my dear. Have you read Gieshnam's theory pertaining to certain casters having a magical Affinity that better allows their magic to channel together for group casting?"

Hermione's attention sufficiently captured by the conversation at hand, she ignored the way Thorfinn and Reina's parents seemed intrigued by, and yet concerned over, the amount of knowledge she was able to call on to converse so excitedly with Pandora Rowle about magical theorems. She supposed she was being a bit rude, really, given that she was there to see Reina, yet she was utterly monopolising Pandora's time, but Hermione was too caught up in the discussion to notice much of anything.

Including the way Thorfinn Rowle watched her over the rim of his goblet while she enchanted his family so animatedly.

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Thorfinn found her, predictably, in the library. Curled up in one of the window seats that looked out over the lush fields beyond the Tower, she had a book on her lap and was engaged entirely in what she was reading. She didn't even look up when he entered the small library the Tower boasted and she didn't seem to notice, or mind, when he moved over to sit beside her.
"Where's Reina?" he asked, surprised his sister wasn't with her.

Watching the two of them interact throughout the afternoon had already convinced him that his sister was extremely fond of Hermione and that she was thrilled to have company for the holidays. His parents were intrigued by her, too, he could tell.

"Showering," Hermione replied without looking up. "She insisted on painting my toenails. I accidentally kicked her when she was shifting around and tickled me. Nail polish went everywhere."

"You have ticklish feet?" Thorfinn asked, a slight smirk on his lips.

"Mmm." She nodded, her eyes still on her book. "My in-step is especially sensitive. She did manage to avoid smearing the polish, even if she ended up wearing most of the bright red lacquer, so I suppose that's something."

"Bats colours?" Thorfinn's smirk grew when he glanced at her bare feet and saw that every second toe was painted red when the others were painted black.

"I'm told it's important to get into the spirit," Hermione said, slanting a smirk of her own in his direction. "She does it at Hogwarts too. She insists on painting mine and Ginny's toenails red and gold to support Gryffindor whenever they play."

"She's a bit of a Quidditch nut under the layer of ladylike behaviour drummed into her since birth," Thorfinn agreed with a fond smile as he thought of his baby sister.

"She loves it because of you, Finn." Hermione nodded. "She adores you, you know? In all honesty she doesn't even enjoy the actual game that much—she doesn't like flying any more than I do. She knows every rule, memorises the statistics for every team for the entire season, and gets extremely into supporting the Bats every time you play, even if we're stuck at school. The Weasley twins were on her case last year when she wore a Bats jersey to a Gryffindor match because you were playing the same day as Gryffindor. She knows it's your passion and so she makes sure it's her passion, too."

"You reckon? She could just be into it, Hermione," Thorfinn said, throwing his arm around her shoulders and pulling her closer into his side until she was leaning against him.

"She's more into the nail painting than whether the Wronski Feint is an effective game tactic against bludgers, but you'd never know it for the way she heatedly argues the topic with Ron and Harry. She loves it because you love it and she adores you, Thorfinn. She misses you when you're away."

"I know." Thorfinn nodded, more to himself than to her. "She's always idolised me, ever since we were kids."

"I think she'd like to see more of you," Hermione said in a serious voice. Her book still open on her lap, she twisted slightly on the seat, bringing her feet up to rest on the cushion beside her and reclining more fully against his side.

Thorfinn kind of liked the casual way she did it; until today he hadn't seen her since he'd left Hogwarts. The idea that even after all this time she was comfortable enough in his presence to relax against him made him smile inwardly as he curled his arm over her chest to rest intimately against her hip.

"There's not much I can do to see her more, Princess." He sighed at the truth in his own words. "I'd
"get home more if I could, but even when I can, she's away at Hogwarts most of the year."

"The Irish International team plays Bulgaria in Dublin over the Christmas break this year, don't they?" she asked.

"How do you know that?" Thorfinn arched a brow. "Keeping tabs on me, Kitten?"

"No. Reina's got the schedule memorised for every game you play this year," Hermione said. "She was telling me about it while she was painting my toes."

"Really is obsessed, isn't she?" Thorfinn chuckled.

"Only when you play," she informed him. "She was wondering whether or not your family would let her spend the Christmas break period with you in Ireland, rather than having her stay at school or return here. She said your parents attend a Yule celebration with the Malfoys, but that she'd rather spend the time with you and see you play than go there. She's having a bit of a hard time with the other pure-blood girls because they all have their noses out of joint over her being made a Gryffindor."

Thorfinn held in a sigh.

"I don't know if my folks will go for the idea." Despite his words, he was mulling it over in his head. "She's too young to stay on her own at my place when I've got practice, and we usually go out as a team after the game for a few pints. Dad would pitch a fit if he thought I was leaving her unsupervised in a foreign country."

"She'd hardly be unsupervised." Hermione rolled her eyes. "And she's an angel. The worst she could do would be to accidentally spill nail polish on your carpet."

"Or get bored in my flat and explore the city instead, potentially getting herself into mischief or getting caught unattended and end up in danger. I won't risk either of you," Thorfinn said quietly.

"Either of us?" she asked, twisting slightly and lifting her gaze from her book.

"You'd come too, Princess." He nodded, shrugging. "Can't have her getting in my hair at my flat or sitting by herself when I'm playing. Toshka would get his wand in a knot and likely hex her for bugging him."

"She's not a gnat," Hermione retorted. "She'll be almost thirteen by Christmas, Finn. She's not a child anymore. She doesn't just make a nuisance of herself or wander off and get into trouble because she doesn't recognise the dangers of certain circumstances. She doesn't need constant supervision."

"I'd argue that you'd keep her out of trouble if you were there, but knowing your track record for trouble when you're with Potter and the ginger lad, I'm not sure you know how to steer clear of mischief." Thorfinn was still miffed with her after she'd gotten herself petrified by that Basilisk at the end of school last year.

"I hardly do that on purpose." She rolled her eyes. "And the circumstances always make my involvement a necessity. I'm very rarely in all that much danger in those instances. I'm the brains. Harry and Ron do all the brave and dangerous stuff."

"You still get yourself petrified by Basilisks loose in the castle because you're not being cautious enough, Granger. You could have died. Do you realise that?"
"Do you imagine me stupid?" she asked hotly, "Of course I know I could have died."

"Then what were you doing mixing yourself up in that mess?"

"That mess?" She snapped her book closed and spun on the cushion to meet his serious gaze. "I encountered that wretched creature whilst peaking around corners in the hallway with a mirror on my way to the library, Rowle. I hardly went looking for it. I didn't do what Harry and Ron did, climbing down into the Chamber, itself. I was trying to research in the library and happened upon it by accident. I hardly see how I could have prevented it other than to have closed myself up in Gryffindor Tower like a terrified nitwit."

"And the incident with the Polyjuice potion and the cat hair?" Thorfinn demanded, forgetting himself as he blurted out the words in his fury over the messes she kept ending up—messes he wasn't supposed to know about, but did because Quincey kept him updated on her comings and goings every day.

"How do you know about that?" she asked, her cheeks turning red and her angry expression morphing to one of shock at his words.

"Reina told me," Thorfinn said, the lie smooth and immediate as it fell from his lips. "The point is you did something stupid that could have gotten you in some serious trouble, Granger. You're not using your fucking head for the right things. You're supposed to be logical and clever, not just book-smart and prone to making stupid mistakes. How could you mess up and pick up cat hair instead of human hair?"

"I plucked it off her robes!" Hermione protested, "How was I to know?"

"You should have confirmed it. If you wanted her hair that bad, pick a fight with her and snatch a handful of it from her head to confirm it. And I've seen the Bulstrode girl! She's got long hair. How did you mistake a short cat hair for one of hers?" Thorfinn seethed. "You're not thinking about things the right way, Baby-girl. Not thinking big enough, again. If you want to get even with someone, you dismantle their entire life. If you want to manipulate them, you find leverage and you use it against them. If you want to impersonate them, you make damn sure that you get their DNA; you don't just assume that you've got it. You could have gotten yourself stuck with that tail and whiskers for the rest of your life and been relegated to St Mungo's or some hovel, where you wouldn't have to interact with regular people or be seen coughing up fur-balls."

"Oh, I'm so sorry that I didn't go about the entire thing the way a Slytherin would have," she responded, her voice icy. "We're not all cold-hearted, calculating bastards like you, Thorfinn."

"Well, you better fucking learn to be if you're going to be friends with Potter for the rest of your bloody life, witch. You're going to need to be a lot more calculating and lot more careful about how you handle things with these continued resurgences of You Know Who and his followers. They're all targeting Potter. They want him dead and you're his best bloody friend. If you don't watch yourself, you won't even live out your years at Hogwarts."

"Oh, and just how do you propose I should go about that, Thorfinn?" she snarled the words at him, pulling out of his hold and getting to her feet to glare at him. Not that her standing when he was sitting actually gained her much height over him.

"Get yourself some Slytherin friends, little lion," Thorfinn said, narrowing his blue eyes on her and watching the way, from the corner of his gaze, the flames in the fireplace began to leap higher as his temper sparked.
"Oh yes, because that will be so easy with the likes of Malfoy swaggering around the castle referring to me as 'Potter's Mudblood,' or just 'that filthy little Mudblood.' His stupid goons, Crabbe and Goyle, are thicker than trolls, and Pansy Parkinson makes fun of me—she still pretends to be an over-excitable beaver every time she sees me. Yes, those types of people would be so open to the idea of being friends with me."

"So talk to the kid of Nott and his friend, Zabini." Thorfinn shrugged. "Talk to the girl of Greengrass in your year, or the Bulstrode witch. Find someone who can teach you how to be cunning, so that the next time you need to infiltrate the Slytherin common room you don't have to steal from Snape's stores and you don't have to spend months in the Hospital Wing when you fuck it up!"

"How do you even know about it all, Thorfinn?" Hermione stomped her foot as she glared at him, at a loss of what to say in response to his suggestion and not at all cowed by his growing temper.

"What? You thought that just because I don't go there anymore, I wouldn't keep tabs on you and on my sister?" he asked, raising one eyebrow in challenge. "Do you even understand what being sly means, Kitten? I've got eyes and ears inside that school, making sure that if things get too out of hand for you or my sister, you'll be seen to in some way or I'll be notified so I can fucking do something about it."

"You barely even tolerate me most of the time," she said, accusation in her tone. "Why would you bother keeping tabs on me?"

Thorfinn's eyes narrowed as his gaze held hers. They were hurtling toward dangerous territory, where he risked revealing more than he already had.

"If you can't figure that out, Hermione," he said in a cold voice, "then you better fashion a title for yourself other than brightest witch of your age, because it clearly doesn't apply."

Thorfinn got to his feet and stormed to the door, leaving her sputtering and visibly furious.

"Thorfinn!" she shouted, indignant and clearly not finished arguing with him.

Thorfinn didn't pause, or even look back.
"You're beginning to feel the strain of it, aren't you?" Antonin Dolohov asked knowingly as he watched the way Thorfinn Rowle paced up and down the length of their flat with a glass of fire-whiskey clenched in his fist and an angry expression marring his face.

Thorfinn ignored his best friend, pacing even as he downed the contents of his glass and strode to the counter to pour himself another.

"It's only going to get worse," Antonin warned. Thorfinn threw back another mouthful of whiskey, shuddering at the burn in his throat. "The more jewellery items you send her to renew the bond from your end, and the less time you spend with her, the more unhinged you're going to feel. You can feel it now, can't you? That gnawing in your gut that makes you want to seek her out; that wretched voice in the back of your head telling you that the bond is waning from her end; that it's going to break if you don't do something about it."

"Shut up about it, Toshka," Thorfinn growled. He slanted a glare at Antonin for the entirely too-accurate description of what he felt right then; he was all too aware of the sensation thanks to his witch having just donned the pair of earrings he'd anonymously sent her.

"Have you set anything on fire yet?" Antonin asked, ignoring the directive.

"I set shit on fire all the fucking time!" Thorfinn snapped before downing his drink in one long gulp only to reach for the bottle, discarding his glass altogether.

Antonin had the gall to smirk at his words and Thorfinn thought seriously about hexing the bastard.

"You should've have listened to me and broken the bond with her like I told you when we were still at school," Toshka sneered.

"She accepted the earrings," Thorfinn told him. He scratched idly at his chest where he knew their bond originated, linking them together. "She's wearing them now."

"I heard Quincey." Antonin nodded. "Did you get her to put more beads in your hair when she was at the Tower?"

Thorfinn shook his head and looked away with a scowl. "She's not talking to me after the fight we had."

"You told her you were keeping tabs on her. What did you expect?" Antonin retorted. "If you'd told me that you were keeping tabs on my before stomping off like a bloody sod, I wouldn't be talking to you either."

"You'd have hexed me in the back while I went," Thorfinn corrected. Antonin grinned cruelly, not bothering to deny the correct accusation. "She's still not speaking to me, and she hasn't opened the gift that's signed as being from me."

"I know." Antonin nodded again. "It's only going to get worse from here on out, you know?"

"What the fuck am I supposed to do, Toshka?" Thorfinn shouted at his friend, spinning on him viciously. "You know I can't fuckin' break it off now!"
"Why the fuck not?" Antonin retorted, narrowing his eyes on him. Thorfinn thought seriously about punching the cunt right in his face, his temper felt so volatile. "So what if you bought every fucking property her entire fucking family owns, Thor! Just keep them as investment properties or sell them on. It's not as though you don't own other buildings as investments. Do you want to end up like me? Hollowly seeking out and fucking just about anyone else because even though Tatiana never reciprocated, and I severed out bond, I still fucking ache for her? Do you want to end up three parts nuts, bordering on psychotic with no proper sense between wrong and right anymore?"

Thorfinn blinked in shock at his friends words when Antonin stared him down coldly from across the room.

"How the fuck would trying to sever it now help, Toshka?" Thorfinn asked. "Yours was never reciprocated and you're still wretchedly effected by it every fucking day! Mine's been reciprocated, the little bitch is well under my skin and it's only going to get worse from here on out."

"The sooner you sever it, the less hold it will have!" Antonin argued.

"Magic doesn't work like that and you know it!" Thorfinn growled, swigging from his bottle of whiskey distractedly as he resumed his pacing. "In any case, even I could live with severing it now and be a fuckin' head-case like you, I won't be able to."

"Why the fuck not?" Antonin demanded. "If this is about the properties again, I swear to Merlin, I'll fucking hex you, Thor."

Thorfinn chugged back several long swigs of whiskey whilst glaring at his friend.

"Ames Entraclees," Thorfinn told him stoically when the bottle was empty. "Corpora Habebant."

Antonin's face went white at the words – the dark spells – rolling off Thorfinn's tongue.

"Tell me you're joking?" he asked, his voice dropping and his furious expression slipping from his face to leave horror behind.

Thorfinn shook his head.

"Even went as far as Filii Lien," Thorfinn admitted grimly.

Silence prevailed as Antonin absorbed that information, his dark eyes wide as he stared at Thorfinn. He looked beyond horrified now. He began shaking his head slowly from side to side, as though he couldn't believe it. As though he couldn't stand it.

"FUCK!" Antonin suddenly shouted, making Thorfinn jump in surprise.

Thorfinn nodded slowly, knowing that the response was warranted.

"Fucking hell, Thorfinn! Why? When? Tell me you're joking? What the fuck would possibly possess you to…" Antonin frowned before crossing the small space between them and gripping Thorfinn's upper arms tightly, shaking him as though he were a rag-doll.

"They're only on my end," Thorfinn admitted quietly, the effects of the booze beginning to kick in and mellowing him slightly. "I had to. I… you told me that she was going to fuck around on me. That it would drive me mad. That she'd hate me by the end and probably try to murder me."

Antonin punched him. Balling his fist, the Russian wizard reared back and slugged Thorfinn hard across the face; as hard as he could.
"You stupid fucking cunt!" Toshka shouted while blood spurted from Thorfinn's nose. "Do you know what you've done?"

"It's only on my end," Thorfinn said in self-defence, feeling hot blood rush down over his lips and begin to drip from his chin. "They're only from my end. If it comes to it, I could…"

"Yeah, because you're going to be able to bloody manage that?" Antonin scoffed, looking disgusted with him. "You could no sooner kill that fucking little mudblood bitch than kill Reina or me. You… You don't know what you've fucking done, Thor. This is… you've got no chance of being free of her now. Not unless you kill her. And if you somehow do manage it, the effect that tearing your bond out will have now…. Fuck! No wonder the bond between the two of you was so strong when we examined it last year."

"I hadn't done it then." Thorfinn admitted shaking his head from side to side, too intoxicated to mind the blood running over his lips to drip onto the floor. "I hadn't… I didn't do it until she was petrified last year by that fucking monster… until she…"

"She almost died and you fucking panicked," Antonin cursed, stumbling back a step and running a hand through his hair as he tried to come to grips with this wretched new development. "Bloody hell, Thorfinn, you're supposed to have your head screwed on right. You're supposed to be the one who pulls me into line… this is… when that little witch starts fucking people, you're going to… Merlin, Thor. You're going to kill someone. I thought you might already, with how you care for the little bitch but if you've done all that…"

"They're not supposed to effect that shit," Thorfinn protested. "Not when she hasn't performed them, too. They're just supposed to make it so that she can't… She'll be tied to me, but everything I read on it said that I've got to cement it by fucking her."

"You do," Antonin nodded. Thorfinn watched the way Antonin's mind practically lit up as he focused his brilliance on the magic he'd done and the effects it should have, rather than his sudden rage and panic.

He took a deep breath and Thorfinn took one with him. He'd been sitting on the information for months that he'd done these reprehensible spells to further link himself to his witch. He hadn't been able to find much on them other than how to make them work and how best to further activate them.

"Which I obviously haven't done," Thorfinn went on when Antonin paced in silence. "And I've only done the spells from my end…"

"It won't help to keep you from killing anyone. You already would have, I imagine, but this will exacerbate it," Antonin told him seriously. "You've really fucked yourself over with this, mate."

"I know." Thorfinn nodded. "I panicked and stopped thinking when I was standing there looking at her in that hospital bed."

"You went to the school while she was petrified?" Antonin asked, his brow furrowing.

"I made Quincey take me," Thorfinn admitted. "After that bullshit when I lost it and fucked that bitch in the alley, I couldn't take it. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't focus at all. I was messing up at training. I had to do something other than fucking every witch that moved."

"So you went and performed blood magic," Antonin muttered. "Yeah, that makes sense. Where the fuck was your head? You acted like a bloody Gryffindor, Thor!"
"I know. Fuck! I fucking know. I fucked up bad and now the little bitch isn't even talking to me unless she has to be polite for the sake of appearances."

"Over you keeping tabs on her?"

"Over me ignoring her when she wasn't finished being pissy with me for it," Thorfinn corrected him. "I went to bed after the fight and I was at the pitch for my match before everyone else was up for breakfast back at the Tower the day after the fight. Played the game, won the game, took a bludger to the head and went out drinking with the team to celebrate the win and liaise with the sponsors afterwards. When I got back to the Tower the next day she was pretty frosty with me and I had to be back here for training that afternoon. I didn't get a chance to talk to her without making a scene and letting on that we'd had a fight."

"Who cares about a scene? Reina and your Gran both know you're betrothed to the witch." Antonin frowned at him.

"But Dad doesn't. Mum suspects, I think, after I let Hermione call me Finn at dinner with them all, but she didn't ask me about it." Thorfinn shrugged his shoulders before reaching for his nose to try and stem the bleeding that didn't seem to be stopping on its own.

"Fuck. So you've not spoken to her since that incident? No wonder you're pacing the floor like a caged lion," Antonin muttered. "And you haven't had her strengthen the bond on her end by putting more beads in your hair. Did you at least get your hands on her? Physical contact and frequent time spent in one another's presence will strengthen the bond."

"Couple of hugs when she saw me and when I Side-Along apparated her," Thorfinn shrugged again. "And she clung on for dear life when she was terrified after I took her flying, forgetting her fear of heights. She admitted to having bursts of accidental magic a lot too, which I'm thinking happen when I fuck around."

"They do," Antonin nodded. "Nothing else? You didn't kiss her or anything?"

Thorfinn shook his head. "Cuddled a bit in the library just before the fight. And the hug after I took her flying strengthened it, a bit. I could feel it. But it wasn't enough to last the entire year without making me lose it."

"Especially not with what Quincey reports she's up to." Antonin nodded grimly. "How are you going to fix it?"

"What would you do?" Thorfinn asked.

"Kill her and sever the connection," Antonin answered truthfully and Thorfinn didn't doubt that was the truth.

"Did you kill Tatiana?" Thorfinn asked the man quietly.

"Why would you think that?" Antonin asked, evading the question.

"You said your bond to her is severed. That you told her how to remove the jewellery and that having her remove it and reject the bond would sever it," Thorfinn told him. "You also said that you still ache for her. And I know you're selfish enough to do whatever you can to end your own suffering. Since I don't see a Russian witch in your bed, I'm assuming she's not available."

Antonin looked away from him, his fists clenching. Thorfinn felt a surge of concern for his friend over the idea that he might be a murderer.
"I didn't kill her," Antonin admitted quietly. "She's with someone else now. Never having reciprocated, she only gets the very faintest of impressions back from the bond to me. She bonded to someone else while you were away."

"Is that why the place was trashed when I got home?" Thorfinn asked. "You told me you'd fucked some witch bow-legged all over the house."

Antonin nodded grimly, not looking at him, never one for admitting his emotions.

"I did fuck someone. Some witch by the name of Carrow nearly twice our age who works with the Goblins at Gringotts. Thick as a troll, that one, and barmy as fuck, but she took it hard and didn't even flinch when I….

"You hurt her?" Thorfinn asked quietly, his concern growing even more when Antonin looked away, regret and guilt flashing in his eyes.

Antonin nodded again, grimly, his eyes and his fists clenching as though he knew he was fucked up and knew it was going to catch up with him in the end.

"I nearly broke her, but she didn't complain. Slammed her into shit, bit her, ravaged her entire body and she just moaned for more. She's been stalking me at work. Keeps popping in unannounced and flirting with me…" Antonin admitted, "I… fuck, Thor… I'm fucked up."

"What did you do?" Thorfinn asked, moving towards his friend who was still tensed as though awaiting some kind of blow.

"I want to murder the fucker," Antonin admitted, opening his eyes. "Tatiana's wizard. I want to kill him so badly that it wakes me up in the middle of the night. The bond between us is severed, but almost ten years of connection means that no matter how brutally it's slashed, echoes of emotion still travel through when they're strong enough. I know she's fucking him. I know she fucking loves him… And I know she sure as fuck doesn't want me."

"How?" Thorfinn asked. "How do you know?"

"I asked her," Antonin admitted. "I… on my last trip to Russia for the goblins I stopped by to see her. I couldn't help it. She's terrified of me, Thor. She could barely bring herself to even look at me and she couldn't stop shaking in terror. I don't know what her old man told her before he croaked but whatever she knows about the Dolohov family – about me - is fucked up because she was looking at me like I might murder her at any moment."

Thorfinn clenched his own fists at the idea. He couldn't imagine the idea of his witch ever actually fearing him. Even when he got cranky, she didn't recoil in fear.

"I wanted to do it…" Antonin whispered. "She told me she'd found someone else; that she was going to be bonded to him. She's… Thor, she's going to marry him. And when she told me, for just a minute, I wanted to kill her too."

A chill slid down his spine as Thorfinn watched his best friend open his eyes. For the first time that Thorfinn could remember, there was fear glittering in Antonin Dolohov's eyes. Fear for himself and the idea that he might be losing his mind and losing his humanity as a result of his severed bond. Fear for Thorfinn and how much more fucked over he was because of the stupid things he'd done to completely tie Granger to him. Fear of what they were both going to become.

"We don't have any more whiskey," Thorfinn told his friend quietly. "Let me clean up my face; we'll head out."
"You've got a game tomorrow," Antonin reminded him.

"I'm not going to get any sleep tonight; not with what my witch is up to," Thorfinn retorted, shrugging. "I reckon she'll knock it off when a surge of jealous rage runs through her, though. And you need to bury your cock in some witch who isn't bonkers."

Antonin nodded his head, his fists still clenched and his jaw tight.

"You're fucked, you know?" he told him as they were leaving their flat to head for the pub down the road.

"Yeah, I know," Thorfinn admitted. "At least, I am until she's old enough that I can claim her without seeming like a rapey cunt."

"Even then, you're probably fucked, Thor. She's Potter's girl. And the shit coming that Dad's been on about? No way is she getting through that unscathed." Antonin warned him as Thorfinn strode into the bathroom and mopped at his face, realising idly that his nose was broken before healing it with his wand. "And since you're the one who's been keeping me in line and anchoring me to keep me from losing my mind, I reckon that means I'm fucked, too."

Thorfinn didn't say so, but he kind of agreed.

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Hermione Granger nibbled her lip as she eyed the boy sitting hunched over an essay in the very back corner of the library. She hadn't spoken directly to him since first year just before catching Rowle and Dolohov at their end of school prank. Indeed, she'd hexed him the last time they'd exchanged words. She didn't imagine that Theodore Nott was going to be overly thrilled by the idea of speaking to her. But Thorfinn had made a good point - no matter that he was also an obnoxious arse without even the decency to explain himself and tell her just who it was he had spying on her and making sure she was 'safe'.

That idea annoyed her more than it had any right to. The idea of being looked out for in a world where she was despised by some simply because of her genetic coding was a rather nice one. The idea that Thorfinn Rowle was somehow being kept up to speed on her comings and goings made her nervous and she didn't know why. She didn't have to be a rocket-scientist to have figured out that she fancied the stupid git and that, though he was currently too old for her, she was certain she would always fancy the big, blond idiot.

She couldn't explain it and she honestly didn't care to try. She was aware of his aesthetic appeal, of course, and of the fact that, infuriating though he might be, he was funny and witty and acerbic to the point of cruelty at times, but she enjoyed sparring verbally with him. Flirting, Reina had called it. The girl seemed to recognise that Hermione had a crush on Thorfinn but she'd voiced no objections to the notion. And despite Hermione not currently talking to the stupid Viking of a wizard, he'd made a good point when he'd said she needed to learn to be a little more Slytherin about certain things. She'd been making stupid mistakes like the cat hair incident and she didn't want to make more of them.

That, and she had a list of tasks that needed to be complete before the end of her schooling career and though she'd managed to smash through all of those pertaining to breaking certain amounts of rules, Hermione had yet to tick off any of the others. She might have just turned fourteen, but there was no reason she couldn't begin getting things like the snogging out of the way and, though she wasn't yet of an age where she would be comfortable considering anything more sexual than that, she was going to need someone to help her with those things eventually. Someone, preferably, who
had to keep his mouth shut about it. She didn't want to go getting a name for herself as some sort of slag.

Cue, Theodore Nott.

One of the least obnoxious Slytherin boys in her year, he met the required criteria for what she needed on three fronts. The first was that he wasn't as obnoxious and wretched as the likes of Malfoy and his cronies. The second was that he was a Slytherin and was, therefore, useful to her in the endeavour to learn how to be a little less scrupulous about certain things, whilst also being able to teach her how to think bigger picture in her planning of things to avoid the types of disasters she'd encountered thus far. Rather than having contingency plans and backup plans to handle things when they did eventually go wrong, Hermione was thinking Nott could teach her how to more critically analyse things so that they were already foreseen dangers and thus less contingency plans would be required.

The third and most coveted appeal of the boy was that, like her, he was bound by the Rites of Passage magic not to discuss those Rites with anyone not also initiated into them. And Thorfinn had assured her that all first year Slytherin boys were initiated. Meaning that while he would be able to tell the likes of Malfoy, Zabini, Crabbe and Goyle, he would not be able to tell anyone else, and neither would they.

"Are you going to continue to ogle me, Granger, or did you have something to say to me?" the slightly reedy voice of Theodore Nott interrupted her musing as she gathered her courage to approach him. Hermione blinked stupidly for a moment.

"I was waiting for you to finish your train of thought with your essay before interrupting," she offered weakly, though she suspected from the way he looked up at her over a pair of horn-rimmed reading glasses, scepticism etched in every line of his face, that he didn't believe her.

"What do you want?" he asked snidely. "Come to hit me with another Stinging Hex?"

"No," Hermione said, crossing the small distance to his desk and sitting down opposite. "Though the circumstances pertaining to what you were trying to prevent me from seeing that night are the topic I wanted to broach with you?"

"You want to talk about me playing lookout for some seventh years when I was a firstie?" he asked.

"I want to talk about the fact that they were enacting their senior year prank for the Rites," Hermione corrected, watching the way the boy stilled for several heartbeats but showed no other reaction to her words that would give away his knowledge of what she spoke of.

"Rites?" he feigned ignorance.

"Don't play coy with me, Theodore," Hermione leaned in and whispered to him. "I know about the Rites and can talk about it because I've been initiated too. Finn figured that the only way to keep me quite after I interrupted them was to initiate the magic to bind me from discussing what I'd seen with anyone not also initiated."

"You've done the blood magic to activate the Rites? You? Hermione - I've got a stick up my arse, I love rules - Granger?"

Hermione rolled her eyes at the boy before producing her scroll from her pocket and sliding it across the table towards him. He obviously recognised the make of the parchment and when he
unfurled it, his brow furrowed.

"You've already ticked off almost half of them," he pointed out. "How? You're the biggest goody-two-shoes I know."

"I'm really not," Hermione replied. "I simply appear that way because I get good grades, I try hard in class, and because I can better get away with breaking big rules when I'm seen to pander to the little rules."

"Very Slytherin of you," he commented, eyeing her over the top of his reading glasses for a long moment. "Did you have a point for sharing this information with me?"

"Yes," Hermione nodded, taking her scroll back from him and rolling it back up. "It has come to my attention that eventually, I'm going to need help to achieve some of these tasks. And while I feel certain that I could convince my friends to assist me with things like pranks and other such rule-breaking, there are some things that I'd prefer to have bound to silence magically."

Theo smirked at her wickedly.

"What's the matter Granger? Don't trust Weasley not to blab if you were to shag him in the library?"

"I don't think Ron would survive having me suggest such a thing," Hermione retorted. "He'd have a fit or die of utter shock."

When the dark haired boy laughed cruelly at her words, Hermione watched him intently. She didn't like the idea of giving him power over her by having her at his mercy for assistance in such things but it was important to her that she achieve everything on the list, if only to spite Thorfinn Rowle. That, and she didn't much fancy the idea of breaking her blood oath.

"And so you've come to me?" he mused, still eyeing her speculatively. "Why? You don't actually need a Slytherin for any of the tasks you've got left. The only one you needed a Slytherin for was for the snogging of someone from each of the four houses. And you've already ticked my house off your list."

"You haven't ticked Gryffindor off yours," Hermione replied.

"Seem awfully certain about that, don't you?" he asked, quirking one eyebrow and removing his glasses to stare at her speculatively.

He had a very direct stare that rather unnerved her when he turned his full attention to her. Indeed, he reminded her a little of Dolohov and the way he'd stared, though when Theo did it, Hermione didn't feel like he was plotting her imminent doom. At least, not yet.

"You underestimate the gossiping nature of Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil if you think you can actually convince me you've snogged a Gryffindor girl, Theodore. I guarantee that if you had, I would know about it."

"They are awful busy-bodies who stick their noses everywhere they aren't wanted," Theo said, his brow furrowing slightly. "But my current lack of experience with snogging Gryffindor witches aside, why would you ask me to help you, Granger? You don't need a Slytherin for anything and while Weasley is likely too thick to help you out, there are certainly other boys in our year or some of the older years who would be willing to assist you."

"None bound to keep quiet about it," she pointed out. "I also find myself requiring the influence of
a Slytherin boy to further my understanding of the way certain wizards think."

"Wasn't Thorfinn handling that particular task?" Theodore asked, raising one eyebrow at her challengingly now. "Given that you're currently wearing his Quidditch jersey, I assume you are still in contact with him."

"I am." Hermione nodded. "You may notice, however, that he is currently a long way from Hogwarts."

"Is this your odd way of asking me to be your friend, Granger?" Theo asked, his brow furrowing slightly. "I won't be a stand in for Rowle. Not without some kind of explanation over just what there is between you and him. I'm not stupid enough to get on Thorfinn Rowle's bad side."

"He's my friend," Hermione shrugged her shoulders. "He's the elder brother of my best friend."

"Thought Potter was you best friend?" Theo frowned.

"Harry's one of my best friends. Reina is my best friend," Hermione waved her hand idly.

"In any case, there is obviously something between you and Thor, Granger. What do you need of my help with on these things? Given that you parade around bearing evidence of you betrothal to him, I'm not about to sign up to lay a finger on you. He'd kill me, and be well within his rights to do so, too."

"Betrothal to him?" Hermione choked out, her brow furrowing.

"Come now, Granger, don't play coy. You're dripping in silver trinkets and you almost always have something bearing his name draped around you. You might as well stamp 'Property of Thorfinn Rowle' across your forehead – and you're arse too, because I'm thinking that if anyone lays a finger on it, they're dead." Theo clucked his tongue, frowning at her further.

"I'm not betrothed to Finn," Hermione argued, similarly frowning. "I'm friends with him. And I like to wear the jerseys he sends me because they're comfortable and they smell good... Um, I mean..... I just... like supporting my friend in his career."

Theo smirked wickedly at the way her cheeks bloomed pink at her slip of the tongue.

"You fancy him and he's too old for you when you're still such a young age," Theo corrected her slyly. "Not that your age stopped him from snogging you when you were still a first year."

"That was one time and it was because he hadn't finished his tasks on his scroll yet. Graduation was the following day, and I was cussing him about what the tattoo would look like when the Rites are complete." Hermione shrugged. "I never said anything about fancying the big idiot. He sends me the jerseys. The jewellery isn't from him. Well, this bracelet is. But it's not a representation of a betrothal bond. It's just a way of his thanking me for some things I did in first year that helped him out. He assured me that there was no intent to form a betrothal bond with me when he gave it to me."

"And the earrings?" Theo asked. "Or the anklet?"

"How do you know about my anklet?" Hermione frowned at him.

"Do you imagine that Slytherin students or those of us from pureblood families who keep to the old ways don't pay attention to the types of trinkets a witch or wizard might wear, Granger?" Theo asked her. "We pay attention to that sort of thing to avoid offending anyone. It's been a matter of
some interest to many of us just who has been giving you the jewellery. When you started wearing that bracelet at the end of first year, we all wondered but then you were sent Rowle's jersey and started wearing an anklet the same day. We figured he'd claimed you."

"Claimed me?" Hermione scoffed. "He barely tolerates me. I've seen him once since the end of first year - which was at Reina's place over the summer while he was home for the Cannons game. We're not betrothed. We're just friends. The anklet isn't from him. Neither are the earrings."

"Who are they from, then?" Theo asked, his brow furrowing.

"I don't know. An admirer? They're never signed when they're sent to me, but the last two years on my birthday, they've arrived."

"And you're wearing them? Without concern that they might be cursed or might be being used to instigate or strengthen a betrothal bond with you?" he asked, alarmed. "Bloody hell, Granger. You need a Slytherin friend to keep you from ending up in hot water over your own ignorance because of your birth."

"You all thought I was betrothed to Thorfinn?" Hermione asked, feeling a strange swooping sensation in her stomach at the very idea. Last year the notion, when mentioned to her by Reina, had terrified her. This year it still terrified her, but this time it was an excited sort of terror, like the agonising wait before a plummet on a rollercoaster.

"Yes," Theo nodded, "It's why Draco's such a prat to you. He was devastated when he spotted that bracelet on your wrist."

"Why would he be devastated?" Hermione asked blankly, blinking stupidly at Theo for several minutes.

Malfoy? Devastated at the idea of her being betrothed? Surely Theo was having her on?

"Oh, bloody hell, Granger. For a smart girl, you're awfully thick sometimes," Theo told her seriously. "Draco fancied you from the minute he first laid eyes on you when you were sticking that big bushy head into our compartment on the train, asking after Longbottom's toad."

"He has not," Hermione rolled her eyes. "He loathes me. He goes out his way to insult me and call me a Mudblood."

"He thought you were betrothed and had to bury his feelings when his father caught him moping over a mudblood after you were given that bracelet. He'd been nattering on to his parents all through first year about the girl he fancied, refusing to tell them your name because he wanted them to have the chance to meet you before they found out your parents were muggles. When you started wearing the bracelet, he thought you'd gotten yourself betrothed to someone - Rowle - and bitched to his father about it all, including your being muggleborn. Lucius was, as expected, furious to find Draco wanted a mudblood and even more furious because he'd likely have been convinced - based on your magical brilliance - to overlook the unfortunate circumstances of your birth in order to give Draco what he wanted - because he always gets what he wants."

"Now you're just being ridiculous." Hermione rolled her eyes at him.

"I'm not." Theo shook his head. "He even dug into your family genealogy and found out that you're distantly related to the Dolohovs and the French Malfoys. He's been wretched to you since because you had the audacity to agree to marry someone else."

Hermione blinked stupidly for several long minutes, trying to process his words. She felt unable to
comprehend his words; unable to rationalise what he was telling her in any way that made sense within her mind.

"Did you just say I'm related to the Dolohovs?" Hermione asked, horrified.

"Oh. You didn't know that? Figured with the way you and Dolohov snarled at one another before he graduated, and then when he sent you that Temnyy Klinok Smerti that you knew you're related to him. You and Antonin Dolohov are fourth cousins, once removed. When he sent you the blade, we all assumed he was also laying claim to you on behalf of House Dolohov to give you a wizarding familial bond to sanctify your betrothal to Rowle."

"You're telling me I'm related to Antonin Dolohov?" she repeated, feeling like her whole world had just been jolted and bounced right off its axis.

"You really didn't know?" Theo frowned at her. "You have muggle family who are Russian, right? You're great-great grandmother was a squib of the Dolohov line. Blasted off the tree, of course, but of a magical family nonetheless - one of the most prominent magical families in Russia, actually. And your paternal grandmother's maiden name was Malfoy, of the French line. You're fourth cousins with Antonin, and very distantly related to Draco too. Very distantly, mind you. The French Malfoy and English Malfoy lines diverged centuries ago so you'd be like, twelfth or thirteenth cousins, a few times removed, to Draco. How do you not know this? You're always spouting about how muggleborns have magical blood in their family history. There's likely some on your mother's side too, to activate the magic in you strongly enough to manifest, but they were harder to track down, I'm told. In any case, Draco was convinced for a while that you being descendant of the French Malfoy and the Dolohovs lines would be enough to get Lucius to overlook your mudblood status and let him have you."

Hermione was reeling. Theo peered at her for a moment and then smirked cruelly again.

"If you're not betrothed, Draco will likely be put out with me if you and I come to some sort of arrangement to see the Rites completed, Granger," Theo told her seriously. "He's so wretched to you because he was under the impression that you fancied him back but then he spotted you hanging out with Thor and wearing that bracelet and Thor's jerseys. He's wretched to you because he thinks you led him on and betrayed him. It's why he argues so hard that you're a mudblood. He shoves it in everyone's faces because he's embarrassed over how much time and effort he spent tracking down your bloodline and your magical ancestors."

Shaking her head from side to side, Hermione was certain she might have a heart attack at the very idea of all this.

"Why would Toshka send me the blade as a means of claiming me as family?" Hermione asked, frowning at Theo and choosing not to comment of Draco Malfoy and his supposed infatuation with her at all. "Why would he need to claim me and provide magical backing to sanctify a betrothal between me and Thorfinn - me and anyone magical?"

"You call him Toshka?" Theo asked, his eyes widening. "Does he know that you call him that?"

"Not to his face," Hermione rolled his eyes. "He hates me. It's just a bad habit because Finn calls him that in his letters and when he talks about him."

"Oh. Well, in the wizarding world - according to the traditionalists - in order for a witch or wizard to bond with a pureblood in marriage, they have to be claimed first by blood relatives of their line. It's why blasting people off the family tree was so big for a bit. If you get blasted off the tree, you can't marry another pureblood or anyone whose family keeps to the traditions because the
protection of that House wouldn't apply to that member any longer. It was originally implemented to keep us all in line and make us do what our families wanted. Marry this person or you're disowned. Take this blood oath or you're disowned. You get the picture. Someone magically disowned loses their House and its protections, loses access to the family vaults, and has their familial bond severed. In some instances it can drive a wizard mad. In others it just depletes their magic a lot. Makes them more likely to throw Squibs if they procreate. When people hurl around insults like Blood Traitor, they're not just referring to them turning on the idea of being prejudice about blood purity. They're also turning their back on all the old ideals that magical folk, as a society, have kept to since the Dark Ages. You'll never see someone like Weasley threatened with disownment because their family don't keep the old customs."

"So Dolohov sending me the knife indicates that he's laid claim to me as belonging to House Dolohov? Thereby allowing me to marry any pureblood, despite my blood status and my muggle parents, without any repercussions that would see someone thrown off the family tree?" Hermione clarified.

"Essentially," Theo nodded. "Not that the Rowles would be too concerned with it since Thor's grandmother is a mudblood, but you get the idea. Families like mine or Draco's, for instance, would refuse to accept you at all if you weren't claimed by a Noble House. Antonin did you an enormous favour, Granger."

"By making it so that I could marry into a prejudice and twisted family?" Hermione scoffed. "I hardly see that as a favour, Theodore. I can't think of anything worse than marrying into a family like yours."

"What are you doing propositioning me toward the idea of sex then?" he asked raising one eyebrow, though he didn't look offended by her statement. "And don't deny that you are, because we both know it. You don't need help pranking or getting into mischief when you've got Weasley and Potter to help you. You need someone magically bound to keep his mouth shut when you start shagging around, sure, but nothing else. Thus, I reiterate my original question from before you side-tracked the conversation. Why me?"

Hermione's cheeks turned pink at his blunt and direct way of putting it.

"You're the least wretched of the choices for those who would be bound to silence," Hermione informed him coolly. "Everyone else in our year is horrid, thicker than a troll or gives me a pinched, haughty look as though I'm something inside a specimen jar."

"Blaise is rather gifted with his haughty looks." Theo smirked, chuckling at her words.

"So you see, here I am, approaching you about such things."

"You realise the older years would also be options, right? You don't have to limit yourself to our year."

Hermione paused, tipping her head to one side thoughtfully.

"I hadn't considered that," she admitted.

"Obviously," he drawled, sounding a little too much like Professor Snape for Hermione's peace of mind. "Though I find myself less than inclined to assist you when you've just informed me you're only picking me because I'm the least offensive option."

"Were you hoping for a declaration of love?" Hermione retorted, sarcastically.
"You need to learn how to play with Slytherins, Granger. We're all about subtlety, flattery and never revealing our entire hand," he informed her, slyly. "You've also yet to inform me what's in it for me."

"You mean other than ticking off the same things on your list without the effort of seducing uncooperative witches into bed with you?" Hermione bit out, narrowing her eyes on him.

"Don't make the mistake of thinking that would be a hardship for me, Granger. Even if I did agree to something with you, I'd still seduce you into things every time anything happened. Seduction is half the fun. Watching another person fall for my charm, surrender to my will and sacrifice themselves for my happiness is the real reward."

"You're very odd, Theodore Nott," Hermione said, eyeing him curiously.

"I know," he smirked. "It's part of my charm."

"Is it?"

His grin turned wicked. "It's already working on you. You wouldn't have asked me in the first place if there wasn't something about me that intrigues you."

Hermione supposed that he had a point. Scanning her eyes over him carefully she nodded to in agreement.

"I like your hair," she admitted quietly. "And I like that little half-smirk you do when you outsmart Crabbe and Goyle by using big words."

"Been spying on me, then?" he challenged.

"Yes," Hermione admitted boldly, making him snort in amusement.

"It's going to take me a while to acclimatise to how blunt Gryffindors can be," he informed her. "So what, exactly, is it that you're asking me, Granger? You want me to be the bloke you plan on shagging around? You're too young yet."

"I'm older than you," she frowned at him.

"By two weeks," he rolled his eyes. "That's not the point though, is it? We're both fourteen. Even in the wizarding world, that's a bit young for shagging around. Hence, the question. What do you want from me? Are you expecting me to be your boyfriend? Someone to buy you chocolates and flowers and books at Hogsmeade weekends?"

"Circe, no!" Hermione wrinkled her nose at him in disgust at the very idea. "Flowers make me sneeze."

Theodore laughed out loud at her response.

"No flowers. then."

"I don't want a boyfriend," she informed him, thinking about it carefully. "I might like the shape of your hands, but I don't currently fancy you, Theo. I merely meant to ask if you'd be amenable to being my friend - and, at some later date - interested in dealing with the sexual tasks of the Rites with me."

She shrugged her slim shoulders at him, her expression sincere. Theo eyed her carefully, his dark
green eyes assessing her carefully, searching her face for hidden meaning or some hint at a hidden agenda.

"You're sort of odd too, you know?" he said finally, "Most fourteen year old girls don't bluntly proposition a man for sex they plan to have in the not-so-immediate future. They tend to stammer, blush, stutter or giggle over the very idea of anything more scandalous than hand-holding."

"It's taken you until now to realise I'm not most girls?" Hermione asked him, raising her eyebrows in challenge.

"No," he admitted. "I just never imagined the day would come that you – of all people - would be asking me to shag you."

"I didn't actually ask that," Hermione pointed out, her cheeks turning pink.

"You implied it. You intended it," he retorted, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back in his chair to watch her with that rather direct and unnerving stare of his. Hermione met his gaze unflinchingly, refusing to let him intimidate her. She could stare down the likes of Thorfinn Rowle and his father – men who could easily snap her like a twig if they wanted. Theodore Nott was far removed for the hulking, overbearingly muscled stature of such men. He didn't scare her. Much.

"What, exactly, do you want from me?" he asked her seriously, continuing to eye her when she didn't fidget or squirm under his stare – something she expected he was unaccustomed to if the way he pursed his lips was any indication.

"I want you to teach me how to think the way Slytherins think," Hermione informed him. "And to teach me all the things I can't learn from books pertaining to wizarding customs that go undocumented or forgotten as time passes – things the Noble Houses still practice."

"You don't want chocolate and hand-holding in the corridors and dates to Hogsmeade?" he confirmed, cocking his head ever so slightly.

"When I'm looking for a boyfriend, Theo, I'll ask someone who makes me laugh," she replied evenly.

"I could make you laugh," he replied. "I'm funny, you know?"

"Somehow, I doubt that," Hermione told him. "I think your humour is a bit too cruel to truly be considered funny outside of those people who share your sardonic outlook on life and those who laugh as a result of their own twisted tendencies."

"Blunt, aren't you?" he said, that little half-smirk he so often wore when tormenting Malfoy's cronies slipping across his face as he continued to eye her.

"Yes," Hermione nodded. "I am. I don't believe in saying things that go against what I mean or what I think. I don't like to mislead people."

"You like to be intellectually and morally superior," he corrected her. "You're just as odd as I am."

"In vastly different ways," Hermione shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't think so," he shook his head, his eyes assessing, "It stems from being well-read, and of a more mature disposition than our age-mates. Excessive intelligence certainly factors in as well."

Hermione knew it was true. She might outstrip him intellectually, but she knew it wasn't by much.
He was nipping at her heels for the position at the top of the class.

"Perhaps," Hermione conceded. "So, are you accepting my offer?"

His smirk at her question was slow, wide and very deliberate in the way it unsettled her. Hermione felt suddenly as though she might as well have been sitting there naked and speaking gibberish, babbling like a toddler and embarrassing herself when he looked at her like that. It made her feel small, and rather stupid somehow.

"What's in it for me?" he wanted to know.

"We've already covered that," she frowned.

"We agreed that we're both too young for shagging," he reminded her. "And that I'd seduce you either way. So what, exactly, would be the appeal to being your friend, from my perspective?"

Hermione nibbled her lower lip carefully for a moment, thinking hard. There was little she could actually offer him. He hardly needed help with his homework and she didn't see him considering it an appeal simply to be in her company.

"Don't do that," he said quietly, his eyes narrowed slightly and fixed upon her mouth.

Hermione blinked when he suddenly leaned forwards, reaching for her and using his thumb to pry her lower lip from between her teeth. She stared at him, startled by the casual way he'd touched her.

"Why did you do that?" she asked him curiously.

"Don't chew you lip in front of me," he said, eyeing her strangely.

"Why not?" she asked. "It doesn't hurt. I very rarely break the skin."

"That's hardly the point, Granger. He shook his head, shooting her an exasperated look. "Do you have a list of things to offer me regarding what's in an arrangement with you for me?"

"No," Hermione admitted. "I've no idea what you want from me."

"Other than sex, when we're old enough," he smirked cheekily.

"Other than that." She rolled her eyes.

"I want secrecy," he informed her seriously. "I wasn't kidding about the idea of Draco being put out with me if he finds out you and I are... involved. I don't imagine Rowle or Dolohov would be all that thrilled about it either. Betrothal bond or not, Rowle's laid a claim on you. Maybe not with the full repercussions of a betrothal, but he's making sure people know you're associated with him and that he'll get involved in anyone messes with you. I can only imagine what he and Dolohov would do to me if they found out about you and I doing anything."

"What I do and whom I do it with is hardly the business of Thorfinn Rowle or Antonin Dolohov," Hermione bit out, annoyed by his words.

"You truly have no grasp of how those of us in the pureblood circles operate if you believe that. If he's swathing you in those jerseys now, and if he took your first kiss, you better believe he's making plans for courting you when doing so won't be frowned upon due to your age difference, Granger. That name stamped on your chest is a big 'Fuck Off' sign to every wizarding male with
any sense for such things," Theo told her. "I, for one, don't want to be on their bad side, so anything you and I do will be kept between the two of us lest it get back to them and they murder me. I also don't imagine that Potter and Weasley would be thrilled to find you hanging out with snakes."

"No, I don't imagine they would either," Hermione said frowning and looking away from him for a moment, conflicted over the idea of his suggestions pertaining to Thorfinn and his possible intentions towards her.

"More reason to keep it to ourselves," Theo said. "I don't feel like dealing with those ponces getting in my face and threatening violence. You want to spend time with me – shag me, when it's appropriate – you keep it a secret. No one finds out."

"That suits me." Hermione shrugged her shoulders. "If you want to be my dirty little secret, Theo, I'll let you."

He shot her that half-smirk of his and Hermione found herself returning the expression.

"Then we have a deal, Granger," he told her. "Should we shake on it, or snog on it?"

Hermione tipped her head to one side, eyeing him speculatively.

"What do you want to do?" she asked, wondering what to make of him, of their entire exchange.

His grin was wicked at her question.

"I'm pleased you know when to ask the right questions, witch," he informed her, his hand moving back up again until he cupped her cheek and pulled her toward him across the desk, leaning forwards as he did so.

Hermione let her eyes slide closed when he brushed his mouth against hers. His lips tasted of peppermint in such a way that she suspected he'd been indulging in the Pepper Imps sweets from Honeydukes. His lips were ever so slightly chapped, but warm and sure against her own. A thrill raced through her when he flicked his tongue out experimentally, tracing the seam of her lips until she opened to him. When Hermione granted him entrance, she sighed into him sweetly, blissfully unaware that, across the Irish Sea, a certain Viking of a wizard suddenly set an entire pub on fire.
Chapter 19

The magic exploded out of Thorfinn Rowle in such a bright shade of green, the flames leaping and jumping so wretchedly that, for a moment, Antonin Dolohov thought his Norse descendant best friend had just used the Killing Curse on every occupant within the pub simultaneously. It burst forth, so furiously and so all encompassing, that for a long minute, no one even reacted due to the shock. The witch Thorfinn had been intending to sweet talk into bed with him gave a terrible shriek, her body having suffered the worst of the effects due to her close proximity to the combustible wizard whose expression had transformed from one of easy flirting and smugness to one of such fury that even Antonin wanted to step back from him.

He didn't have to be a genius to figure out what had just happened and while the rest of the occupants in the pub began to scream and run for the door, Antonin tossed the witch in his lap to the floor and sprinted at his best friend. Clutching the front of the blond's shirt, Antonin disapparated the pair of them from the scene.

"Bloody hell, mate!" Antonin said, stumbling back from Thorfinn as out of control purple and green Fiendfyre exploded wandlessly from within him, setting the field Antonin had taken them to ablaze with bright light.

He conjured a strong shield charm for himself and waited out the rage within Thorfinn, watching wild animals take shape within the flames, dragons and lions and enormous hissing snakes. He'd never seen his friend cast Fiendfyre before, though both his father and his grandfather were prone to it. Antonin looked on in awe of the destructive nature of the curse as it worked its way free of Thorfinn Rowle.

His blue eyes were wild, flames dancing in them and around him as he turned and roared inarticulately at the sky. Antonin knew the feeling. The wretched tearing burn of a disruption in the bond between a wizard and his betrothed was more painful than it had any right to be. Especially when one end of the bond was stronger than the other. He doubted that Granger had to deal with the pain the way Thorfinn was right in that moment. When Thor shagged around, the witch would be scolded full of jealousy and rage but it wouldn't have hurt the way Thorfinn's bond to her did.

She'd been casting the flames too, though not to the same level of intensity that they could be classed as Fiendfyre, Antonin knew. Quincey kept them very well updated on the girl's comings and goings. Or, she updated Thorfinn and Thor shared it with Antonin.

When the elf appeared, obviously sensing the rage coursing through Thorfinn and the disturbance in his bond to Granger, Antonin caught the little elf by the shoulders and pulled her inside his shield too.

"Mr Antonin?" she squeaked. "Master is very angry. Master is be needing to know that Miss Hermione... she be..."

"He knows, Quincey," Antonin told the elf. "It's why he's so angry. He can feel what she's doing."

"But Mr Antonin, she only be kissing that other wizard. Only touching mouths," Quincey frowned. "When Master touches much more with other witches, Miss Hermione not be reacting this strongly."

"You know the spells he's done to tie that little witch to him, Quincey," Antonin sighed, watching as Thorfinn tried to get himself under control, the flames threatening to devour their creator before
he slashed his wand through the air and put them all out. He stood breathing hard amid the destruction left behind, smoke rising in the air, only the moon left to light their surroundings in the field.

"Master?" Quincey asked fearfully, wriggling free of Antonin's grip and hurrying towards her master.

"What is she doing, Quincey?" Thorfinn bit out from between clenched teeth, his eyes snapping down to glare at the little elf.

"She be kissing a wizard, Master," Quincey said, wringing her hands in the pillowcase she wore.

"Who?" he growled furiously, his whole body quivering with rage.

Quincey winced at the idea of telling him.

"You can't be killing him master," Quincey whispered. "You can't be hurting him. Miss Hermione, she not be knowing that you is bonded. She not be knowing she not meant to be kissing others."

"Who the fuck is she snogging, Quincey?" Thorfinn shouted at the elf, red sparks exploding out the end of the wand he clutched tightly in his hand.

"Theodore Nott, Master," Quincey said, cowering back towards Antonin.

Antonin watched the way shock overtook Thorfinn's face completely for a moment at the answer he obviously hadn't been expecting before an expression of horror slid into place.

"FUCK!"

~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~

"You want to go to the Three Broomsticks?" Ronald Weasley asked her as they strolled the streets of Hogsmeade together. Harry hadn't arrived under the Invisibility Cloak yet and so it was just the two of them, Ginny and Reina not being allowed to come to the village since they were still only second years. Hermione suspected the pair of witches were currently trying to sweet talk Harry into taking them under the cloak with him. Which was probably what was taking him so long.

"I suppose so." Hermione nodded as she glanced at the redhead beside her.

He was making something of an effort to be polite to her, but Hermione knew that he was still put out with her over the issues they'd been having with Crookshanks continuing to chase Scabbers every chance he got. Ron was itching to have Harry arrive and Hermione sighed to herself softly. Things with Ron always felt rocky and off-kilter, as though they couldn't quite settle into the type of comfortable brotherly-friendship that she'd formed with Harry, but she got the feeling her cat was going to create a serious rift between them before the year was out.

"Fancy a butterbeer?" Hermione offered quietly, trying to smooth the way toward making sure he wouldn't end up telling her off – again – for adopting the squashed-face monster of a cat she had picked to be her familiar.

Ron nodded. "Yeah, alright. I'll get a table, shall I?"

Hermione smiled at him, making her way to the counter to order their drinks. The sight of the pub door opening with seemingly nobody there had Hermione turning her head and she caught Ron's arm before they could part ways, nodding in the direction of the door.
"Maybe not drinks, then?" Ron muttered to her. "Unless you want to get them to take away?"

"Madame Rosemerta doesn't let kids take them outside the pub in case we litter," Hermione reminded him. "You go on out, I'll follow you. I need to use the loo and do a little bit of my Christmas shopping for you and Harry anyway. You distract him, could you?"

"Alright, meet us out by the Shack or something," Ron nodded, looking relieved at the idea of having Harry there so the tension between them wouldn't be quite so strained.

Redirecting her feet to the lavatories, Hermione handled her business quickly, pausing to look at herself in the mirror and to try in vain to fix her mop of curls and make them lie flat. Not that she had much luck given the cold winter wind blowing outside. She needed to do her Christmas shopping, Hermione recalled, thinking she might need to get on top of it before meeting back up with Harry and Ron. Smearing some of her raspberry chap-stick over her lips to protect them from the cold, Hermione pulled her gloves back on and left the pub. She shivered slightly against the chill in the air as she hurried down the street towards the bookshop.

"Dine and dash on your date with Weasley, Granger?" Draco Malfoy's annoying voice cut through the air just as she was about to hurry into the bookshop. "Or did you just suddenly realise that he's a pathetic excuse for a wizard? Maybe you deluded yourself into thinking that a mudblood could do better than a blood traitor?"

Hermione paused momentarily. She hadn't been able to take the stupid sod seriously at all since Theo had told her Malfoy fancied her. The idea that all of his teasing was, as her mother would have put it, just him pulling his pigtails to get her attention rather unnerved Hermione. She hadn't really even been able to make eye contact with him since Theo had told her. The idea that she was also distantly related to him, and that he'd been making plans to make a case for her blood status based on that fact in order to get away with being romantically involved with her, completely confused Hermione.

She was also still trying to process the idea that she was related to Dolohov, but in some ways, Malfoy was worse. Then again, they both had a penchant for taunting her and for calling her a mudblood. Maybe it was a family connection. Shaking her head for her own sardonic thoughts, she spun to glare at the swaggering blonde boy who so enjoyed taunting her.

"At least I go on dates, Malfoy," Hermione retorted, not bothering to try and make excuses or correct his assumptions. "It's hardly surprising that you're stuck with your thick-headed goons rather than on some lovely date with a pretty girl…. Unless… are Crabbe and Goyle your dates, Malfoy? I didn't know you swung that way. My, what would your father have to say about this?"

She hurried into the bookshop before she had to deal with him any longer, leaving him spluttering furiously in the street outside and losing herself in the shelves. Squeezing past a few of the older students who were also using the shop as a refuge against the cold outside and to handle their own shopping, Hermione allowed the calm and quiet of the bookshop to fill her up. She perused the shelves leisurely, trailing her fingers over the titles and Hermione sighed as she sank into the quiet of the shop, loving the soft mutterings people preferred to speak in when surrounded by books. She was gathering quite the collection of tomes for her friends when the bell for the shop tinkled once more, but Hermione didn't bother looking around until she felt the prickle of hairs on the back of her neck that suggested someone was watching her.

Turning slightly, Hermione scanned both sides of her; the aisle she occupied was empty but for Hermione herself. The faintest flash of clothing peeking around the end of one of the rows made her narrow her eyes and Hermione adjusted the basket of books she carried before stomping down the end of the row, intent on confronting whoever was spying on her, suspecting it was probably
Malfoy, back to spray more venom at her like the ridiculous snake he was.

She stumbled to a stop when she rounded the end of the row to find a great strapping wizard with a wild mane of blond hair leaning casually against the shelves. He had his arms crossed over his chest and looked to be waiting for someone. Hermione's heart started racing mile at minute at the sight of the handsome man.

"Finn?" Hermione asked, staring up at him blankly.

He was even bigger than he'd been the last time she saw him, looking like he'd grown both in height and in strength. His hair was longer too, sprawling wildly about his enormous shoulders and making her feel very small as she gaped up at him.

"Took you long enough, Princess." He smirked down at her, turning those bright blue eyes toward her and watching her with some kind of fire dancing in their depths. "I could have hexed you stupid before you even realised I was here."

"You wouldn't," Hermione replied, sure in the knowledge that she trusted him not to hurt her. She adjusted the basket she carried again. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you," he replied. "You going to greet me properly, or are you just going to stare at me?"

Hermione gave a little start, realising she had been doing just that.

"What makes you think I'm even talking to you?" she challenged in reply. "The last time I saw you, we had a fight and you've yet to apologise."

"Witch, if you don't hug me, I'm going to throw you over my shoulder and carry you right out of here with your arse in the air," he threatened seriously, his usual smile remaining absent from his face.

"Threats, is it?" Hermione scoffed before setting down her basket and stepping into him, wrapping her arms around his waist and burying her face in his chest.

His citrus and smoke scent permeated her senses and Hermione felt a big sigh of contentment leave her in a whoosh at the warm, familiar feel of his arms sliding around her, pressing her even closer to him. Hermione sank into the warm feeling of happiness that filled her. She felt more than heard Thorfinn sigh too and Hermione smiled against the fabric of his cloak.

"Is that my jersey you're wearing, Princess," he muttered to her, holding her close for several long minutes despite the way a few other people in the shop had begun looking in their direction curiously.

"Yes," Hermione replied. "You have a game today. I'm showing my support, even if I can't be there."

"If I make you take your shoes off, am I going to find your toes painted black and red too?" he chuckled very softly.

"Of course," Hermione replied, pulling back slightly to grin at him. "And look at these. Reina's improving."

She showed him her fingernails which were all painted black with the shape of a crimson bat sitting on each nail. A slow smirk worked its way across Thorfinn's face.
"She's been practicing, I see," Thorfinn grinned, "Come on, Baby-girl, go pay for your books and walk with me."

"What are you doing here anyway?" Hermione asked him, picking up her basket and heading for the counter. "You've got a game in a few hours. I thought you didn't like International Apparation."

"I don't. But we play the Arrows today." Thorfinn smirked at her. "I was already in the country and I got wind of it being a Hogsmeade weekend. I thought I spotted you in the Three Broomsticks, but by the time I finished my drink, you were gone."

"We stopped in briefly, but left again." Hermione nodded, handing the right money to the shopgirl - who attempted to engage Finn in a round of flirting and tried batting her eyelashes at him. Something he ignored completely.

"We?" he asked, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"Me and Ron." Hermione nodded. "Harry's not been given signed permission to attend the village and Reina and Ginny are too young. It's just the two of us today. Or was, until Harry snuck out of the castle and turned up. We had to leave the pub because the teachers stop in there and might've spotted him. He's not supposed to be here, especially not with this mess going on about Sirius Black."

Thorfinn nodded his head, frowning slightly as Hermione took her bags and shrunk them before tucking them into her pocket.

"Hey, can I get your autograph?" a fifth year Ravenclaw boy asked as they were leaving the shop. Hermione rolled her eyes to herself when Thorfinn glanced at the kid before smirking slightly and taking the quill along with the book being offered to him and scrawling his name across it.

"Thanks, Rowle!" The fifth year grinned. "Smash it with the Arrows tonight, mate."

"Thanks kid," Thorfinn said while Hermione waited.

She rolled her eyes at the man when he grinned at her smugly.

"Try not to look so conceited, could you?" Hermione teased him.

"This, from my biggest fan?" he retorted, poking her side before slinging his arm around her shoulders and tucking her into his side.

"I wouldn't say I'm your biggest fan," she replied. "Reina holds that title."

"You're the one wearing my jerseys and painting bats on your nails in your adoration."

"Adore this, Finn," Hermione replied, elbowing him in the ribs and making him laugh. "Now are you going to tell me what you're actually doing here? Oh, I need to stop in here, hang on."

She made for the doorway to Honeydukes, pulling Finn along with her thanks to the way she'd curled her arm around his waist to better keep her balance as they walked since he insisted on keeping his arm around her.

"Didn't think you had much of a sweet tooth, Princess?" he asked, moving around the shop with her and signing things when kids asked him to while Hermione bought sweets as gifts for her friends.

"I don't. They're Christmas gifts," Hermione told him, laughing when three seventh year Hufflepuff
girls accosted Thorfinn, asking for autographs and hitting on him shamelessly.

She'd have felt sparks of jealousy, she suspected, if it weren't for the way he kept shooting her
glances as she moved around buying Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans for Harry and enough
Sugar Mice to put Ron into a sugar coma for a week. She bought Ginny some Apple Bites, and
some Sugar Quills for Reina - the girl had a bad habit of sucking her quill. As those girls all flirted
with Thorfinn, Hermione made her purchases and Thorfinn watched Hermione over the heads of
the females acting like ninnies in his presence. He was still polite to them, he even bantered
flirtatiously with them, but the entire time he did so, his eyes kept drifting back to Hermione and
the curly haired witch smiled to herself.

"Whenever you're ready," she told him after buying her gifts, moseying over to him with a lollipop
in her mouth as she watched him curiously.

"You're hanging out with her, Thorfinn? Why?" a catty looking Slytherin sixth year girl named
Chelsea Bulstrode sneered, eyeing Hermione like she was something disgusting she'd found stuck
to her shoe.

Hermione ignored the vicious cow even when she raked Hermione with a disgusted glance.
Thorfinn, on the other hand, glanced slowly at the other girl, his good humour disappearing in a
heartbeat. Hermione watched the way Chelsea took a big step back at the sight of whatever
expression was on Thorfinn's face. He didn't speak to her or even do anything more threatening
than glare at her, but the temperature in the shop dropped a good five degrees and the fans who'd
been swarming around Thorfinn suddenly found they perhaps had better things to do than to vie for
his attention and annoy him with their inane prattle.

Chelsea Bulstrode turned back to her friends, all of whom shot unfriendly glances at Hermione
before they disappeared deeper into the packed shop.

"You ready to go, Baby-girl?" Thorfinn asked, turning his attention back to her and eyeing her
curiously once more, though a hint of his sudden temper still danced in his eyes.

Hermione nodded her head, moving for the door and then through it, out into the street just as it
began to snow.

"Tell me something, Princess?" Thorfinn said, tucking her back into his side as though she
belonged there. "Do the other girls all treat you like that, or just the Slytherins?"

"Usually they just ignore me." Hermione shrugged. "The ones in my year, like Pansy Parkinson,
give me a bit of grief. But the rest of the time they usually just pretend I don't exist. A few sneer
unkind things every now and then if they see me playing with Harry or Ron, shoving or laughing.
They give me this disgusted sort of look. The rest just leave me alone. Why?"

"They don't pick on you, do they?" he asked, glancing down at her.

"Not often." Hermione shook her head before an idea occurred to her. "Actually, I wanted to talk to
you about that."

"Oh?" he asked, raising one eyebrow.

"Yes. I took your advice, you see, and I made a friend in Slytherin," Hermione told him, noticing
the way his arm tightened convulsively around her and he glanced down at her sharply, his blue
eyes narrowing slightly. "And he informed me that most of the people in Slytherin are labouring
under the notion that I'm betrothed. To you."

"Didn't we cover that last year at your birthday, Princess?" he asked and Hermione got the feeling the smile he wore was a bit forced.

"Well, yes. By letter," Hermione replied. "I never got around to asking you in person. It's easier to lie via written correspondence."

"You think we're betrothed?" he asked, smirking. "You sure you don't fancy me, Princess? You seem awfully interested in the idea of being betrothed to me."

"Thorfinn, don't jest," Hermione said seriously, pulling out of his hold and moving to stand in front of him, peering up at him suspiciously. "This isn't something to laugh about. My new Slytherin friend told me that all the Slytherin kids – the ones who know about Pureblood customs like the use of jewellery to claim a person, in any case – all think that you and I are betrothed. He told me that when I started wearing the bracelet you gave me, they all figured I'd been claimed. I'm told one of them was even extremely put out over it."

"Malføy?" Thorfinn guessed, still smirking as though the conversation was amusing. "I knew that little bastard had a thing for you."

"It's not funny," Hermione hissed, stomping her foot and narrowing her eyes on the big idiot when he chuckled. "Theo told me that when they saw the bracelet, they all figured that I was betrothed. That when you sent me your jersey for my birthday last year, they all assumed that it was you I was betrothed to. They all think that the anklet I was sent for the same birthday was also from you to renew the bond – whatever that means – and that the jersey might as well have been you stamping 'Property of Thorfinn Rowle' across my forehead."

"You still wear the jerseys I send you," he pointed out. "Playing into their delusions, Princess?"

"I am more than aware that if they think I'm affiliated with you in a romantic sense, they will leave me alone, so yes, I still wear your jerseys all the time," Hermione retorted. "It's certainly better to have them think I'm spoken for than to have the likes of Draco Malføy thinking I'm available for courtship. The point is that Theo made a point of mentioning that since I was also anonymously sent earrings this year at my birthday, they think I'm once again being plied with more signs of ownership to renew a bond. And I've been reading up on such bonds – what little I could find on them in the Hogwarts library, anyway – and have discovered that if I were betrothed to someone, my random outbursts of wild fury that have been so prevalent since the summer before second year would likely be the result of whomever I'm betrothed to shagging around and dishonouring the bond."

Thorfinn stared at her for a minute.

"You're accusing me of initiating a betrothal bond with you – without telling you – and of secretly renewing it every year, whilst shagging other witches and driving you crazy?" Thorfinn asked slowly, as though she were crazy, crossing his strong arms over his strapping chest and staring her down.

"I'm asking you to assure me that Theo and the rest of the Slytherin Purebloods who know about the custom and think we're betrothed, are wrong," Hermione replied, crossing her own arms and lifting her chin stubbornly to glare right back at him.

"So you don't fancy me and you aren't pining to be betrothed to me?" Thorfinn's lips twitched, a
teasing lilt in his voice that made her think he wasn't taking this seriously.

"I'd like to believe that if you did something like that you'd tell me or ask me like a gentleman rather than forcing such a bond upon me without my knowledge," Hermione replied evenly, hating the way his lips quirked up into a smirk at her careful wording.

"That wasn't a denial about fancying me, Baby-girl," he grinned.

"Thorfinn, stop messing around and tell me the truth! Did you do something? I know that such bonds have to be acknowledged and accepted in order for them to form… did you somehow trick me into reciprocating such a thing after you gave me the bracelet?"

"You haven't given me anything other than that muggle contraption for my birthday since I gave you that bracelet, Hermione," he reminded her gently. "Unreciprocated betrothal bonds are dangerous. They can drive people mad. It's why Toshka's so fucked up. Now, do I seem mad to you?"

Hermione shook her head from side to side.

"Then you're worrying for nothing," he said, reaching out with one hand and tugging gently on the braid he'd put in her hair behind her ear, the one with the gold bead on the end of it that matched the ones he still wore in his own hair.

"What about the beads?" Hermione asked, suddenly recalling that he'd first mentioned the significance of jewellery exchanges in her first year when she'd put the bead in his hair. "You still wear the beads I gave you and you were being funny about them when I first put them in."

"I still wear them because they remind me of you, Princess," he told her quietly. "They make me think of you every time one of them whips around and whacks me in the forehead when I'm flying."

"They don't signify reciprocation?" she clarified, rolling her eyes at his grin.

"You gave them to me first. Without the intent to form a betrothal bond. Intent, Baby-girl. You keep forgetting that magic is about intent."

Hermione frowned. No, she hadn't been thinking about the idea of marrying the big idiot when she'd put them in his hair, but she had been thinking that sitting with him, touching him, being held by him was nice. And that she could probably grow to care for him. And that he was entirely too handsome for her sanity.

"So you don't send me your jerseys to warn everyone else away from me because you've laid some kind of claim to me?" Hermione pushed the issue.

Thorfinn's lips twitched at her words.

"Well, now. I didn't say that, did I?" he said, before turning and continuing to stroll down the street, glancing over his shoulder to catch Hermione standing there with her mouth gaping open and closed once more in shock.
Thorfinn listened to the sounds of her feet running down the street to catch up to him when she recovered from her shock enough to follow him. He was smirking to himself over her interrogation and her obvious surprise at the idea that he rather liked the idea of her wearing his jerseys to lay claim to her. Hell, if it would keep the other fuckers from laying a hand on his little lioness and keep him from almost killing someone again, he'd chain her to him permanently if he had to.

"What does that mean, Finn?" she demanded, catching up to him. "You can't just walk off after saying something like that."

"Which part are you having trouble with, Princess?" he asked, slanting a glance down at her and tucking her back under his arm even as he steered her away from the main street and down a small alley between two houses.

"Your intention with the jumpers is to claim me?" she demanded, wriggling in his hold when Thorfinn used his grip to steer her around until she stood with her back against his chest, hidden from the view of the street.

"Do me a favour, Princess? Shut your eyes," he said to her, still grinning to himself.

"Close my eyes? What? Why?" she squeaked when Thorfinn turned sharply and Disapparated both of them.

"You going to throw up?" he asked, clutching her to him when she sagged in his hold, landing in his bedroom inside Rowle Tower.

"Where are we?" She groaned. "Damn it, Finn! You can't just snatch me away from Hogsmeade. I'm supposed to meet Harry and Ron by the Shrieking Shack and I'm going to get in lots of trouble when they realise I'm not where I'm supposed to be."

Thorfinn chuckled, dragging her up his body, her back still to his chest, until he could speak directly into her ear.

"If only there was some way for you to be in two places at once," he said, an edge in his voice that let her know he knew all about the Time-Turner she was hiding under her robes.

"How do you..? Oh, for Merlin's sake, put me down, you idiot!" she demanded, pulling at his arms until she set her back on her feet and released her.

She spun to face him.

"How do you know about the Time-Turner?" she demanded, planting her hands on her hips.

"I have my ways, Baby-girl. I told you I've been keeping an eye on you at the school." He shrugged his shoulders at her, smirking wickedly and watching the way her eyes narrowed on him angrily.

He kind of liked it when his little witch got fired up. If he was being honest, Thorfinn was still furious with her for snogging Nott, having discovered from Quincey just what the little witch had arranged with the other boy. Antonin had punched him in the face three time for what had happened when he'd lost control of his temper and his magic in his fury, demanding he inform the little witch of their bond or that he jam his temper and his jealous rage up his own arse if he wanted to keep hiding it from her.
Thorfinn had decided on a compromise. He knew he should tell the little brat that he'd let their betrothal bond happen. That she'd instigated it, he'd reciprocated and he'd done a number of other things to mess with her life before realising she wasn't so bad after all. Before realising he cared about her. But he couldn't do it. She was going to look at him with such hatred in her eyes and she was going to lose her mind at him for doing it without her permission.

Hell, she'd likely hex him stupid.

No, he couldn't tell her they were engaged until he'd had the chance to court her into it. Though if she kept on with the intention to fuck Theodore Nott and anyone else who took her fancy, he'd likely go back to loathing the little bitch and wanting to murder her before she'd be of an age that it was appropriate for him to court her. Right now she was jail bait and he wasn't going to risk his career and his freedom just to keep her from being a teenager. He'd brought this on himself by forming the bond and by performing such Dark magic to link the two of them together. He couldn't kill her either. He fancied her too bloody much for that.

"You've still got someone spying on me?" she demanded. "Who? Why? It's not like you and I are all that close, Finn."

"Aren't we?" he asked, raising one eyebrow at her before dropping back to sit on the end of his bed and reaching down to pull his boots off his feet.

"You think we are?" she asked, frowning. "You write to me every few months – usually when sending me a new jersey. You hadn't even bothered to write to me before turning up today, despite the fact that the last time I saw you, we had a fight."

Thorfinn shrugged his shoulders.

"And where the hell are we? You have to take me back to Hogsmeade, Thorfinn."

"I don't have to do anything, Kitten." He grinned at her, shrugging out of his outer robe once he'd pried his shoes from his feet. "Except get a shower in before my game in an hour."

"You just kidnapped me from Hogsmeade to drag me to one of you games?" Hermione demanded of him and Thorfinn laughed when her eyes bulged in her fury before she stepped forward and started swatting at his head and his arms.

"Oi! Easy on the merchandise, Princess." He chuckled, fending her fists off before looping an arm around her waist and dragging her to him. Sitting on the end of his bed while she stood, Thorfinn noticed that she'd grown a bit since he'd last seen her. Pressing her close until he could prop his chin against her sternum, he also idly noticed that she had a bit more filling out her shirt since the last time he'd held her in this pose while he'd still been at school.

"What are you doing?" she asked him, her hands coming to rest on his shoulders idly.

He could feel her heart beating in his chest when he leant into her like this and Thorfinn smirked when he felt the way it began to race as he held her.

"Holding you so you can't beat me to death," he grinned at her.

"Are you going to take me back to school?"

"After the game." He nodded at her. "You've got you time-turner, no one will even know you're gone once you get back there and turn it. You can relive the hours you spend with me now and you won't even be in trouble."
"You want me at the game that badly?" she asked, cocking her head to one side.

"You're already dressed for it." He shrugged his shoulders, feeling their bond strengthening when she smoothed her fingers into his long hair carefully, looking torn between being pleased and being angry.

"You're such a bad influence on me," she muttered.

"You love it," he replied, letting his eyes drift closed as he felt the warm rush of the bond growing even stronger the longer he held her.

"What did you mean about the jerseys, Finn?" she whispered, her hands playing in his hair as he cuddled her. "You send them with the intent of claiming me?"

"I did tell you I was coming back for you when you were older, Princess," he reminded.

"I thought you were joking," she admitted in a small voice. "You do recall that I'm only fourteen, don't you?"

Thorfinn snorted.

"Trust me, Jail Bait, I'm painfully aware of your age," he replied, opening his eyes once more and meeting her gaze when she glanced at him. Her cheeks were bright pink as though she were shy over her age and embarrassed by what he'd called her.

"If you're calling me that, what exactly is your plan with the jumpers?" she asked him.

Thorfinn chuckled.

"Just because you're still too young right now doesn't mean I'm about to leave you exposed to the likes of Malfoy and the other gits you go to school with who might get it into their heads that they can have you, Princess," he replied.

"You're being a Slytherin and staking a claim now for later?" she asked, raising her eyebrows. "You don't even fancy me. What do you care if other boys do?"

Thorfinn didn't answer her. Not when he had to bite his tongue to keep from telling her that she was his and would be until the day she died. Not when he didn't trust himself not to say something that would land him in a prison cell. Especially not when he wanted to turn her in his hold and lay her out on his bed before snogging her senseless until she wouldn't even think about snogging anyone but him every again.

"Why, Nott?" he asked instead.

"Why not? What do you mean, why not?" she asked, looking confused. "That's not a good enough reason to lay claim to me. I'm not a lamp post that you can whizz on like some mutt, marking your territory, Rowle."

Thorfinn snorted at her words.

"Not 'why not', Baby-girl," he chuckled. "I said 'why, Nott'. As in why did you pick Theo Nott to be the Slytherin to befriend?"

"Oh," she said, her cheeks flaming again. "Well… erm… he's the only decent bloke in my year from Slytherin. Malfoy and his goons are all wretched – no matter what Theo's been arguing about
the idea of Malfoy being such a git to me because he fancies me and thinks I'm spoken for. There's Zabini, obviously, but he's so haughty and so high maintenance that I think simply being in his presence would offend him. You should see the way he eyes my hair. It's like he wants to attack it with a comb."

"So that leaves Theo," Thorfinn sighed. "Why couldn't you have befriended one of the girls?"

"Millicent Bulstrode hates me." Hermione shrugged. "We got into a scuffle last year – when I snatched that hair that turned out to be cat's hair – and she hasn't forgiven me. Parkinson is a wretched cow who sneers like Malfoy does – though I'm beginning to think that's because she knows Malfoy fancies me and is jealous. Other than that there's Daphne Greengrass and Tracy Davis, but they don't like me much either. They glare at me when they see me. I've worked with Theo a few times in class when we're all paired with people from a different house and he's not a complete arse."

Thorfinn closed his eyes, gritting his teeth for a minute and feeling the need to lock her away where no one else could even think about laying a hand on his witch.

"Just be careful, Kitten," he warned her quietly. "Never forget that he's a Slytherin. He looks out for himself first. He'll do whatever he has to if it means he gets whatever it is he wants. Don't be too quick to trust him."

"You're a Slytherin too, remember," she said, scraping her nails lightly against his scalp. "And I trust you."

"You do." he nodded in agreement. "And one day you'll likely look back and curse the day you first met me, Hermione Granger."

"You're planning to do something to upset me?" she asked, her fingers stilling in his hair.

Thorfinn opened his eyes to stare at her.

"How do you know I haven't already done plenty of things to upset you?" he challenged. "The first rule of being at Hogwarts is; never trust a Slytherin."

She narrowed her eyes on him.

"I don't think you'd purposely seek to hurt me, Thorfinn. Not unless you're holding a grudge over the whole me-nearly-getting-you-expelled thing," she said carefully, staring into his eyes.

Thorfinn felt a wretched spear of guilt course through him to know she trusted him so much.

"You did almost ruin my life." He smirked at her, hiding his guilt behind his bravado. "And I've yet to repay the favour."

She rolled her eyes. "As though having to put up with you isn't punishment enough?"

"Cheeky little brat," he laughed.

She squealed in surprise when he gripped her a little tighter and turned her in his hold, dumping her onto his bed on her back and sliding out from under her until he hovered over her. The way her cheeks went crimson and her breath hitched let Thorfinn know she was suddenly thinking less than appropriate things about him right in that moment. Staring into her eyes for a long minute, Thorfinn had to fight to keep his gaze from straying to her lips, recalling the way she'd tasted the last time he'd kissed her.
He wanted to do it again.

Wanted it so much it stung and he had to clench his fist in his duvet to keep from tunnelling his hands into her wild hair and holding her still to be snogged. When her eyes darted to his mouth, Thorfinn knew she was thinking about snogging too and before he could think better of it, he lowered his mouth to hers.

~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~

Hermione heard the soft little sound that tore from her throat when Thorfinn's lips brushed against hers. Butterflies rioted in her stomach and she forgot every thought she'd ever had, her brain disconnecting entirely at the feel of his warm lips moving against hers. He wasn't as hesitant this time as he'd been when he kissed her in her first year, and neither was Hermione. Her heart was racing in her chest as his tongue traced the seam of her lips, requesting entrance she was only too happy to grant.

Sliding her tongue out to meet his, Hermione reached for him with both hands, tangling her fingers into his long blond hair and pressing herself to him a little more firmly. She let herself get lost in the kiss, exploring him, tasting him, feeling like her heart would beat right out of her chest with how her whole body tingled and quivered beneath his. His tongue stroked against hers surely, massaging her hungrily. Where last time he'd been tentative, careful, obviously holding back to keep from scaring her when she'd been so young, this time he pressed forward a little more insistently.

A little more hungrily. He groaned very softly when Hermione nibbled his lower lip as he went to pull away before she pull him back in for more. She wanted more. Her whole being wanted so much more, chasing the feelings of heat, and tingles and butterflies inside of her that made it feel like nothing else mattered in the whole world but that she could keep kissing Thorfinn Rowle. Her whole body felt like it was burning up, searing from the inside out as though she had a fever she never wanted to break.

The quiet sound of a grandfather clock chiming out the half-hour intruded on the kiss and Thorfinn tensed against her suddenly, his mouth leaving hers and trailing a line of kisses across her cheek and along her jaw. Her scarf prevented him from kissing her anywhere else.

"Fuck!" he growled out huskily, breathing hard against her as though he were as breathless as she felt.

Hermione was beyond the ability to speak. She just wanted to kiss him again, to keep kissing him until the both passed out from the lack of oxygen. She never wanted to stop kissing him.

"I've got to shower before the game, Princess," he muttered to her, pulling back from her carefully.

Hermione nodded mutely, her eyes still glazed as she reclined on his bed with him half pinning her to it.

"Shit, you're not helping when you look at me like that," he told her, his voice hoarse. "Fucking hell, I've never wanted to go to a game less in my life."

Hermione blinked rapidly, allowing her hands to slide free of his hair as she focused back on his face, moving them to cup his stubbled jaw. His blue eyes glittered with heat and hunger when she met his gaze and he groaned again when Hermione reached up slightly and pressed another kiss to his lips. He leaned back into her hungrily; his kisses getting rougher; his tongue sliding hotter against her own. He swallowed the sound she emitted when a whimper of what she vaguely
realised was desire coursed through her.

Heat zinged between them and Hermione sighed when she felt his magic brush against hers, sparking wickedly and shooting little thrills through her. He felt like home, she realised idly as he leaned into her a little more, his tongue sweeping against hers faster. His lips against hers, his arms tight around her, his body pressing hers into the mattress deliciously and his magic brushing so sensually along the length of her own, Thorfinn Rowle felt like home to Hermione. She felt like she belonged right there with him.

He kissed her until Hermione felt dizzy before he finally jerked back from her.

"Circe's cunt," he groaned against her lips, pulling back only far enough to let them catch their breath.

She couldn't verbalise a response, and so all Hermione managed was hum of agreement, not even offended by his foul language when she felt like she was floating on cloud nine.

"Shower," he muttered. "I'm supposed to shower... shit, it'll have to be a cold one now. You alright, Princess?"

Hermione nodded, dazed.

"Fuck. No, Thorfinn, don't ask the fourteen year old to join you in the shower," he was muttering to himself, levering his body off hers whilst scolding himself and Hermione felt a giggle escape her as she watched him turn in a circle, looking for something, only to have his eyes stray back to her four times in a matter of less than a minute.

"Don't you bloody giggle at me, witch," he threatened, though he was grinning slightly. "You just wait here. Shit, we're going to be late to the game at this rate."

Hermione shook her head at him.

"Hurry up and wash, then. What are you looking for?"

"My Quidditch gear," he admitted. "I don't know what I did with it."

"Are we are at the Tower?" Hermione asked, looking around the room belatedly and realising that though she hadn't been in Thorfinn's room before, the view from one of the windows certainly looked like the view she'd spent more than a month admiring over the summer.

"Yeah." He nodded. "Fuck!"

"Finn, just get in the shower. I'll find your gear." Hermione waved him away, sitting up slowly and trying to put her scattered thoughts back in order.

She was sure that her cheeks were bright pink and that her lips were swollen. Bringing her hand to them slowly, Hermione watched the way Thorfinn watched her touch them, trying to cease the way they tingled.

"Don't give me that look or you'll end up snogged again, Princess," he warned her even as he crossed the room and disappeared into his bathroom.

Hermione giggled to herself when he kicked the door closed behind himself only to have to hit the frame too hard and pop back open just a bit. Just far enough for Hermione to hear him muttering to himself and to hear his gasp of shock at what she suspected would, indeed, be an icy cold shower.
She'd snogged him. Again. Hermione felt like her whole body was on fire and her heart was practically singing in her chest. There could be no denying it anymore. She fancied the pants of Thorfinn Rowle. The snog she'd shared with Theo had been nowhere near as good or as intoxicating as the ones she'd shared with Thorfinn. Hermione felt jittery, as though she suddenly felt lighter and had more energy than ever.

Glancing around his room, Hermione could tell he'd obviously only been living in it occasionally when he was home for matches these days. The bed was made, but rumpled. There was a bag of what she suspected must be his Quidditch gear on the floor behind the open bedroom door and everything else was neatly put away.

Hermione scanned her eyes over his room with interest, noting the presence of a Slytherin flag tacked to one wall, the collection of textbooks he'd obviously used throughout his Hogwarts career and the number of other knick-knacks that she expected most teenaged boys owned.

Shaking her head fondly when she heard him continue to curse from the confines of the shower, grumbling about the cold of the water and how young she still was, Hermione got off the bed and made for the bag behind the door. Her knees wobbled a bit as though her legs had turned to pudding and didn't want to hold her weight, but Hermione soldiered forward, snagging the bag from the floor and hauling it back to the bed. It was heavier than she expected, but she pulled it open to find his Firebolt, his beater's bat and his uniform for the game inside it.

Digging the uniform out of it, Hermione laid the garments on the end of the bed, waving her wand to freshen them and to smooth away any creases from being shoved into his bag.

"Thorfinn?" someone's voice called from down the hall, coming closer just as Hermione collected a book from one of Finn's shelves and sat back on the bed to read it while she waited. "Darling, don't you think we should get to the pitch?"

Hermione recognised the voice as belonging to Pandora Rowle before she spotted the woman carefully poking her head through the open bedroom.

"Gran?" Hermione asked, belatedly realising that having spent so long at the Tower during the summer and having spent so much time listening to both Finn and Reina calling the woman that, that she'd adopted the name for the woman.

"Hermione? Good heavens, dear, I nearly hexed you," Pandora said, stowing the wand she'd pointed at Hermione upon spotting her. "What are you doing here, darling?"

"Finn kidnapped me from Hogsmeade," Hermione admitted, grinning at the woman as she put down the book she'd chosen and crossed the room to embrace the older witch.

"Did he, now? Well, that's not… oh dear, you're going to be in terrible trouble when you return," Pandora sighed, obviously concerned over the notion of Hermione being snatched from the village. "And with you being friends with young Mr Potter, and all this mess about Sirius Black, too. Oh dear."

"It'll be alright," Hermione assured the woman. "No one will even notice I'm gone, I bet."

She didn't disclose the information about her time-turner.

"Princess, who are you talking to? Oh," Thorfinn said, charging out of the bathroom wearing nothing but his boxers and making Hermione's cheeks turn pink as she eyed the muscled expanse of his bare chest and his washboard abs.
She'd seen it before, of course. She'd even traced her fingers over the Hogwarts crest tattoo on his ribs – the mark he'd received for completing his Rites.

"Dear Merlin, Thorfinn! Put some clothes on, darling, before you blind somebody. This is hardly appropriate," Pandora scolded her grandson at the sight of him.

"It's fine." He waved a hand at her. "She's seen it all before, haven't you, Princess?"

"I was referring to my own poor eyesight," Pandora replied snarkily, smirking at her grandson. "Though it's hardly appropriate that you be half naked in front of a fourteen year old witch, Thorfinn. What are you doing? We need to be heading off, dear."

"I know," Thorfinn said, waving a hand at the woman. "You and Grandad go. Take Mum and Dad with you, if they're coming to the game. I'll apparate into the sheds."

"Are you sure, dear?"

"Gran, I really don't have time to argue about it," Thorfinn said, clearly beginning to panic a little when the clock struck on the quarter-to.

Hermione watched with some amusement as he picked up his uniform pants and started hopping on one foot, trying to get them on.

"Alright, well then good luck, darling. We'll see you after the match," Pandora told him. "And stop being so jittery, sweetheart. It's just a game."

Thorfinn waved her off, still fighting with his pants.

"Coming, Hermione?" Pandora asked, offering her hand to Hermione.

She made to reach out and take it.

"Not you, Baby-girl." Thorfinn shook his head. "Need your help."

"With what?" Hermione frowned. "I won't be allowed in the sheds on game-day, Finn. O'Malley will have your head."

"O'Malley will suck it up," Thorfinn argued, before getting his foot stuck in his pants and falling onto the bed. "Fuck! Stupid fucking pants! I'll bring you with me. I need you help with this mess."

He fisted a handful of his sopping blond mane and shook it at her, making some of the beads rattle.

"What do you expect me to be able to do about it?" Hermione scoffed. "I can't even tame my own hair. Besides, part of your image is that uncontrolled mess making you look like a fierce lion."

"I don't need you to tame it." He rolled his eyes at her. "I need you to re-do the braids. They've needed it for days but I always fuck them up."

Hermione eyed him as though he were crazy. She'd never seen him so jittery and so completely not collected. Usually he was Slytherin, swaggering and cocky and perfectly in control of himself. Today he looked jittery. Indeed, he'd only looked jittery since snogging her, but Hermione knew the feeling. She just hadn't expected that someone with as much experience at snogging plenty of other witches – prettier witches – would be so effected by snogging her. He hadn't been during their kiss in first year. Or maybe he had and she'd been so dazed that she hadn't noticed.
"Fine," Hermione sighed. "But when O'Malley screams at you for bringing me into the sheds, I'm not taking any blame."

"O'Malley can suck my…"

"Thorfinn!" Pandora snapped. "Enough. Don't go saying such things in front of Hermione. I'm leaving now. Hermione, find us in the players box when you're done with Thorfinn, won't you? Thor, make sure you give her an all access pass so she doesn't end up stuck in those smelly dressing sheds by herself."

"I'll be seeing you, Gran." Hermione smiled at the woman and watched her leave the bedroom before moving towards Thorfinn carefully.

"Did you just refer to my grandmother as 'Gran', Princess?" he smirked at her.

"Yes," Hermione admitted, her cheeks still pink. "What is wrong with you? I've never seen you this worked up."

"It's game day," he reminded her. "And I'm running late because you snog like the devil. And that shower was fucking cold. And I can't get these FUCKING pants on."

He shouted the last few words, kicking his feet and obviously frustrated. Shaking her head and attempting to hide her laughter, Hermione approached the flailing wizard where he was still trying to wriggle into his pants on the bed. She put her hands on his bare shoulders and made him sit still, watching the way he tensed slightly before he took a deep breath and met her gaze. Smiling at him gently, Hermione knelt on the floor between his knees and picked up one of his feet, working the rather tight-clinging fabric of his team pants over his foot and bunching it at his ankle.

"Merlin, Hermione, having you kneeling between my knees when I'm only in my boxers is not helping with what I already tried and failed to achieve with that cold shower," he informed her in a tight voice.

"Shut up and put your shirt on, Finn," Hermione commanded, her cheeks turning crimson once more.

"You're the only witch I know that I'm not related to who would issue that directive," he informed her dryly, not doing what she asked.

Hermione rolled her eyes, taking his other leg and bunching the fabric until his foot was free of the pants.

"Pull your pants up, Rowle. You've got a game in fifteen minutes and your head is not in it," Hermione informed him. "Do you know how upset Reina will be if the Bats lose this match? Do you know furious you'll be? How you'll blame yourself if the Arrows – your favourite team before signing with the Bats – win this game? Anyone who knows you might think you threw the match to get the Arrows the cup this year. Is that what you want?" Hermione asked, stowing her jitters and letting cold hard logic possess her body once more.

Thorfinn sighed, his jaw tightening at the reminder.

"Good," she murmured, getting to her feet in front of him and peering up at him when he stood and dragged his pants up his legs.

She reached for his shirt and handed it to him, watching him pull it on over his head.
"Sit and put your shoes and socks on," Hermione commanded. "And try not to move too much while I fix your hair."

She moved around to kneel on the bed behind him, pulling beads from the ends of his plaits and feeling a strange little shiver of cold run through her as she removed each one.

"Merlin, I don't like that feeling," he muttered, rolling his shoulders slightly as she pulled them all out.

Hermione nodded her head to herself, her fingers working to separate the segments of hair for re-plaiting, digging them through the thick blond locks and working each plait in where she thought they would look good. Warmth returned with each snap of a bead onto the end of a plait and she narrowed her eyes suspiciously. She opened her mouth to comment on the fact that it seemed odd that something he'd claimed hadn't instigated any kind of magical bond between them seemed to be making them both feel things as they were removed and replaced once more.

Before she could comment on it, however, Hermione realised that the last thing he needed was to be distracted again and so she closed her mouth once more and finished her fussing. When all the beads were in his hair once more, she dragged her hands through the thick damp locks, muttering drying charms.

"Good as new," she told him, smoothing her hands down to rest on the tops of his shoulders before she leaned against his back while he pulled his boots on. "Are you still jittery?"

"Princess?" he asked reaching for her hands and tugging them further over his shoulders until she would hang from his back like a backpack if he stood up.

"Yes, Finn?" Hermione asked.

He curled one of her hands around and brought it to his mouth, pressing a gentle kiss to her knuckles.

"You and I need to discuss something after the game," he told her quietly.

Hermione nodded her head seriously, brushing her chin against the top of his head before dropping a kiss there.

"Ok. But we need to go. You have to play in seven minutes."

"Bloody hell," he snarled, releasing her and shooting to his feet.

He grabbed up his bat and his broom, snagging a VIP pass on a string and looping it around Hermione's neck.

"Don't lose this, yeah?" he told her, "Otherwise you'll end up stuck under the stands or escorted outside the Quidditch grounds. And don't you dare think about picking up that book, Kitten. You promised me that you'd be paying full attention at matches."

Hermione stopped in her attempt to grab the book she'd abandoned on his bed and nodded her head.

"Come here." He tugged her to him, curling both arms around her middle, one hand holding his broom, the other holding his bat.

Hermione pressed her face into his chest and wrapped her arms around his waist, clinging to him tightly before she felt a sharp tug behind her navel and was Apparated away and into the dressing
"Where the fuck have you been?" O'Malley immediately roared when Thorfinn landed.

"Jam it, O'Malley," Thorfinn growled, releasing Hermione.

"And what the fuck is this? Fans in here on game day? What the fuck, Rowle?"

"Wait, I remember you," Jenkins said, snapping his fingers at Hermione and pointing. "You're that kid he turned up with during the summer before we thrashed the Cannons."

"She's a good luck charm," Thorfinn commented. "You alright, Princess?"

"Oh stuff the concern, Rowle," Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "You've got a game to win. Do you know how long I had to sit still – without my book - while Reina painted these bats on my nails? I'm going to be severely pissed off with you if you lot lose this match."

"Hell, that's more like the fan-talk I expect out of people dragged into the shed," Mullins commented, chuckling.

"You're ready to play, Thor?" O'Malley confirmed while Thorfinn smirked at Hermione for a long minute.

"Born ready, Captain," Thorfinn nodded.

"Right, here's the plays we're running…" O'Malley launched back into the last minute rundown of the game strategy they were implementing while Thorfinn began applying the protective leather pads all players were supposed to wear.

She watched the way he struggled slightly with the one for his batting hand and Hermione watched him clench and unclench his fist a few times. Recalling from her first year that he'd once complained of it aching from how tightly he gripped his bat in the icy winds and how hard he slugged the Bludgers, she found herself reaching for him carefully.

He was mostly paying attention to the pep-talk O'Malley was giving, but Hermione caught the way he glanced down at her for a minute when she perched on the bench next to him and took his wrist in her small hands. Digging her thumbs in gently, Hermione worked the tendons slowly, dragging them across his flesh and pulling at the tight, corded muscles of his hands and forearms.

He didn't groan like he'd done the first time she'd done it to him when he'd still been at school, but his breath did hitch slightly at the sweet pain of the tendons loosening. Repeating the process, Hermione watched the way the tension in the muscles slowly uncoiled until he rolled his wrist, shooting her a grin. Hermione smiled back gently before snatching up a roll of strapping tape from further down the bench and beginning to strap his wrist tightly the way she'd seen Fred and George do any number of times before a Gryffindor match.

Bracing the strap around his thumb and almost all the way up his forearm, wrapping it tight enough to help protect the joint without restricting full movement or cutting off his circulation, Hermione strapped his wrist tight. When she was finished, she reached for the fingerless leather glove designed to give him better grip on his bat and protect the fine bones in his hand. Pulling that onto his hand over the top of the strapping tape, Hermione affixed the forearm grieves to his arm next, being sure to pull his sleeve down first to protect him from the icy breeze she knew would be blowing outside the sheds.

When she was finished, she looked up to find Thorfinn's bright blue gaze fixed on her, a playful
little smirk upon his lips as he watched her fuss over him. Hermione rolled her eyes at him and 
looked away, her cheeks turning pink again. At that moment O'Malley declared that they had a 
game to get on with and announced that they needed to head out. The team all got to their feet, 
Thorfinn included, and Hermione took his hand when he held it to her, offering to help her up like 
a gentleman.

"Good luck," she told him, smiling up at him as he collected his gear and made for the tunnels to 
walk out onto the pitch with the rest of the team.

He let the others go ahead of him, shouldering their brooms as they went. Hermione held her 
breath as she looked up at him while the rest of the team disappeared down the tunnel.

"I'll see you after the game, Princess," he told her, grinning wickedly as he tucked his bat under his 
arm before he reached up to smooth his fingers along the line of her jaw – which still tingled from 
having him kiss her there earlier. "Kiss me for luck?"

"You're going to get in trouble if you get caught, you know?" Hermione reminded him, feeling 
бutterflies riot in her tummy. "And if you kiss me like you did last time, I imagine that flying will 
be rather uncomfortable."

"Such a piece of work," he laughed at her retort.

He leaned toward he a bit, quirking an eyebrow and obviously waiting for permission to kiss her on 
the off chance that she didn't want to. Rolling her eyes at him, Hermione sighed loudly and tipped 
her face up, stretching up on her toes and waiting for him to close the distance between them. His 
lips were warm and firm when he brushed them over hers again. He kept his tongue behind his 
teeth, brushing his lips to hers chastely, lingering for just a moment.

"I swear you're the only witch who's ever looked put-upon at the idea of my kissing her, little 
lioness," he muttered as he pulled back from her, leaving her lips tingling.

"Don't pretend you haven't had girls be inconvenienced by the idea of being inappropriate with 
you, Finn," Hermione rolled her eyes. "I've literally seen women run from your presence after you 
tricked them into shagging you."

"When I get back from playing, you're going to pay for that, witch," he warned her, his laughing 
eyes full of promises.

Hermione laughed at his words.

"Just go and win the game, would you?" she demanded, giving him a shove towards the tunnel 
where his teammates had gone.

He was still chuckling at her response as he jogged away down the corridor, leaving Hermione 
alone in the dressing sheds. She followed at a more sedate pace to stand at the mouth of the 
entrance onto the pitch and watch the captains shake hands before waiting for the balls to be 
released. The roar of the crowd was deafening as the whistle blew, the balls were released and the 
game began. Hermione watched them all shoot into the sky, the Chasers racing after the Quaffle; 
the Keepers from each team zooming towards the goal posts; the Seekers rising high above the 
chaos and scanning for a glimpse of the snitch.

And lastly, the Beaters each of whom took off in the direction of the bludgers already racing 
towards the keepers and harassing the other players. She watched the blond streak dressed in black 
and red as he raced after the bludger, drew his arm back and flogged the rogue ball at the Arrows'
seeker.

Shaking her head when the Arrows' home crowd masses all booed him, Hermione poked off towards the nearest set of stairs she spotted, intent on finding the boxes where the personal guests of players were supposed to sit. She strolled along idly, keeping one eye on the game and watching Thorfinn terrorise the pitch with his bludgers and his wicked aim until she came across a food stand selling hot chocolate and warm pumpkin pasties. She lined up to get one before fishing some money out of her pocket to purchase them, wandering off with the drink in one hand and her pasties in the other.

"Excuse me, could you tell me how to get to Bats' player boxes?" Hermione asked a security guard standing around and keeping an eye on things.

"Let's see that pass, little lady," the man said, picking up the all-access pass hanging around her neck. "Well now, you'll be looking for Rowle's box, I reckon. Go up those stairs over there, right to the top."

Hermione nodded her head, thanking him before heading in the direction he'd pointed and climbing the stairs. She felt better when she spotted Thorfinn's grandparents watching from their seats, rugged up warmly against the cold as snow began to fall heavily. The box was mostly empty, in fact. But for Pandora and Titus Rowle, the only other occupant in the box was Antonin Dolohov.

Smiling in greeting, Hermione moved over to say hello to Pandora and Titus Rowle, offering them both a pumpkin pasty from the bag of them she'd purchased.

"Oho, and what are you doing here, little lady?" Titus boomed, snagging hold of her and dragging her into an affectionate cuddle of greeting. "Don't suppose those wayward granddaughters of mine are with you?"

"Hi, Grandad." Hermione grinned, hugging the huge man in return and thinking again that it was obvious where his son and his grandson got their hulking size. "No, Reina and Luna aren't with me. Finn snatched me from Hogsmeade when I was doing my Christmas shopping. Reina, Luna and Ginny aren't old enough to be allowed on Hogsmeade trips yet."

"Sneaky brat, isn't he?" Titus boomed with amusement. "You'll likely be in trouble if anyone knows you're missing, little lady."

"It's unlikely anyone will notice my absence as long as I'm back before the allotted trip time is up."

Hermione shrugged her shoulders, noticing the way Pandora Titus and Antonin all looked at her sharply for her self-deprecating statement.

"We'll just have to make sure you're back in time for that then, won't we?" Pandora smiled, wrapping an arm around Hermione and giving her a comforting squeeze.

"Hopefully it'll be a short game today," Titus agreed. "Too bloody cold for a long one. Especially with this bloody snow."

Hermione smiled to herself, feeling a swell of affection in her chest for Finn's grandparents. Despite her being in Gryffindor and despite the age difference between her and Finn and between her and Reina, they had both take a shine to her and treated her like she was part of the family.

"Hopefully O'Brien will catch the snitch fast," Hermione agreed, sipping her hot chocolate and ignoring Antonin for the time being. "Though, even if she doesn't, it looks like the Arrows might be down a few players before the game ends."
She winced as she watched Thorfinn belt a bludger at one of the Arrows' Chasers when he wasn't looking. It collided with the man's head and knocked him out cold, sending him plummeting from his broom to the ground with a sickening crunch. The crowd booed and hissed at Thorfinn, shaking their fists and threatening violence on the man while the Bats' Chasers raced off with the Quaffle to score the first goal of the game for their side. She cheered along with the rest of the Bats supporters even as the Quaffle was put back in play, the Arrows playing with one player down.

As per the rules of Quidditch, there could be no replacements to take the spot of the fallen player in the match. Subs were allowed on the team should someone get sick before a game, but the minute the balls were released, the seven players to each side were the only ones allowed to play in that game. The Arrows would have to play with six until the player recovered from the blow, or until the game ended – whichever came first.

"I'm hungry now," Titus complained a little while later, after having helped Hermione polish off all the pasties in her bag. "Who else wants something to eat? Antonin? You hungry, lad?"

Antonin looked over, before nodding carefully.

"We'll get it, if you want, Titus," Antonin offered. "Come on, kid."

He got to his feet before Titus could stand and offered his hand to Hermione the same way Finn had done, planning to help her to her feet like he were a proper gentleman. Hermione eyed him suspiciously for a moment before sliding her gloved hand into his and getting to her feet.

"What would you like?" Hermione asked of Thorfinn's grandparents politely.

"Whatever they have that will fill me up, little lady." Titus smiled. "Dora, love? Are you hungry?"

"Just something small, Hermione dear. Here, take this to get it," she tried to hand Hermione some money but both Hermione and Antonin waved their money away.

"We got it, Gran," Antonin assured the woman when she looked like she was going to fuss.

"No, don't be silly, take it," Pandora tried to say.

Antonin tugged on Hermione's arm, smirking at the older woman and pulling the younger witch away even though she'd had no plans to accept the money either.

"We'll be back shortly," Hermione promised the elderly couple who both were watching them with fond, yet exasperated expressions.

Walking in silence with Antonin, Hermione shot a glance at the Russian wizard out the corner of her eye.

"So..." Hermione began. "Cousins, huh?"

Antonin missed a step on the way down the stairs and Hermione lunged to grab him before he could topple down them all. He shook her off impatiently and turned to glare at her.

"You know about that?" he demanded, his eyes narrowed on her coldly.

Hermione nodded. "I'm told that you did me an enormous favour sending me the Dark Blade. Claimed me for the Dolohov line, eh? So much for me being... how did you like to put it?... Oh yes, a filthy little mudblood."
"Don't get smart with me, witch," Antonin warned her, his eyes narrowed. "I found out that you're technically my fourth cousin. Since I've seen how you like to play with Slytherins who ought to know better, I did you a favour."

"You did Finn a favour," Hermione corrected him. "Not that his family would care one way or the other that I'm muggleborn, whether I'd been given Dolohov House backing or not."

"You never know," Antonin retorted. "And what makes you think it was a favour for Thor?"

"You mean other than that he sends me his jerseys to lay claim to me so any other boy who takes a fancy to me knows to keep his hands to himself?" Hermione raised one eyebrow.

His eyes narrowed on her again.

"What do you know, little witch?" he asked suspiciously.

"I know Finn admitted to his intent to 'come back for me' and that he admitted to giving me the jumpers with his name to warn others away." Hermione shrugged her shoulders, "I also know that though he argues that things like betrothal bonds need to be reciprocated and must be sparked with magical intent, there seems to be some intriguing side-effects when I remove those beads from his hair and put them back in again."

Hermione squawked when Antonin suddenly grabbed her and hauled her bodily into what looked like a bathroom stall.

"Hey! What are you doing?" she demanded, her hand diving for her wand only to be seized and squeezed tightly until she dropped the weapon with a clatter upon the floor.

"Listen, you little brat," he warned her in a low voice, shoving her up against the wall and hold her at wand point. "I don't care if you and I are distantly related or not. If you do anything to fuck Thorfinn over by being a careless little snit, I will end you. Is that clear?"

"What could I possibly do to him, Toshka?" Hermione hissed, her eyes narrowed.

"Don't fucking call me that! Only Thor and my mother call me that."

"As though I don't know that?" Hermione scoffed, one eyebrow raised in challenge. "I've Russian roots too, genius. Explain why you're threatening me this instant, Dolohov, or I'll maim you."

"If you don't know why I am, you're thicker than I thought," he snarled, an icy glint in his eyes.

"Since you only reacted this way to the idea of something to do with a betrothal bond, I'm going to go ahead and assume that you know I've been asking Finn about it and that I've been told – more than once – that it seems as though I have one. With Thorfinn. He denies it, but you know the truth, don't you?"

Antonin's eyes narrowed to slits. "If Thorfinn says you don't have a betrothal bond, then you should believe him."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "He would lie about it if he had plans to tell me at some later date because he knows I'd be furious about having one without consenting to it."

"What makes you think you have one?" Antonin demanded. "A few jumpers? Some kids telling you that it looks like you belong to Thor?"
"I believed him when he said 'no', when I asked him," Hermione replied. "But I also felt slivers of cold invading my magic every time I pulled one of those beads out of his hair. And a giddy sort of warmth when I put them back in again. Not to mention that despite the number of witches I do not doubt Thorfinn has snogged, I watched him get so giddy he seemed almost drunk after snogging me just before the game."

"You've been snogging him?" Antonin asked, his expression shifting slightly.

Hermione nodded.

"Fuck. Well… bloody hell, witch, how old are you again?" he demanded, looking concerned as he looked her up and down. Hermione didn't doubt that dressed as she was – swamped by the fabric of a jersey made to fit Finn – she looked even younger than she was.

"I'm fourteen," Hermione replied evenly.

"Too bloody young for him, still," Antonin growled, shaking his head. "Fucking hell! He needs it and you're bloody helping him, but fuck, you'll ruin him if I don't interfere."

Hermione felt a sliver of fear coil through her.

"What, exactly do you know about betrothal bonds and what makes you think you have one with Thorfinn?" he demanded, his wand digging into her throat as he continued to threaten her.

"I know that they link two people together and that the longer they last as a betrothal bond the harder they are to circumvent. I know that if I had one, it would make forming any kind of romantic bond with anyone else difficult. I know it will make times I spend with Thorfinn more… well, for want of a better word, more real. Happier. It won't make me love him, but it will make me feel like he's the missing piece to my puzzle."

"And what do you know about the effect of having such a bond and committing sexual acts with someone not your betrothed?" Antonin asked.

"Nothing." Hermione shook her head. "Though, I think I could take a wild guess towards uncontrollable rage that taps into one's core magic and causes accidental outbursts at inconvenient moments when the other person is 'cheating'."

Antonin continued to eye her coldly.

"You really are too clever for your own good, you know?" he asked her mildly. "Too clever to keep from landing Thor in a world of pain and trouble too. Betrothed or not, you're too young to be dating him or courting him, Granger."

"I'm aware of that. I told him that," Hermione replied. "If he's caught with a minor, he'll lose his sponsors and be shamed out of the League."

"And I don't trust you two not to get caught," Antonin muttered. "Not when I know him like I do."

"There's also the fact that I have to complete the Rites," Hermione muttered, staring at him. "Finn initiated me before he left school. I have to complete all those tasks, including the ones that involve sexual stuff."

"Fuck!" Antonin snarled, his wand digging into her neck even more and fury flashing in his eyes, making him look unhinged. "You're not going to be able to do all that with Thor. Not without getting caught. Dumbledore's wards on the castle will alert him to unknown presences if he tried
sneaking in to fuck you in the library or on the Astronomy Tower. I'm assuming that's why you
made a bargain with Theodore Nott toward seeing those tasks ticked off your list?"

"You know about that?" Hermione hissed. "Who the hell is reporting to you two? It can't be Theo.
He swore me to secrecy over it."

"I know and Thor knows," Antonin muttered. "How we know is not important because you're
going to forget we know. You're also going to start seriously working your way through that
fucking list, witch. And you're going to forget about any notions of betrothal bonds with Thor."

"Oh, am I?" Hermione challenged coldly. "And just how do you plan to make me do that,
Toshka?"

Hermione blinked in shock when his wand suddenly left her throat and pointed right between her
eyes.

"Legilimens."
Chapter 21

Antonin dove into the mind of the young witch before him, feeling her initial, natural resistance against the intrusion attempting to fend him off with little more than a sear of her magic against his own. Antonin easily overpowered her. Delving into the many memories he’d come searching for Antonin narrowed his eyes in annoyance at what he encountered; he’d purposely quizzed her on what she knew, intent on bringing it all to the forefront of her mind to better access it.

And he felt a scald of fury in his veins when he uncovered just how much the little witch had gleaned from her interactions with Reina, with Theo Nott, and with Thorfinn himself about the idea of a betrothal bond. One, with Thorfinn, to be exact. He smirked to himself just a little when the witch struggled feebly, trying to escape his tight grip and succumbing to unconsciousness when she was unable to fling him from her mind. Antonin moved quickly then, poking about inside her head, finding and gathering the extent of her knowledge on the subject.

He was tempted to simply obliviate all the memories right out of her head, but he decided against it when he realised that she would need to know eventually. It just simply wouldn't do to have her know until it was more prudent. More importantly, it wouldn't do to have her know until her knowing wouldn't put Thorfinn's career at risk; wouldn't put his sanity at risk. He was beyond furious with his best mate for inducting her into the Rites in the first place. Were it simply that she were reaching an age where snogging and sex was something she'd begin looking into, he'd have been able to simply suppress such an urge within her mind until she was of age.

With the requirement of the Rites, however, it was another matter entirely. She would have to complete the blood oath, or she would lose her mind as surely as Thorfinn would lose his if she did complete it. Worse, she would lose her ability to use magic and that wouldn't do at all. Even if she was just a meddlesome little mudblood. The trouble became that, with the spells Thorfinn had enacted to link the two of them together, he would face a fate worse than death should Hermione Granger fail to meet her blood oath to complete the Rites.

Gritting his teeth, Antonin decided on a temporary but graceful solution to the problem. Using a containment curse he tended to use most frequently in his work as a Curse Breaker to protect himself and others from the potentially harmful magic he encountered, he gathered her memories, thoughts and discoveries that focused specifically on betrothal bonds, collecting them together. He was forced to sever a few thoughts and memories, removing the effects of the bond from some memories, such as her putting those beads in Thor's hair. He locked anything pertaining to even the idea of a betrothal bond inside the containment charm in her mind, like a locked vault that she would have a hard time breaking into until such time as Antonin himself undid the curse, or until he died – whichever came first.

When everything was sealed, Antonin poked about in her head a little more, examining a few other memories and using a filtering charm to ensure further discussion pertaining to betrothal would filter into the mental vault he'd created and be more easily distracted from than her regular thoughts. He smirked as he used it, having altered the Notice-Me-Not charm to work on the mind and make people forget things he didn't want them thinking about.

It wouldn't do to have her break her blood oath, and so she needed to complete the Rites. It seemed he would simply have to perform some restrictive magic upon her bond to partially suppress the effects of her being intimate with other blokes. Thorfinn would still get echoes – much the same way Antonin himself got echoes from Tatiana, even now, but surely he could find something to help his friend keep his sanity. Nudging around inside her head, he performed another charm to
increase the effects of her body's natural maturing speed, to better nudge her towards being willing to have sex and get it all out of the way sooner. The faster she completed the Rites, the better it would be. If it was a long, drawn out process of snogging in broom cupboards until she felt comfortable, Thorfinn would surely go mad and commit murder.

Casting a Memory Charm on the final few minutes with her since he'd dragged her into the bathroom stall, Antonin slipped free of her mind, struggling for just a moment when her unconsciousness proved a slight hurdle. She hung limp in his hold and Antonin noticed idly that sometime since she'd passed out, he'd scooped an arm around her back, supporting her slight weight easily enough. Shaking his head at the little witch and how much trouble she was proving to be, he wondered for a long moment while he stared if he shouldn't just kill her now and be done with it. No one would know it was him. He could say she'd left to go to the bathroom and that he'd found her this way when she hadn't returned.

It would be so easy, and while doing so would surely hurt Thorfinn now, it would help him in the long run. Narrowing his eyes on the witch, he stayed his urge to kill her as he cast one more spell upon her.

"Ostende Vincula," he muttered and he had to blink several times in surprise at the amount of bond lines that erupted from within her chest, suddenly visible to his gaze.

He was rather alarmed to find one of a blood red shade travelling from her to him, linking them as members of the same bloodline, however distantly related they might be, as a result of his acknowledging her. She had many more of them, though Antonin couldn't tell who most of them might connect to outside of those that undoubtedly represented her parents, given their blood red shade. The one he was looking for, however, was the brightest and most blinding of them all.

Her link to Thorfinn was strong – even stronger than Thorfinn's had been when last Antonin had used this charm on him. The bond between them glowed so bright that it almost blinded him but Antonin focused on the glowing strands of colour, noting with some satisfaction that the most prevalent colour glowing amid the rainbow was the bright, dark shade of pink, gleaming with the inarguable sheen of affection that bordered very closely upon love. Despite seeing him so infrequently, the little witch definitely fancied Thorfinn.

At least there was that, he supposed. Even without the betrothal bond between them preventing her from making any kind of meaningful connection to anyone else, her fancying Thorfinn would certainly keep her from falling for anyone else. Especially if the big haired bastard had been kissing her. Even if she loved the big-haired fucker, the spell he'd done on her would like see her completing her Rites sooner rather than later, but the sooner she did it and realised she still fancied the pants off Thor, the better things would be for everyone involved.

Releasing the magic once more and watching the colours fade, Antonin narrowed his eyes on the little witch once more, his mind racing with how he would convince her that he hadn't just been inside her head. He'd removed her memory of the discussion, but how was he to make it look like he'd 'found' her slumped against the wall.

Smirking to himself, he lowered her against the nearest wall within the small washroom and let her slide down it as though she'd fallen faint all of a sudden. He shook himself for a moment before performing the spell to revive her and made a show of nudging her with his foot as though trying to rouse her as her eyelids fluttered.

"A-Antonin?" she asked, blinking up at him dazedly.

"You alright, witch?" he asked gruffly. "Been in here awhile."
"Why am I on the floor?" she muttered, her cheeks darkening, "I… how did I even get here?"

Antonin smirked, watching her now-addled mind trying to piece things together to figure out why she was having trouble knowing where she was and why she had so little memory of getting there.

"You said you weren't feeling well," he shrugged. "But you've been in here more than ten minutes now."

She blinked stupidly for a few more minutes and Antonin sighed, holding one hand out toward her to get her back on her feet, playing innocent as though it weren't his fault she was in such a state.

"I don't remember anything after coming down the stairs," she admitted, her cheeks pink.

"Could be all the Side-Along Apparating," Antonin shrugged. "There's a reason you're supposed to wait until you're of age, or close to, before trying it. Thor's been popping you about all over the place. Might've addled you a bit."

"I feel light-headed," she nodded. "And like I can't think properly."

Antonin nodded too. "Apparating side-effect."

She didn't look entirely like she believed him, but she took his hand nonetheless and let him pull her to her feet before she stumbled over the bathroom sink to wash her hands and her face thoroughly.

"You want me to take you back to school?" he offered, trying to play nice with the witch, no matter how he personally considered her little more than an inconvenience.

"No." She shook her head. "I… Finn wanted me to see the game. And he said he wanted to talk to me about something after it."

Antonin's eyes narrowed on that bit of news, not at all thrilled to hear that. Thorfinn was probably thinking of confessing to her about their betrothal, and that wouldn't do at all. Making a mental note to beat the snot out of his best friend, Antonin shrugged his shoulders. Even if Thorfinn directly told her they were betrothed at this point, the spells he'd done would make her feel vague and distracted by other things to the point where the information wouldn't register at all, except to sink inside the mind-trap he'd created inside her head.

When – if – the time came that he would remove it, she'd know, but who knew what kind of damage would be done by then. He might just have to guilt and shame Thorfinn into keeping things to himself for a bit longer. The effect of the bond making him so giddy was obviously messing with his ability to think like any regular, calculating Slytherin ought to think and that wouldn't do either.

"Come on then," he shrugged at the witch. "Let's get the food we promised Pandora and Titus and return to the game before it's over."

Hermione nodded her head, still looking rather confused, but also eyeing him as though she were grateful he'd bother to supposedly come searching for her when she hadn't returned from her trip to the washroom. Antonin hid his smirk when he saw the vaguest hint of trust in him beginning to glow in her eyes.

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"What the fuck do you mean, Toshka?" Thorfinn snarled at his best friend, having been cornered in
"I mean that if you even think about telling her the truth about that bond, she's going to be furious with you and she's going to try to run from you," Antonin snapped at him and Thorfinn narrowed his eyes on the man.

He'd been surprised to find Toshka already waiting for him in the sheds when he got back from the game they'd just won, smashing the Arrows three hundred and seventy point to two hundred and ten. He hadn't expected that Toshka would even make it to the game at all today, given that he'd been working on some new thing the Goblins were looking into pertaining to the vaults belonging to the last remaining heir to the Black family fortune – under scrutiny after a large sum of money was missing alongside the recent escape of Sirius Black from Azkaban prison.

"What the hell do you even know about it?" Thorfinn hissed, leaning closer to his friend.

"I know she's been wearing a stupid grin on her face the entire time she's been sitting in that box and arguing magical theory with you grandmother, even when I throw in unhelpful and borderline rude comments," Antonin shrugged. "Making me think that someone gave her something she can't stop smiling about."

Thorfinn narrowed his eyes on the man.

"What are you accusing me of?" he snarled.

"Nothing you haven't done to her before," Antonin argued. "Look, I don't doubt that with you bond freshly renewed, you're high on the fucking magic but the last thing you want to do is tell that little witch that you two are betrothed."

Thorfinn frowned at him.

"If I don't tell her, she's going to keep snogging that kid of Nott," Thorfinn argued, ignoring the way his teammates were eyeing them curiously.

"Yeah, she is," Antonin agreed with a grim nod. "And you're going to have to let her, Thor. She's initiated in the fucking Rites, remember? You know the type of shit that's on that list. There's no way you could sneak in there to help her complete all the sexual ones. Hell, she's still got to snog a Gryffindor, a Hufflepuff and a Ravenclaw. And that's not taking into account the number of times she's going to have to shag someone inside that castle in random places."

"You've been arguing with me all along that when she sleeps around, it's going to make me crazy," Thorfinn whispered.

"And had you not been a fucking thick-headed bastard prone to panic and done all that Dark magic to tie her to you so completely, I'd still be telling you to sever the fucking bond. But if you sever it now, you'll be worse off than what you'll be when she starts shagging. You can't be the one to help her with it. Not all of it, in any case. Things like fucking her in Hogsmade? Fine, take her around back of the Hog's Head and hard-fuck her into the wall. Things like shagging in a teacher's office without getting caught? No way an alumni visitor doesn't set off the wards and attract enough attention that you'll pull it off. And if you try to pull it off anyway, she'll get expelled and you will go to prison for statutory rape of a minor – no matter how willing she is."

"You want me to just grit my teeth and bare it when she fucks around?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

"That's what she has to do every time you get laid," Antonin retorted coldly and Thorfinn winced,
knowing that his sexual appetite had caused her a good deal of grief already. "But if you tell her about the bond, she'll run. And you'll still be just as bonded to her, only she'll make sure you won't get the reciprocation of any kind the way you have been until now. And then you'll end up like me. Do you want that?"

"You're not that bad," Thorfinn shrugged at his best friend.

"I found her passed out in a bathroom stall when we went for snacks and she ducked to the bathroom feeling unwell," Antonin told him. "Slumped against the wall, looking pathetic, and do you know what thought went through my mind when I looked at her – a girl I know is important to you and a girl I've claimed as fucking family - you know what I thought?"

Thorfinn gritted his teeth, suspecting from the cold gleam in Toshka's eyes that he really didn't want to know what the bastard had thought when he found her.

"I stared down at that little brat whose only crimes have been a misfortune of birth and the unwitting instigation of this connection to you and I thought seriously about killing her and putting you out of your misery. I nearly did it, Thor. Would've been easy. No one would've known it was me, she wouldn't have been found until later and you'd be free of your bond. You'd be bereft for a bit, but you'd get over it and move on without the complication of being betrothed to a child," Antonin voice was devoid of any emotion, his eyes glittering with an icy depth that scared Thorfinn just a little bit.

"If you ever try to kill her, Toshka," Thorfinn threatened in a low voice. "So help me, Merlin, I will never forgive you for it."

"One day, you'll eat those words, Thor," Antonin promised in return. "One day soon, she's going to fuck someone who isn't you and you're going to have no choice but to suffer the wretched, aching, stinging burn inside your chest of knowing the woman you're betrothed to is cheating on you. And when that day comes, you'll kill people. You'll kill people and you'll curse her fucking name and the day you ever met her. Eventually, by the time she's through with the Rites, you're going to be begging me to kill her for you, or itching with the urge to do it yourself."

Thorfinn watched the way his best mate narrowed his eyes slightly, nodded once and then turned on the spot, Disapparating with a sharp crack.

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Hermione was greeted with a pair of hands gripping her hips tightly before she was tossed high into the air and held aloft by a laughing, celebrating Thorfinn Rowle when the players descended on the player-boxes after the game. She'd been feeling rather dizzy and light-headed throughout the remainder of the game after being found by Antonin in the bathroom, unconscious, and so she tried to hide her wince for the sake of Finn's exuberance. She didn't want to ruin his game-winning high with her sour mood and so she concealed the way she felt even dizzier to be being tossed about.

Not that he was rough about it. He held her above his head as though she were a trophy he was triumphantly displaying while he grinned at her.

"You won," Hermione smiled at him.


"Told you that matches were different to training," Hermione smiled.

"You alright, Princess?" he asked her, lowering her until she was pressed to his chest, his arms tight
around her.

Hermione nodded.

"You sure? Toshka said you passed out in the bathroom?" Thorfinn asked, his brow furrowing with concern.

"Too much Apparation, maybe?" Hermione shrugged her shoulders. "Or possibly the strain of that combined with the extensive use of the Time-Turner messing with my system and pushing me a bit harder than I ought to push."

"You could have been in real trouble if he hadn't found you, Kitten," Thorfinn told her.

"I know," Hermione nodded. "I thanked him. I was even polite to him. We didn't fight, even once today."

"Progress," Thorfinn smirked. "That will come in handy when you visit with me at our place for Christmas."

"Who says I'm coming to your place for Christmas?" Hermione wanted to know, a smile pulling at the corners of her mouth.

"I do," Thorfinn grinned at her. "The Irish play the Bulgarians in one of the opening International League matches for the season. Both teams are tipped for favourites for next year's World Cup. You have to be there. Mum and Dad gave Reina permission."

Hermione felt the smile escape her hold, curling her lips and making her smile widely at his words and his certainty that would go with Reina to visit him at Christmas.

"You really want us there, clogging up your space and getting in the way?" Hermione asked him sceptically.

"You're my good luck charm, remember?" he asked, smirking at her. "Got to have you there, Princess. Might not win the game if you're not there."

Hermione rolled her eyes at him, regretting it when it made her headache worse.

"You're an idiot," Hermione told him and Thorfinn shrugged his massive shoulders unrepentantly.

"I need to get you back to school before anyone has a fit about you being gone," he said seriously, frowning a bit at the idea.

"They're likely already having a fit, given that I'm close friends with Harry and according to the Ministry, Sirius Black is after him. They probably think he's snatched me as bait to lure Harry to his doom," Hermione sighed.

"Are you up for being Side-Along Apparated again, or do you need me to find a Floo to send you through, Kitten?"

Hermione thought about it for a long moment, weighing the options.

"Flooing will draw too much attention," she concluded finally. "Anyone who sees me coming through the Floo will wonder where I've been. If you apparate me, I can just pretend I was hiding out in the bookshop the whole time and they didn't see me when they went looking for me. Of course, when I turn the Time-Turner, I'll only have been 'missing' for about twenty minutes instead
of nine hours."

"The game did go for a bit longer than I anticipated when I grabbed you," Thorfinn chuckled nodding, "Close your eyes, Baby-girl. Let's get you back."

Hermione glanced towards Thorfinn's grandparents, both of whom were across the crowded box, not paying them any mind. She thought briefly about being sure to say goodbye, but Thorfinn didn't give her the chance. Closing her eyes, Hermione burrowed her face into his neck, feeling his hair tickle her skin. He cuddled her a little closer to his chest before he turned on the spot and there was a sharp jerk behind her navel.

Hermione blinked slowly, feeling dizzy when she opened her eyes. He had landed them both in the alley behind the pub, The Hog's Head. She could hear the sounds of Aurors and the teachers hunting around the place, trying to find her and she winced to know she would be messing with time so much that all of these people would instead do something completely different with their afternoons when she turned the Time-Turner so no one would know she'd disappeared.

"So, how does it work, Princess?" Thorfinn asked her, leaning against the wall and still cuddling her to him rather than letting her down. "Am I going to remember snatching you from the Village today?"

"Erm..." Hermione frowned. "Not unless you turn back the clock with me. Which will mean that the you who takes me to the game will still do that, will still play the game and will still win. But there would also be another you who would be able to, I don't know, go home and catch a nap or whatever you feel like doing. Something that would mean you won't be seen, since everyone knows you're supposed to be at that game and many people saw you there. If anyone sees you anywhere else, they'll know something is off."

"The same could be said for you," he argued.

"Not necessarily. The only people who know I was at the game are you, your grandparents, Antonin and the team because they saw me in the sheds. Essentially time will loop, if you loop with me, until you'll be back at the stadium before disapparating me. Meaning you'd have to fill in nine hours until apparating back under the pretence of having returned me to school."

"Sounds complicated." He made a face. "You do this every day?"

"Multiple times," Hermione nodded. "It's how I'm managing so many subjects at once."

"Bloody hell, no wonder you passed out. Shame I can't just spend the extra nine hours tormenting you," he grinned, lowering her slowly to the ground.

"You can't because otherwise I won't be able to explain your presence to my friends when you're meant to be off winning the match," Hermione smiled at him.

"Right, well, I'm turning anyway. I don't want to forget spending the day with you, Baby-girl."

Hermione made a face at him even as she fished the device from the front of her robes.

"Bend down, idiot," she told him, "I've got to get this around your neck."

Thorfinn did as he was told, bending until his face hovered in front of hers and Hermione was able to loop the chain of the Time-Turner around his neck.

"It's a bit disorienting," Hermione warned him, just before she began to turn the little hourglass,
retracing the hours lived and watching the evening light recede back to the brightness of midday.

"Bloody hell," Thorfinn complained when she fished the chain from around his neck. "That's worse than apparating. What now, Baby-girl?"

"Now you have to find somewhere to hide yourself for nine hours and I have to go and meet Harry and Ron out by the Shrieking Shack," Hermione sighed, tucking the chain back down the front of her robes. "I think I might make an excuse about being tired and go to bed, to be honest. I'm still feeling dizzy."

He nodded his head.

"You never gave me an answer, you know?" he told her, "You're coming to my place with Reina for Christmas, right?"

"I'll have to check with Mum and Dad if they're alright with it," Hermione told him.

"Tell them you're staying at school," Thorfinn shrugged. "Then come with Reina to mine when we Portkey over. You know your folks will say no if they think it's just going to be you, me, Reina and Toshka."

"With good reason," Hermione pointed out.

"Don't be a spoilsport, Kitten," he chided, poking her in the side affectionately. "Just say you'll do it and find a way to make it so you can do it without the complications of your parents fearing for your innocence."

"He says, as though he's not planning to thoroughly corrupt my innocence." Hermione laughed, blushing when Thorfinn winked at her in amusement and didn't deny the accusation. "You're trouble, Thorfinn Rowle."

"You love me," he retorted and Hermione's cheeks brightened to red once more.

"Dream on, Finn," Hermione told him. "I better go, before Harry and Ron come looking for me and sound the alarm."

"Probably," Thorfinn nodded. "How long is it until Christmas anyway?"

"Forty-three days," Hermione told him.

"Not that you're counting," Thorfinn laughed.

"I'm not," Hermione smirked. "But I bet you will be now that I've agreed to visit."

"You're a real piece of work, Granger," Thorfinn told her, laughing at the way she wiggled her eyebrows at him knowingly.

"You love me," Hermione parroted back at him.

"Witch," he accused, smirking, and Hermione noticed with a bright blush that he didn't deny it. Her stomach did somersaults at the very idea. "Now, shut up and kiss me, woman, and then go play with your friends."

"Are you always this needy about snogging?" Hermione asked drolly, trying to hide her wide smile and trying to still the riot of butterflies inside her stomach.
"Needy this, Princess," he told her, stooping down as one of his hands tangled in her loose curls, tipping her head up before covered her lips with his.

He kissed her with just enough fervour to make Hermione breathless and dizzy all over again and she found her fingers tangling into that wind-swept blond mane of his as she kissed him back hungrily. Warmth rushed through her, making her giddy with happiness at the feel of his lips – chapped from the icy winds of the match – moving so skilfully against her own.

She gripped the front of his Quidditch uniform, her body pressing closer to his as his tongue swept into her mouth. Hermione heard the soft sound he drew from her even as he swallowed it, his tongue stroking surely against hers and making her thoughts scatter once more. His fist tightened in her hair when Hermione leaned into him even more, kissing him harder, feeling parts of her body tingle and ache with warmth at his ministrations. Her back pressed against the wall of the pub behind her as he curled his free arm around her waist, lifting her against him once more.

Hermione didn't even have to think about it as she wrapped her legs around his waist, her ankles locking at the small of his back. Shifting against him slightly, Hermione broke away from his lips when she felt lightheaded from the lack of oxygen, kissing her way across his cheek. She didn't know which of them was more surprised at the soft groan he emitted when she nibbled his stubbled jaw lightly.

"Bloody hell, Princess," he muttered into her hair, his teeth finding her earlobe and nibbling there while Hermione trailed kisses against his throat. Her whole body felt like it was on fire and she felt like she wanted to climb inside of him and never leave. When she tightened her ankles and slid against his front to reach more of his neck, he hissed slightly, his hand shifting to her hip and holding tightly.

"Don't do that again, Princess," he whispered. "Or that innocence of yours will be mine, here and now."

Hermione didn't know which of them was more shocked when a little giggle escaped her mouth before she very deliberately did it again.

"Merlin, witch," he growled, pulling back far enough to pry her lips from his neck and to press her to the wall a little more firmly with his hips as he stared at her, his eyes wild and hungry.

"Something wrong?" Hermione asked, smirking at him even as she tried to catch her breath and tamped down the urge she had to blush and giggle like the school girl she was.

"You're going to be the fucking death of me, Princess," he muttered, his blue eyes darting between both of her chocolate ones searchingly.

Hermione smiled at him.

"You better let me down," she told him. "Harry and Ron will be looking for me."

"That's all you have to say?" he asked, smirking at her.

"What were you hoping to hear instead, Finn?" Hermione asked, raising her eyebrows as she unhooked her ankles from around his waist and slipped back to the ground, standing on knees that were wobbly and weak from his ministrations.

"Nothing appropriate for a fourteen year old to be saying to me," he muttered truthfully, stepping back from her slightly and carding a hand through his own hair as though fighting the urge to grab her all over again.
"Are you going to remind me of my age comparative to yours every time you see me, Thorfinn?" Hermione asked, raising one eyebrow as she stared up at him.

"Oh, I'm not reminding you, Princess," he assured her, narrowing his eyes slightly. "I'm reminding myself so I don't do something stupid like shagging you, right here."

Hermione felt her heart skip several beats and the butterflies in her stomach transformed into rampaging elephants, trying to get free. She was sure that her cheeks were crimson, and yet her mouth engaged without permission from her brain when she said, "Well, maybe the next time you see me, you can just conveniently forget about my age altogether."

The heat in his gaze at her words had Hermione clapping her hand over her mouth, her eyes going wide as her brain caught up to what she'd just said and her cheeks flamed crimson once more.

"Um… I… erm… I'll see you at Christmas, Finn," Hermione stammered out when she saw the smug, hungry expression on Thorfinn's face.

She turned and hurried away from him before he could reply.
Chapter 22

Hermione Granger was in a fiery mood three weeks after the incident with Thorfinn. Her magic crackled across her skin, purple and green flames dancing at her fingertips as she stomped down the corridor, intent on returning to the common room to work on her homework for Ancient Runes before dinner. She had already had to turn the hours four times to attend all of her classes for the day and get her Care of Magical Creatures homework done. To make matters worse, she’d been struck by another of those bursts of furious energy that seemed to randomly seize her and she had no idea why or what to do about it.

She wanted to set something on fire, but she didn't dare.

She was muttering her herself about all the little things in her day that had irked her, trying to pinpoint which one of them was the most likely cause for her foul mood, when someone grabbed her from behind and hauled her none-too-gently down the corridor and into a broom cupboard.

"What do you think you are doing?" she demanded in a furious voice, having no idea who had just accosted her even as she was thrust into the dark of the cupboard – which smelled vaguely of cleaning products and dust.

"Shhh," a voice hummed by her ear that she was sure she wasn't familiar with.

Hermione saw red at her captor shushing her and the flames on her fingertips flared into fireballs that lit up the entire cupboard.

"Bloody hell, Granger! Are you doing that wandless and non-verbally?" Theo Nott's reedy voice invaded her senses, penetrating some of the rage.

"So what if I am?" she hissed, spinning in his hold to face the dark haired boy and finding he'd backed across the small space of the cupboard to lean against the far wall.

"You really are brilliant, you know?" he remarked, eyeing the flames with interest. "But put them out, would you? Before you burn me?"

"I don't know if I can," Hermione admitted quietly, closing her fists and watching the fire shrink once more, though little sparkles of green and purple licked across her fingertips.

"Does it hurt?" Theo asked, reaching carefully for her wrist.

"No," Hermione shook her head. "But they only happen like this – outside of my control - when I get really angry and I don't know why."

"Can I touch?" the boy asked her, looking intrigued by the little flames as they danced.

Hermione opened her hands slowly, watching the flames as they moved, like wisps in the wind, across her skin, jumping and dancing softly.

"If I scream, take me to the Hospital Wing, yeah?" Theo confirmed.

"I don't think they'll hurt you," Hermione said, eyeing the flames with interest. "Not unless I attack you with them. But if they do, yes, I'll take you to the Hospital Wing."

Theo nodded his head before carefully reaching for her fingers. He brushed his own against them
carefully before pulling back. A little frown marred his brow and he did it again.

"They tingle," he smirked at her. "I can't decide if it's a good or bad tingle."

Hermione watched the way he slipped his fingers between her own, interlocking them with hers.

"Was there a reason you hauled me into this broom closet, Theo?" Hermione asked, lifting her gaze from their joined hands to meet his dark eyes.

"Been meaning to talk to you about our little arrangement," he nodded. "You never did clarify what you want out of this – other than my help with how to be more Slytherin and eventually my help to shag you for the tasks on the Rites of Passage list."

"I'd have thought that was clarification enough," Hermione frowned at him. "I specifically remember telling you I had no interest in making you my boyfriend."

Theo's little half-smirk that could so effectively make her feel stupid pulled at the corner of his mouth.

"I sometimes forget between our interactions, how blunt you are," he told her, tipping his head to one side as he regarded her thoughtfully. "But that wasn't exactly what I meant. Essentially you want us to be friends and you want us to shag, yeah?"

"Essentially." Hermione nodded. "Why?"

"Have you heard of the concept of being friends with benefits, Granger?" Theo asked her.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You dragged me into a broom cupboard because you wanted to label this thing between us?"

She snorted in amusement, genuinely tickled by the notion that he felt the need to label it that way.

"Labels are important, witch," he chided, clucking his tongue idly. "And anyway, I wanted clarification on how you would define such an arrangement and whether or not you mean to limit the sexy stuff between us only to the things on our lists or if you'd be open to the idea of… outletting certain grievances through one another?"

Hermione felt a half-smirk of her own pull at the corners of her mouth. "Something bothering you that you think could be solved by a bit of snogging, Theo?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," Theo replied, though being so upfront about the idea looked almost painful for him to admit. "I hardly think I need to tell you that there are certain things that rub me the wrong way."

"Do I get to know what's rubbed you the wrong way enough that you want to snog me silly in a broom closet?" Hermione inquired curiously. "Keep in mind that you did say 'friends with benefits'."

Theo's lips twisted as though he didn't want to tell her.

"I'll tell you what's pissed me off if you'll tell me what's made you cranky enough that you're muttering to yourself, stomping in the halls and expressing what I'm beginning to think is accidental magic since you have so little control over it."

Something that was proven when a stab of fury suddenly surged through Hermione entire being
and caused the flames upon her hands to shoot up both of their arms. Surprisingly, neither of them caught fire, though Theo did tremble as though the tingling were bordering on being uncomfortable.

"I take it you don't like to be asked about it either?" Theo quirked an eyebrow at her.

"No, it's not that," Hermione muttered, her teeth suddenly clenched. "I... I don't know what this is, if I'm being completely honest. Since the summer holidays at the end of first year I've been getting these random surges of uncontrollable rage. When they first started happening I set my whole house on fire. They aren't constant, but sometimes they wake me up in the middle of the night, completely furious, but with seemingly no reason for my being in such a foul mood. At first I thought it was just really bad PMS, but the attacks are random and don't match up with my cycle."

"I'm not sure we're close enough friends just yet for you to be telling me about your PMS and your cycle, Granger," Theo said dryly.

"Don't be ridiculous. You plan to be shagging me at some point in the future, you better hope you know about my cycle by then otherwise you might go sticking your hands in my knickers and not liking what you find," Hermione retorted, watching the flames dance up Theo's arms as the anger inside her surged again.

"Blunt. Gryffindors are entirely too blunt," Theo complained. "But you said this random rage has been happening since you were given that bracelet at the end of first year, yeah?"

"I don't know," Hermione said, her brow furrowing when she found she had trouble thinking about the bracelet at all, even when talking about it. "Maybe."

"And I'm supposed to believe you're not bonded to anyone?" Theo muttered. "Secrecy is definitely key here."

"Secrecy indeed. Now, are you going to tell me why you're in a bad enough mood to seek me out and ask if I'll be your emotional outlet through physical interaction?" Hermione asked, her mind skipping over his words without really registering what he'd said.

He eyed her curiously for a long moment.

"We all have our triggers that set us off, Granger," he shrugged his shoulders slightly. "Mine tend to include getting a shitty grade and being rebuked for it and for being beaten out by a muggleborn for top of the class. Again."

"Letter from home, huh?" Hermione said knowingly.

"My father is less than pleased with my most recent grade in Herbology." Theo nodded, looking away.

"The group project?" Hermione confirmed. "You got stuck with Ron, Terry Boot and Hannah Abbott, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Theo sighed, untangling one of his hands from hers and running it through his hair as though talking about it annoyed him.

"If it helps, I was paired with Susan Bones, Crabbe and Anthony Goldstein, and we did pretty rubbish too." Hermione offered kindly. "The only group who got decent grades were Neville's group because he's nutty enough about plants that he knew every answer on that pop quiz."
"You didn't get full marks?" Theo asked, his gaze darting back to hers.

Hermione shook her head.

"We barely scraped an Exceeds Expectations," Hermione told him. "Goyle's fault, of course. He completely bungled his bit and Professor Sprout docked a few extra points because I tried to take over Goyle's bit when he messed it up."

"Still better than barely scraping an Acceptable," Theo grumbled. "But if you'd be willing to take my mind off the punishments I've been threatened with, that would be spectacular." Hermione chuckled at his words.

"So that's where we land?" she asked, raising one eyebrow. "We can't date because we don't actually click romantically, but you're happy to shag me?"

"There's plenty of spark," Theo pointed out, shrugging. "And I'd date you, if you wanted to, but you said you didn't. Though you're a bit blunt for my tastes as a girlfriend. There's also that whole secrecy thing we agreed on so Rowle doesn't take my head off for laying a hand on his witch."

"I don't belong to Thorfinn," Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Don't you?" Theo asked, challengingly, even as another flare of green and purple flames raced up both of their arms, all the way to their shoulders.

"Are you going to keep making comments, or are you going to snog me, Theodore?" Hermione demanded.

"I'm not going to do anything until you confirm that you're alright with the idea of being friends with benefits and using one another as an emotional outlet. I don't want to be consoling you later when you think that me pulling you into broom cupboards or behind tapestries means more than that I'm pissed about something," he informed her coolly, eyeing her closely.

"Are you going to object to me returning the favour?" Hermione asked him seriously, raising her eyebrows.

"No," he shook his head. "I am at your disposal whenever you need to be snogged until you forget your frustrations."

Hermione grinned at him.

"I assume you have some kind of clause you want to add to it about me not snogging anyone else?" she asked curiously.

"I don't do exclusivity, Granger," Theo shook his head. "If I walk in on you snogging Weasley or, hell, snogging Malfoy for all I know, it's not my business. I mean, as your friend I might ask for juicy details that I can manipulate the tossers with later, but if you're not my girlfriend, you don't owe me your fidelity, sweetheart."

Hermione thought about it seriously for a long moment before another surge of rage coursed through her, seemingly for no reason and she threw caution to the wind. The fact was that she liked Theo. She enjoyed his company more than she'd expected – having worked with him in the library a few times since they'd made their deal – and though his twisted sense of humour didn't usually appeal to her tastes, he was fun. She also knew he wasn't going to tell anyone what they did and she found she rather liked discretion in such things.
"Well, alright then," Hermione nodded. "But if you're planning to turn this into a shagging arrangement, you'll need to get up to date on my PMS and I'll need notice to begin brewing and taking contraceptives."

He shot her one of those half-smirks he was so known for.

"You think of everything," he complimented.

Hermione nodded in agreement and she felt a tingle race across her skin when he stepped closer, closing the distance between them before he ducked his head and captured her lips with his own. A surge of magic rushed through her at the contact, his tongue sweeping into her mouth and bringing his peppermint flavour with it. Hermione sighed against his lips, distracted, somewhat, from her fury when a steady warmth began to build below her abdomen.

Theo used his grip on her hands to lift them above her head, pressing them to the wall and snogging her hard. Hermione snogged him back enthusiastically, finding that while he didn't have the same giddiness-inducing effect on her system that Thorfinn had when he snogged her, he certainly made her feel things. Gripping his hands tight even as he pinned hers above her head, Hermione tangled her tongue with his and let her rapidly firing brain shut off for a little while.

He pressed his body against hers and Hermione felt a smirk against her lips when he pressed his lower half to hers intimately, using his knee to drive her thighs apart. She could feel his arousal and knew she wasn't the only one being effected by the feverish kisses.

Another surge of rage, this one more powerful, slammed into her and Hermione whimpered at the fury of it pulsing through her body. Twisting her wrists until he released them, Hermione tangled one hand into Theo's dark hair, flames threatening to explode from her fingertips. When he reached with one hand to grip the back of her knee and haul her leg up, better insinuating himself between her thighs, Hermione whimpered at the feel of the hot, hard bulge he pressed to her core.

Working her fingers against the buttons of his shirt, Hermione popped each one through its hole until his uniform white oxford hung open. Theo trembled against her when Hermione smoothed her hands under the fabric, trailing them hotly against the tight expanse of flesh for the first time. He snogged her even harder, his lips almost bruising against her own, but Hermione was too angry to mind.

Theo jerked back when she gripped his hips tightly, trying to pull him even closer and he hissed between his teeth in surprise.

"Bloody hell, sweetheart!" he muttered, glancing down at her hands where she'd dug her nails into his skin.

Those green and purple flames still danced upon her fingers, but Hermione could tell that wasn't the reason for his exclamation. Breathing hard, she squinted at the sight of what looked like flame shaped burns of green and purple seared into his flesh.

"Oh no!" Hermione whispered. "Did that hurt?"

"Erm..." Theo said, strangely at a loss for words. "I don't really know. Feels kind of good but stings too. Do it again."

"I don't know how," Hermione admitted.

"Grab me and pull me closer again," he shrugged.
Hermione did as he asked, tugging him to her, her nails digging into his skin, the flames crawling across her fingers and seeming to seep into his very flesh.

"Mmmmm," Theo's eyelids fluttered. "Fuck, Granger! It's like they brush right up against my magic and leave marks."

"Does it hurt?" Hermione asked. "I can't really get a sense of my magic touching yours when I do it."

"It's tingling sort of burn," he told her. "Like when your feet go numb and then you get into a hot shower, that burning feel as warmth returns."

"Do you want me to stop doing it?" Hermione asked.

"Can you?" Theo challenged in return.

"I don't know," Hermione admitted. "I don't think so."

"Only happens when you're angry, yeah?" he asked, raising one eyebrow at her.

"Yes, but only when I'm angry and don't know why. If I'm just ordinarily cranky about something like Ron being rude to me or some such thing, the flames don't happen," Hermione explained, still panting slightly from their snogging session.

Theo's expression twisted slightly, a knowing glint coming into his eyes.

"Pretty sure I could tell you what the surges of rage stem from," he muttered. "You feel inexplicably jealous when you get angry like this, yeah?"

Hermione nodded her head, her brow furrowed.

"You're so screwed," he muttered. "And I am going to hell if Rowle ever finds out about you and me. I'm thinking he knows too, right now he's probably experiencing the same kind of rage and jealousy coursing through him. Especially if I do this."

He captured her jaw in both hands and leaned into her once more, snogging her hotly. His tongue swept into her mouth, assured of his welcome and Hermione dug her nails into his skin once more as a surge of heat swept through her when he snogged her like that. The kiss was all too brief, yet made her breathless just the same, before Theo pulled back once more, a wicked grin on his face and a cruel gleam in his eyes.

"Do me one favour, yeah?" he asked, his voice husky from snogging her so hotly.

"Hmm?" Hermione hummed curiously, not trusting herself to speak without suggesting they get back to the snogging.

"Every time you feel that kind of jealous rage filling you up, you find me, yeah?" Theo said, smirking wickedly in a way that made her think he was definitely up to something.

"You like the burn of the magic against yours?" Hermione frowned. "You do realise those might scar permanently, don't you?"

"Oh, they won't be permanent, but they'll last a few day every time you do it," he chuckled cruelly. "Just promise me that whenever you can do so without us getting caught, come and find me when that rage courses through you, alright?"
Hermione nibbled her bottom lip thoughtfully for a moment.

"Ok," she whispered, nodding her head, peering into his face while she went back to nibbling her tingling lips and hoping he would snog her again.

"And I thought I told you not to do that?" he muttered, smoothing the pad of his thumb along her lower lip and prying the plump flesh from between her teeth, that strange look coming into his eyes that he'd gotten the last time she'd done it.

"Are you going to keep telling me what to do, Nott? Or can we get back to the snogging?"
Hermione grumbled.

Theo's amused chuckle was pure sin even as he leaned into her once more, his lips devouring hers and making her forget almost everything he'd just said.

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Thorfinn was in the middle of snogging some bird who'd accosted him at the pub where he and the team were having a few pints after practice. He'd dragged the witch home with him for two reasons. He hadn't been laid in a while, putting it off for as long as he could to preserve the effect of renewing his bond with Granger, and he'd intended to keep putting it off until two things occurred to him. The first was that she would be coming to stay with him in a little over a week. The flat he lived in with Toshka wasn't big enough to go throwing mattresses on the floor in the living room and so Reina and Hermione would be bunking in with him.

He planned to enlarge his bed big enough for three and to stick his favourite little lioness between him and his sister. The idea that he would be sharing his bed with her, however, had made him realise that unless he meant to fuck her – something that was going to be awkward with his baby sister in the same city, let alone the same room – he was going to have to clean out the pipes.

The second reason he had for hauling this particular witch – whose name he was still uncertain of – into his bed was that she was just his type. Petite. Brunette. Curly haired. And just forward enough that she'd snagged his attention when she'd walked right up to him and snogged him. The perks of being a celebrity. Rolling his eyes to himself behind his closed eyelids while he snogged the witch stupid, Thorfinn could practically hear Hermione's voice in his head, accusing him of being a slag and using his fame to lure unsuspecting women to their doom upon his cock.

The thought had him snorting in amusement and the witch he was snogging jerked back from him suspiciously.

"Something funny?" she asked breathlessly.

"Nothing." Thorfinn shook his head, chuckling to himself as he smirked.

He peeled the witch out of her jumper and her shirt until she stood in his bedroom wearing nothing but her muggle jeans and her entirely too skanky bra. Thorfinn almost rolled his eyes at the sight of the thing. This witch had clearly set out this afternoon with the intention of getting laid. That much was clear from the see-through lace that did nothing to hide the rosy pink pebbles her nipples made inside that bra. He'd bet she had knickers to match, too.

He was in the middle of snogging her hard and pressing her back into his headboard when the surge of rage accosted him and Thorfinn growled in the back of his throat, flames springing from his hands.

"Oh, Merlin," the slag he was snogging gasped, jerking in his hold as the flames on his hands
"Shit, are you burnt?" Thorfinn asked through gritted teeth.

The witch only moaned and reached for him, peeling him out of his shirt and unbuckling his belt hungrily while she snogged him once more. The rage coursing through him couldn't be contained, but Thorfinn knew that if he didn't channel it, he'd burn down his own fucking flat and apparently having the flames sink into the witch in his hold meant they didn't burn. Or if they did, if wasn't enough to make her want to stop.

Letting the rage pour through him, Thorfinn channelled it all into her. Her jeans and knickers shredded under his hands in a barbaric display of strength and he bit down on her throat hard enough to draw blood. If she minded, Thorfinn couldn't tell. He was too angry and she was moaning and writhing as though the flames that were quickly devouring her skin—covering her flesh in green and purple marks—were divine torture, wiping her mind of anything but pleasure.

The jealously and pain and fury coursing through Thorfinn could only mean one thing. Hermione was snogging some bloke at Hogwarts right that second—potentially in retaliation to know that Thorfinn himself was sleeping around—and it hurt like fuck. His mind threatened to give into the rage before the red haze descended as he tore his trousers off and buried his cock inside the witch who looked so much like Hermione, but wasn't her.

He could feel the bond between him and his witch ripping, little tears forming in the betrothal bond that linked them together. And he fucked the witch under him all the harder in response. She groaned and squealed and Thorfinn cursed Hermione's fucking name as he pounded into the witch in his bed. The colours of the flames still spreading across his fingers glowed an eerily bright green and an uncomfortably dark purple, sinking into the bitch's flesh and leaving long marks upon her skin.

Thorfinn was too angry and too gone to the rage to care if he was hurting her anymore. He hated her. He hated Hermione. He wanted to fucking kill her right in that moment and he found his fingers tightening around the throat of the witch he was fucking, grasping tightly and watching more marks appear upon her flesh. She looked so much like his witch, and was so into it, even as elsewhere in the world, his actual witch was letting someone who wasn't Thorfinn put his hands on her.

A roar of furious agony and rage tore from his throat, drowning out the garbled scream he drew from the witch impaled upon his cock as it emptied. He released her throat in fear of actually killing her, snatching hold of the headboard so tightly that the fame splintered in his grip. He jerked back from her in concern when she laid limp beneath him, green and purple marks like flames across her thighs, her hips, her stomach and her ribs. More still raced up her neck, almost hiding the hand shaped bruises on her delicate throat. Thorfinn stared at her, horrified when, amid the green and purple, streams of obsidian flames also marred her flesh.

"Fuck!" Thorfinn whispered. "Quincey!"

The elf appeared, looking concerned and obviously able to feel the rips forming in his bond to Hermione. She had tears in her eyes.

"Master?" the elf asked quietly.

"I need you to find Toshka and bring him here. Interrupt him. I don't care where he is, bring him to me," Thorfinn said.
He nudged the witch he'd fucked and he felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He'd killed her. He'd strangled her or he'd burned her to death. She didn't move upon the bed, sprawled at an uncomfortable seeming angle, her throat bearing bruises from his grip. Staring down at his hands, Thorfinn clenched his fists. He couldn't even touch her to take her pulse because the flames still danced upon his hands. The rage still coursed through him and he lunged to the side, flipping his desk and scattering his belongings in a vain attempt to channel his rage to something that would rid him of it.

"Thor? You sent the elf after me? What the….. Ah, fuck!" Antonin's voice intruded as Thorfinn continued destroying his belongings.

"Toshka… I… I think I killed her," Thorfinn whispered, turning to his friend when Antonin strode into the room.

"Shit," Antonin muttered, moving quickly toward the girl where she laid upon the bed. He pressed his fingers to the side of her neck, feeling for a pulse.

Thorfinn's heart raced inside his chest, fear coupling with his rage and making him crazy.

"She's not dead," Antonin told him quietly. "But her pulse is weak. Shit."

Thorfinn watched the way he pulled his wand and began casting charms on the witch. Horror filled him all the more at the cold, calculating way Antonin obliterated the witch of the time she'd spent with Thorfinn; at the clinical way he stuck his wand tip inside her orifices and removed all traces of Thorfinn's DNA from her person; the almost casual way he handled the prone body of the girl.

"Black flames, Thor?" he asked quietly as he worked, reaching for her clothing, cleaning and repairing the garments before using magic to dress her once more.

Thorfinn nodded mutely, not trusting himself to be able to speak with screaming.

"You know what that means, don't you?" Antonin asked. "Hatred. Black is for hatred. And I'll bet it was directed at the witch this one looks like, not this one herself. You choked her?"

Thorfinn nodded again.

"Quincey, where is Granger right now?" Antonin asked of the elf.

"She's at Hogwarts, Master Antonin," Quincey murmured, "She be… well, she kissing someone who isn't the Master."

"Just kissing?" Antonin asked.

Thorfinn felt a sinking pit in his stomach when the elf shook her head, tears pouring from her eyes as her ear flapped from side to side.

"She be unbuttoning shirts and touching flesh. She be letting that boy put kisses here," Quincey indicated to her chest where the tiny bulges that were her breasts were hidden under her pressed pillowcase, "She be leaving green and purple marks on him as well, Master. But he not be minding. He say they feel good."

Thorfinn shoved over his bookshelf and put his fist through the wall in his fury.

"You knew this would happen, Thor," Antonin told him sternly. "It fucking aches like a bastard, and I know you want to rip that kid limb from limb and probably take Hermione over your knee
you knew this would happen. What did you expect when you initiated her into the Rites and then reciprocated the bond with her? Did you think you'd be able to sneak into Hogwarts to help her complete it?"

"Don't fucking stand there are give me the fucking 'I told you so' speech, Toshka!" Thorfinn snarled. "What the fuck do I do?"

"You screwed yourself over," Antonin shrugged his shoulders. "The only way to end your bond with her to for her to die. So either you kill her yourself or you let someone else do it, but your only other option is to suck it the fuck up and deal with it while she completes the Rites. If she's already letting them into her shirt, it won't be long before she lets someone into her knickers."

"That's not fucking helping!" Thorfinn snapped.

"What do you want from me, mate?" Antonin demanded. "It's a fucking cunt. I know. I've been there. I've done this," he pointed to the witch on the bed where she was still covered in marks and still unconscious. "More times that you bloody know. You're giving me that look like I'm a fucking monster when I wipe her memory and clean her so they can't pin her condition on you as though I haven't done it for myself a hundred times before. Only in this instance we don't live in the Hogwarts castle anymore so I can't just leave her somewhere for someone to find, I'm going to have to drop her at a hospital. Those flame marks all over her? They appear because your magic literally burned through hers. She's almost dead. The only reason she's still breathing is because you came fast enough that you didn't deplete her magic entirely."

"I didn't even touch her with my magic. I'd have felt it," Thorfinn muttered, turning from his destruction of his personal belonging to stare at his friend.

"When the bond rips, it damages your magic," Toshka shook his head. "It depletes some of it because the longer the bond exists before you marry that little brat, the more your core magic wraps itself around hers and vice versa. That's why, in the old days, they bonded children at birth. By the time they were of marrying age, they were so entwined that the marriages worked, even if they hated each other. But when you fuck someone who isn't Hermione, and when she fucks someone who isn't you, the bond tears. I showed you on my bond what that looks like. If you do it at the same time, the rip is worse and you lose control of your magic. It attacks the person you're each fucking, drawing on their magical energy to replenish the tear. You tore it hard enough that you nearly killed this girl, sapping her magic to fix the tear. The less magically powerful a person is, the more easily the magic depletes."

"I leached her magic?" Thorfinn asked.

"Yep," Antonin nodded. "It will replenish naturally and actually make her more powerful when she recovers. When the stores get low enough to put someone in a coma like this, their core magic unlocks, unleashing the untapped parts of themselves they might never have unlocked on their own."

"Miss Hermione's partner," Quincey spoke up softly, interrupting. "He asked Miss Hermione to find him every time her fingertips flame those colours, Master. He say to her that whenever she be feeling the rage, she to find him and put these marks on him."

"Theodore Nott? That's who she was with?" Antonin asked.

"Yes," Quincey nodded.

"He knows." Antonin smirked cruelly. "He knows you and Granger are betrothed and he's going to
fuck her anyway. He's going to let your bond rips unlock more of his power each time."

"He not be drained like this, Master," Quincey pointed at the comatose witch on the bed.

"No, he wouldn't be. The boy's from an old and powerful House. And he understands how the magic works. He'd be feeding some of his magic into Granger willingly, letting her draw on it in increments so she doesn't deplete him and have them both get caught. He knows she's bonded to someone and he's using it to his own advantage. If they aren't fucking yet, it wouldn't draw on him as hard either," Antonin said, looking thoughtful. "Are they still at it?"

"No," Thorfinn spat the word through gritted teeth, his fists clenched by his sides. "They've stopped."

Antonin smirked a little and Thorfinn kind of wanted to punch him.

"Good. You get this mess clean up then. Burn the bed, you hear me? You don't want this connected to you in any way. If anyone saw you leave the pub with her, they'll investigate you. Burn the bed, clean this mess up and make sure any trace of her being here is erased. Quincey, give him a hand, alright? Trace charms for her magical signature and her DNA are what they'll look for if Thor is investigated. Anyone looking into this will pin you with attempted murder and magical depletion if you're caught, Thor, and then they'll look into you and who you're betrothed to. The last thing you need is a reporter getting wind that you're betrothed to a fourteen year old. They'll run stories and you'll be kicked from the League if they think you're corrupting or molesting a minor," Antonin told them. "I'll deal with the slag."

"What are you going to do with her?" Thorfinn asked, frowning.

"Never you mind," Toshka told him. "But she needs medical attention. I'll get her to a hospital undetected so this won't come back on us. Destroy the evidence that she was ever here, Thor. And be prepared for the charms I'll be doing on you when I get back so they can't read her magical signature currently plugging the holes in your bond with Granger. They hurt like all buggery."

With that said he scooped the girl off the bed and into his arms before Disapparating with a sharp crack. Thorfinn glared around his destroyed bedroom for a long minute in silence before he lunged at the nearest wall, putting his fist through it again in his fury.
Hermione held her breath as the International Portkey landed her and Reina on Irish soil. She shook her head to fight the slight dizziness.

"Are you alright?" Reina asked her, looping her arm with Hermione's as they moved along with the crowd of people who'd taken the Portkey, through the international travel check-in point.

"I'm fine," Hermione smiled, "And you?"

"Peachy," Reina grinned, "I prefer Portkey over Side-Along Apparating though. It was wretched the last time Thorfinn apparated me anywhere."

"I know what you mean," Hermione nodded, handing the witch checking people's travel documents her permits and watching her stamp them.

They both waited to be processed before being allowed through the arrivals terminal and Hermione looked around curiously, her eyes instantly drawn to the enormous Viking of a wizard where he stood awaiting their arrival.

"There he is!" Reina crowed, "Thor!"

She waved wildly before racing towards her big brother and Hermione chuckled to herself when the tiny blonde witch barrelled into the arms of the huge blonde wizard. Thorfinn caught his sister and tossed her high into the air with a shout of laughter at her enthusiasm, clearly pleased to see her. Hermione looked on, smiling to herself as she strolled towards the siblings at a more sedate pace. Thorfinn looked like he'd grown again. He seemed even bigger than he'd been just a month ago, his shoulders looking broader, his muscled arms more strapping than ever.

The training regime they had him on for both the International League with the Irish and the national British league was obviously doing him some favours.

"I missed you so much!" Reina was telling her brother, clinging to his neck as though she were still a toddler rather than a witch of twelve.

"Missed you too, brat," Thorfinn chuckled, "How's school been treating you?"

"Good," Reina grinned, "I got a really good grade in Potions the other day."

"Even though you're a Gryffindor and Snape hates you feisty little lions?" Thorfinn smirked.

"Even though," Reina practically glowed with pride over her most recent grade.

"Well look at you go," Thorfinn chuckled, lowering the small witch back to her feet as Hermione drew level with them.

"Princess," Thorfinn grinned at her.

"Thorfinn," Hermione replied, smiling at him in return, all too aware that the last time she'd seen him, she'd snogged him and rubbed herself all over him before rushing off.

"Miss me?" Thorfinn grinned at her, holding his arms open a bit and clearly waiting for her to cuddle him.
"Don't be ridiculous," Hermione rolled her eyes at the suggestion even if it was true. She had missed him.

Merlin, some days she ached with missing him and she didn't know why. Well, she did. She'd fallen in love with the big idiot of a Viking and being away from him and his cool wit and his warm hugs was utterly wretched. There was just something about him that made her feel happy every time she spotted him and she almost laughed at herself when she had the thought, recalling that when she'd been in first year, the sight of him had filled her with apprehension and a little fear. Now the sight of him filled her with butterflies and made the corners of her mouth pull up.

Stepping into his embrace, Hermione looped her arms around his waist, pressing her face to his chest and breathing in his familiar citrus and smoke scent. He hugged her close and Hermione sighed against him, feeling a strange knot of tension she'd felt in her belly slowly begin to unfurl as she cuddled into him once more.

"You're a liar, Baby-girl," Thorfinn told her quietly, "I reckon you missed me like crazy."

"Why's that?" Hermione muttered into his chest, "Because you missed me that much?"

He chuckled softly.

"Maybe it is," he replied quietly, squeezing her a bit closer for a minute and Hermione felt like her heart could sing at his words.

"You two are hopeless," Reina announced as they broke their embrace slowly, "Just admit you're mad for each other and get on with it, would you?"

"Shut it, squirt," Thorfinn popped his sister in the back of the head, but didn't deny her accusation while Hermione's cheek glowed a pretty shade of pink, "Come on, let's get you two back to my place and get you fed. It's pretty late."

"You're the one who told us to take the latest portkey for the day," Reina reminded her brother.

"I had practice until about twenty minutes ago," Thorfinn shrugged.

He led them both over to the Apparation point within the Ministry and Hermione closed her eyes and she took one of his hands while Reina took the other, a sharp jerk behind her navel pulling them all away.

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Thorfinn Rowle fought the urge snatch his witch up in his hold and never let her go. It was true that he'd missed her rather more than he realised. It was also true that when he'd watched coming through that arrival terminal with his baby sister by her side, that he'd realised how young she still was. She might be mature for her age and he might have begun to fancy the little brat more than he ought to, but the fact was that she was still just fourteen.

He'd been so focused on the mess with their betrothal and the bullshit deal she'd made with Theodore Nott that he'd almost managed to forget that she was still just fourteen. Just a kid, really. Of course she was snogging boys in broom closets. She didn't know they were betrothed because he'd been lying to her about it since the beginning. Thorfinn knew he should just step back. That he needed to let her get on with things and if he was being honest, that was his plan.

After this little break with her staying over Christmas, Thorfinn planned to pull back with the girl as much as he could without driving them both mad. He had to let her grow up and he had to stop
thinking about those words she'd said to him in Hogsmeade last month when he'd pinned her to the wall of that pub and snogged her silly. They'd been playing on a loop inside his head, telling him to conveniently forget her age and have his way with her and fuck it all, he'd been planning on it too.

At least he had until he'd spotted her walking with his sister and it had occurred to him that if any motherfucker was planning to do to his baby sister the things he'd already done to Hermione, Thorfinn wouldn't hesitate to kill them. She was too young and she needed to learn how to have fun and be a teenager before he would even think about the things he wanted to do to the witch. Even if it meant he had to deal with the wretched ache of her snogging Theo Nott or whoever took her fancy. The only other option as to ask her to be his girlfriend and Thorfinn wasn't ready for a long distance relationship with a witch he couldn't even fuck yet.

Sighing as they entered his flat, Thorfinn watched both witches look around curiously. It wasn't much, really. Small and a bit cramped compared to Hogwarts or the Tower, but it served his purposes well enough.

"Toshka?" Thorfinn spotted his best friend reclining on the couch in one his pyjama pants and nothing else and rolled his eyes, "We've got company, you tosser, put a shirt on."

"Blow me, Thorfinn," Toshka retorted without looking up from his book.

"Hi Antonin," Reina laughed, moving over to ruffle the Russian wizard's dark hair, not at all concerned by his shirtless state given the number of times he'd spent at the Tower when they'd still been at school and she was just a tot.

"Reina?" Toshka asked, lifting his gaze before grinning at the girl he'd all but adopted as his sister, "Well look at you, krasivaya."

Reina blushed and swatted at him.

"Don't try and sweet talk me in Russian, you git," Reina told him, "Just get up and give me a hug, would you? I haven't seen you in more than a year!"

Thorfinn watched them interact when Toshka laid down his book and pulled the small blonde witch into his lap rather than getting up, still heedless of being shirtless. He slanted a glance down at Hermione, who was in the process of removing her scarf, her gloves, her hat and her cloak. He kind of liked the way she hung them on the hook next to his things and Thorfinn smirked to himself.

"You want tea?" he asked her nudging her to get her attention when she turned her eyes to the flat, taking in the details that made up the home he shared with Toshka.

"Oh, yes please," she smiled up at him for a moment.

"And you're here too, eh suka?" Toshka said to Hermione by way of greeting.

"Hello to you too, mudak," Hermione retorted, not at all seeming phased at being referred to a 'bitch' or minding as she called Toshka an arsehole in return, "Miss me, did you?"

"Mechtat', witch," Tohska rolled his eyes and Thorfinn cocked his eyebrow at Hermione when she laughed, not knowing the language well enough to know what he'd said to her. He might speak some of it and be rather proficient at the swear words given how often Toshka used them when addressing him, but he didn't know all of it.

"He told me to dream on," Hermione smiled at him, "Where are Reina and I sleeping? I should put
"You're both bunking in with me," Thorfinn grinned at the little witch.

She looked startled.

"In your bed?" she squeaked and Thorfinn caught the way Toshka and Reina were both smirking at her reaction.

"Unless you'd rather climb in with Toshka?" Thorfinn winked at his witch.

"No, thank you," she replied, making a face and not bringing the topic up again.

Thorfinn was a bad influence. That much was clear later that evening, well after the Reina would usually have gone to sleep, when the Viking of a wizard carried his tiny, slumbering sister to bed and tucked her in. Hermione watched him as he did so, her own eyelids heavy with the need for sleep. Thorfinn and Antonin had held off on decorating for the holidays and Reina had been having entirely too much fun covering the entire flat in yuletide decorations.

Hermione had snuck off and grabbed a shower when the boughs of holly Reina draped over everything got to be a bit too much for her. Snuggled into her purple flannel pyjama bottoms and wearing one of Thorfinn's old Quidditch jerseys, Hermione had been ready for bed for over an hour but Reina had been so excited to see her brother that she'd insisted on staying up late and talking. Especially when Thorfinn had mentioned he had more training tomorrow and wouldn't be able to spend much of the day with them.

"You alright, Princess?" he asked her quietly when he'd managed to pry his sister's arms from around his neck and pulled the blankets up to her chin, properly tucking her in.

"You're a bad influence on her," Hermione replied, smiling softly and trying not to notice the caring and rather adoring way he looked after his baby sister.

"I am not," he disagreed, "You're the bad influence. You're the one who brought her out of her shell. Before she met you, Reina was a demure little wallflower who never talked too much or did anything that might be construed as breaking the rules."

Hermione laughed quietly at his words while she eyed the girl, "No, I don't imagine anyone who isn't your size is willing to put a toe out of line when your Dad shoot them that stern look."

"Anyone who isn't you, anyway," Thorfinn corrected, "He nearly choked on his whiskey when you back-talked him over the summer."

"He's got some backwards ideals that I'm not afraid to challenge," Hermione shrugged.

"Not afraid of much, are you little lioness?" Thorfinn grinned at her moving around the bed and peeling back to the covers on the far side before nodding her in ahead of him.

"You want me to sleep in the middle?" Hermione asked, alarmed by the idea. The butterflies in her tummy fluttered nervously at the thought.

"Not afraid of sleeping next to me, are you Princess?" he challenged.

"Not afraid, no," Hermione shook her head.
"I make you nervous again," he commented, eyeing her for a long moment before he pulled his shirt off over his head.

Hermione's heart skipped several beats at the sight he made, all ripping muscle and strong arms that looked like they were made for holding a witch just right.

"Why would you think you make me nervous?" Hermione asked, all too aware of the way her voice turned husky and the way she was staring at his shirtless chest, her fingers tingling with the urge to trail through the dusting of golden hair covering his chest.

Something made all the more obvious when the press of his fingers beneath her chin forced to her to lift her eyes to his.

"I used to make you nervous because you were afraid of what I planned to do to you back when you were in first year," he smirked at her wickedly, "Now I make you nervous because you want to know what I might do to you, if given the chance."

Hermione felt her cheeks warm, flushing crimson at his assessment. She didn't deny the truth of it. He did make her nervous. He made her feel nervous and excited and apprehensive and hungry for him all at once. The few things she'd done with Theo had been nothing but feverish kisses and timid touches in broom cupboards and empty classrooms. They'd not had the effect on her that Thorfinn Rowle's kiss alone could have had on her. They might still feel good and make a happy little glow come to life inside herself, but where Theo sparked an ember, Thorfinn ignited an inferno of Fiendfyre that threatened to devour her.

"The last time you saw me," Thorfinn went on quietly, "You said something to me about the idea of forgetting how young you still are, Jail Bait."

Hermione gulped and nodded her head.

"Can't do it, Princess," he shrugged his shoulders at her, eyeing her in that way of his that made him look amused and hungry for her at the same time, "Not yet. Not when I know I'd kill a man my age if he even looked sideways at her."

He nodded to Reina where she slept across the bed.

"Can't go making a hypocrite of myself by doing all the inappropriate things I want to do to you when you're still fourteen, Baby-girl," he went on quietly, his fingers caressing her jaw before he used the pad of his thumb to trace the shape of her lower lip gently.

"Oh," Hermione said, feeling crestfallen and trying not to let it show.

"Oh," Thorfinn agreed, "And I've got to tell you, Kitten; if you blush at the sight of me shirtless, it's a sure-fire sign you're not ready to see the rest of me yet."

"I've seen the rest of you before," she reminded him before she could think better of it.

"Yeah, you have," he smirked, "But when that happened, you didn't give me that look like you were three parts hungry to touch and one part terrified over what you might start and not be ready to finish."

"You think I'm scared? Or too immature?" Hermione frowned, tilting her head to one side.

"No," he shook his head, his damp blonde locks shifting as he did so and making two of the beads in the mane of hair click together.
"If you didn't, you wouldn't still be calling me Jail Bait and telling me I'm too young. You think
I'm too immature to understand how sex works, or too childish to consider engaging in the act of
intercourse with anyone," Hermione accused quietly, not angry with him, but rather puzzled.

The truth was, she knew she was too young. She was curious, certainly, and she'd always been
mature for her age, but she knew she wasn't ready yet.

"I don't think that," Thorfinn shook his head again, "But I do think you're too young for it. You're
only a third year, Princess. You've still got some growing up to do before you'll be ready for all I
plan to do to you."

"And yet you say that like you still plan to do them," Hermione pointed out.

"Oh, I'm counting on it, Hermione," he murmured, holding her gaze as his eyes glittered with
unspoken promises of all he would one day do to her.

"And until I'm old enough?" Hermione found herself asking, raising one eyebrow at him before
darting a glance towards the bed he obviously intended to share with her.

"Until then, Baby-girl, you keep all your clothes on and I don't lose any more of mine than this," he
waved his hand at his shirtless state.

"Meaning?" Hermione frowned, wanting to know whether or not she'd be allowed to kiss him
again.

"Meaning if I'm caught doing the things that I've already done to you, I'll be in some pretty serious
trouble, Princess," Thorfinn shrugged.

"Do you doubt my ability to keep secrets?" Hermione frowned.

"Not for a second," he chuckled, "I just doubt my ability to be able to stop when I should. I pushed
you last time I saw you."

"I think you'll find it was me pushing you, Finn," Hermione replied quietly.

He smirked at her widely, a low chuckle escaping him.

"You didn't press me into a wall, love," he shook his head.

"I didn't exactly mind being there," Hermione admitted boldly, though her cheeks glowed.
Thorfinn tilted his head slowly as he regarded her, a genuine smile slipping across his face at her
words as though the admission pleased him.

"I like it when you do that, you know?" he told her.

"Do what?"

Thorfinn waved her towards the bed once more, nudging her towards it until Hermione climbed up
onto the mattress and slid over to the middle towards Reina to make room for him to climb in after
her.

"Admit to what you feel and what you think without trying to hide it for fear of being manipulated
with it," he told her, "Not very Slytherin of you, little lion cub, but I like it just the same."

"You're not planning on manipulating me for admitting that I enjoy snogging you?" Hermione
asked boldly, looking at him as he pulled off his wristwatch and set it on the table beside the bed.

"Well, I might use the information to convince you to do it again," he chuckled and Hermione felt her heart skip another beat.

"The horror," she rolled her eyes at him, shuffling around until she was able to peer at him as he climbed into bed next to her. She watched him shuffle down between the sheets before he waved his wand to douse the lights.

The tension spiked between them in the darkness and Hermione held her breath as she listed to Thorfinn move until he was comfortable. Her heart skipped another beat when she felt his large hand smooth over her hip and curl around her back, scooping her closer until she slid across the sheet and was pressed against him snugly.

"So," he murmured softly, his breath tickling her skin, "What are the chances I get a goodnight kiss, Princess?"

Hermione giggled at his hopeful, yet husky tone.

"How badly do you want one, Finn?" Hermione whispered in return, grinning.

"Ah, so you are learning to be a bit Slytherin after all," he chuckled as though the idea delighted him, "Badly enough that I know I shouldn't ask for one because I'm not sure I'll be able to stop at one."

The butterflies in her stomach rioted at his words and Hermione's breath caught in her chest. Godric, but she wanted to kiss him too. She wanted to feel him press her into the mattress like he'd done when he'd snogged her at the Tower. She wanted to tangle her fingers in that thick golden blonde mane of his and lose herself in the feel of snogging him. And he'd just admitted to wanting to snog her too.

Reaching carefully for his face in the dark, Hermione wriggled until she could find his face, cupping his stubbled jaw in her hands before she leaned towards him shyly. He gave the faintest hum of delight when she leaned in and brushed her lips against his softly, just the barest hint of a touch.

"Tease," he accused when she pulled back slowly.

"You really ought to figure out just what label you're giving me, Finn," Hermione laughed softly, "Tease. Cock-Block. Sadist. Jail Bait. Which is it?"

"All of them at once, you little vixen," he retorted, "Because you tease me and you cock-block me by being Jailbait, thereby making you a sadist."

"You're the one with too many morals about my age," Hermione blurted out before she could think better of her words.

"I'm the one who's going to end up dead if anyone finds out all I've already done to you and what mean to do to you," he corrected, "So hush up and kiss me, witch, before I let my hands wander."

"Again with this neediness for kissing me?" she needled, smirking to herself in the dark even as she leaned in, brushing another chaste kiss against his lips in the dark and feeling his hands on her waist tighten reflexively.

"Don't start that again," he warned her huskily, "You're trouble, Baby-girl."
Hermione smirked against his lips when she kissed him again, a bit harder this time with just the faintest nibble of his lower lip. When his mouth opened and his tongue swept out to meet hers, Hermione felt warmth fill her up, a sense of rightness and happiness flowing through her as she kissed him.

He pressed her to his chest and kissed her hot enough to make her toes curl and Hermione was panting raggedly when he pulled away several long minutes later. The faint sound of Reina snoring from the far side of the mattress reminded Hermione that no matter how good snogging him felt, she wasn't supposed to get carried away, not with his sister right in the room with them. Poor Reina would likely be horrified to think that Hermione was snogging Thorfinn at all, let alone doing so while she was around, even if she was asleep.

"That was one hell of a goodnight kiss, Princess," Thorfinn murmured to her when Hermione shuffled slightly, burrowing her face into his chest and not wanting to let him go but knowing that if she kissed him again, things would get out of hand.

Hermione smiled as she burrowed until she felt the faint pressure of his chin resting against the top of her head, her nose brushing his chest lightly. She snuggled in closer to him, liking the way he pressed her to himself even closer before he kicked one long leg over both of hers, fully enveloping her in his embrace.

"Finn?" Hermione whispered sleepily, her eyes closing and her mind beginning to drift towards slumber.

"Hmmm?" he hummed softly, sounding similarly sleepy and content.

Hermione pressed a soft kiss to his chest.

"I really did miss you, you know?" Hermione murmured to him, admitting it for the first time. She felt him press a kiss to the top of her head and she would swear she could feel the grin on his mouth.

"I missed you more, Baby-girl," he whispered just before Hermione drifted to sleep in his arms.

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Thorfinn woke with a wild-haired witch in his spooned in his embrace, a hard cock inside his boxers and a content feeling that permeated all the way through to his bones. Blinking his eyes open slowly, Thorfinn turned his head slightly to peer over Hermione's head and into her face, peaceful in her slumber. Her breaths were slow and even as she slept on and he felt a little smile pull at the corners of his mouth at the sight.

A smile that faltered slightly when he made to lay back down and continue sleeping and instead caught sight of Reina sitting up in bed across the mattress, staring at the two of them.

"Reina?" he asked quietly, trying to avoid waking Hermione.

His sister eyed him in return for several long minutes in silence as Thorfinn stared at her, wondering what she was thinking. She couldn't actually be annoyed with him, though she looked it. She'd known since last year that he and Hermione were bonded.

"You need to tell her, Thorfinn" Reina said sternly.

"You know I can't," Thorfinn protested.
"I don't see why not," Reina argued, "It's not as though she's going to run from you. Look at her. She's in love with you, Thor. And from that goofy grin on your face just now, I'd hazard a guess that you're in love with her too."

"She's fourteen," Thorfinn reminded her, "And I'm almost twenty. I can't instigate some kind of relationship with her that would lead into a betrothal bond or marriage right now. Now without putting my career and my freedom at risk."

"This isn't the muggle world, Thor," Reina rolled her eyes, "Wizards are still backward on the some things, including the idea of underage witches being betrothed to men older than them and including the idea of betrothal bonds like the one you two have to begin with. You wouldn't be prosecuted for anything if you pointed out the bond and said it simply compelled you to act on it."

"I'd still be in trouble, Reina," Thorfinn shook his head, "The bond doesn't make me fall in love with her or make her love me. It can't force us to interact or to feel anything romantic for one another. It can only link us together, let us know when the other one violates the bond by being with someone else, and make it so that when we're together, the bond sings and encourages cooperation by promoting happiness between us. If anyone finds out about me and her, they'll look into how far things have gone and I'll likely be stripped of my Quidditch career at the very least. No one is going to want to promote a player who diddles minors."

"You're not diddling her," Reina retorted.

"What makes you so sure?" Thorfinn asked.

"She's my best friend. She tells me everything," Reina replied.

"Does she?" Thorfinn smirked, "Did she tell you she's been snogging me?"

Reina's eyes narrowed, letting Thorfinn know that Hermione most certainly had not mentioned that they'd been snogging or anything else either, for that matter.

"She didn't have to," the girl replied, looking annoyed, "And she'd likely have wanted to keep it to herself because she probably thinks it will bother me that there's something between the two of you."

Thorfinn narrowed his eyes on his sister slightly.

"Does it?" he asked curiously.

Reina regarded the two of them for a long moment while Hermione let out a strange little snuffling sound and snuggled her face into Thorfinn's bicep, which she was using as a pillow.

"Yes," Reina admitted, tipping her head to one side as she considered, "It bothers me because I know you're lying to her and because I know she met you first, but she's my best friend. It's sort of the equivalent if I were to begin fancying Antonin."

Thorfinn wrinkled his nose at the very idea.

"But, at the same time, I know she fancies you. I mean, she's never said as much in as many words, but I know she does. I can see it when she looks at you, or when the two of you are together. The way she interacts with you is different from the way she interacts with everyone else, you know?" Reina went on.

"In what way?" Thorfinn asked.
"She lights up around you in a way she usually doesn't light up about anything other than books. She gets this little smile on her face and she looks at you as though she wants to peel open the cover of a book and dive into the secrets inside," Reina admitted, "And she has this way of trading barbs and insults that barely mask flirtation with you that I've never seen her do with anyone else. She tends to have to grouse at Ron and nag after Harry when she's not placating one or both of them about something. And with me she's different again. A bit less mother-hen and a bit more fun and silliness, but with you she's witty and biting and flirty. She's not afraid to let you have it, either. Which we both know is very rare indeed when it comes to you. And I've never seen her treat anyone else the way she treats you in regard to being touched. She never crawls into Harry or Ron's laps. She doesn't cuddle them or snog them, or whatever else you two have been doing."

Thorfinn grinned at her words. The idea made him happy. Happy to know that she thought of him differently to how she thought of others.

"So the question becomes that, if you're not going to tell her about the betrothal bond, are you at least going to ask her to be your girlfriend or something?" Reina asked him, "I know she's been sneaking off with Theo Nott when she thinks no one will notice and I don't doubt you've been shagging other witches when they take your fancy. How does that work with the bond between you?"

Thorfinn's mouth twisted into a frown at the reminder, "It hurts like fuck and makes us both lose control of our magic."

"The green and purple flames and temper tantrums she throws for no reason?" Reina asked shrewdly.

Thorfinn nodded.

"I set an entire pub on fire the first time she kissed someone who wasn't me," Thorfinn told his sister quietly, "Nearly killed a few people with it."

"Wouldn't it make sense for the two of you to be a couple, then?" Reina frowned in return, "If you're dating, you won't be snogging other people and won't tear the bond between you."

"She's still fourteen, Reinie," Thorfinn reminded her again, using the nickname he hadn't used for her since she'd been just a girl, "She's not old enough to be dating a twenty year old yet without it being perverted as hell."

"Why, exactly?" Reina asked, "You're already snogging her and probably feeling her up. Which, by the way, is perverted if you're not dating."

"Reina, we live in different countries," Thorfinn sighed, "She's stuck at school and I'm here when I'm not travelling for a game. As it is, I barely have the spare time to write to her every few weeks. I survive mostly on the stories Quincey gives me about her every day. She's got more growing up to do before she's ready to be dating me with any kind of permanence. Imagine if she was my girlfriend and I snogged her at a game and a reporter caught a shot of it. I'd be painted as a perve and she'd get hate mail."

"She already gets hate mail," Reina rolled her eyes, "Well, not mail… but she gets picked on. They call her a mudblood and other unsavoury things at school. People who think you and her are a thing because she's always in your jerseys and wears the jewellery you gave her all hiss at her because they don't think she's good enough for you now that you're famous."

"I know," Thorfinn sighed, "Quincey tells me about it every day."
"So you're not going to ask her to be your girlfriend yet?" Reina clarified.

"Not yet, no," Thorfinn sighed, "Maybe next summer. Or at the end of her fourth year when it's a bit more acceptable for her to have a boyfriend at all."

"And until then you mean to keep snogging her and snuggling her like that?" Reina raised one eyebrow, "You mean to keep shagging other witches and letting her snog or shag whoever strikes her fancy too – most likely Theo – even though you both would prefer to be exclusively with each other? Even though shagging around is probably doing irreparable damage to you psyche and hers?"

"Pretty much," Thorfinn nodded, sighing again as he laid his head back down and tucked the curly-haired witch back into his hold a little more securely, cuddling her close.

"You're an idiot, big brother," Reina told him.

Thorfinn snorted as he closed his eyes, intent on going back to sleep.

"Your opinion has been noted, little sister," Thorfinn replied, "Now hush up. I don't have to be at training for two more hours and I mean to spend the time until then sleeping and cuddling my witch."

Reina snorted at his words, muttering unkind things under her breath as she climbed off the bed and made to leave the room. Thorfinn listened to her go, shaking his head to himself and cuddling Hermione closer to him once more as he began to drift back toward sleep.

He didn't notice that the little witch in his arms opened her eyes, having heard almost every word.
Habits, Hermione found, were easy things to develop and difficult things to kick. In the months that
followed the Christmas she and Reina spent with Thorfinn in Ireland, Hermione fell into a number
of habits. Habits like writing to Finn every week about anything and everything, even if she hadn't
heard a reply from him. It had begun when Harry and Ron had been disgusted with her and stopped
talking to her after she'd reported Harry being given a Firebolt anonymously at Christmas.

They claimed she'd betrayed them and they'd refused to speak to her. Hermione had poured her
fury, her sadness and her annoyance with the situation into letters to Thorfinn, feeling all the better
when he'd write back.

Another habit they'd both developed was of him sneaking her away from Hogwarts on the
Hogsmeade weekends that overlapped with one of his matches on English soil. So far he'd dragged
her along to three more of his games – the rest not falling on the same day or within the time
window of the Hogsmeade trips and thus, not allowing her to attend. Hermione had laughed her
way through many of them, developing a begrudging rapport with Antonin – something helped by
the fact that she'd lived in his apartment for two weeks over Christmas. She loved attending the
games, if she was being honest. She liked the way the team had all grown used to her and began to
expect her in the shed – both the Bats team and the International League Irish team – on game
days. She liked seeing Pandora and Titus at the matches, occasionally managing to catch up with
Thorfinn's mother and father when they could spare the time to attend Finn's games.

The most alarming habit, however, was that she kept finding herself in compromising positions
with one, Theodore Nott, as a result of her final and most insidious habit. Per their agreement, they
sought one another out when they had something to vent over, something to channel their
annoyance about, or even just the urge to snog without the encumbrance of needing to seduce
anyone or having to worry about strings. If she was being honest, Theo was hovering somewhere
between habit and addiction. Being with him was alarmingly easy simply because he asked so little
of her. He was clever enough that they could heatedly debate magical theory; snarky enough to
keep up with her wit when she was in a mood to cuss somebody out who wouldn't get offended;
and cute enough that she thoroughly enjoyed snogging him.

And she so often found herself in these compromising positions with him entirely because she'd
developed a nasty habit of thinking entirely too much about the discussion she'd overheard
between Thorfinn and Reina while they'd been in Ireland. Having believed her to be asleep, their
discussion had been extremely illuminating, even if she did feel like she hadn't grasped the entire
conversation as she drifted in and out of consciousness. Laying there in Thorfinn's arms and
listening to him and Reina discussing the idea that eventually he had plans to, well…

Hermione snogged Theo a little more fervently, pressed into the wall of the sixth floor broom
cupboard, trying to stem the thoughts of just what she'd overheard Thorfinn planning pertaining to
her. The truth was that she was very much in love with the big blonde idiot of a wizard and she'd
been biting her tongue and refraining from speaking on what she'd overheard for months. She'd
been furious to learn that the spy Thorfinn had sent after her was, in fact, his personal House Elf.
There was little to nothing she could do to the elf to warn her away or to insist that she need not
pass along everything she saw or heard of Hermione's comings and goings.

More to the point, she'd been having some trouble understanding just what it was she'd overheard.
Oh, she understood that Thorfinn intended to keep her at a small distance until such time that
dating her would be appropriate. She suspected that when she was old enough, in his opinion, he
would be laying claim to her and the very idea made the butterflies in her stomach riot uncontrollably. Ginny had accused her of seeming downright giddy after the holidays and Hermione hadn't been able to stop grinning the entire time.

She had also learned through her eavesdropping that Thorfinn was the one responsible for giving her to collection of jewellery she'd begun wearing constantly since he'd first given her the bracelet on her wrist. She didn't like thinking about that particular fact, however, because it made her head ache. She knew it was significant that Thorfinn was the one who'd given her the jewellery and she knew it was probably something to be concerned over that he'd been lying about being the one to give it to her.

The problem was, she couldn't quite put her finger on why. Every time she tried to focus too hard on the idea of the jewellery and its significance, her thoughts seemed to flitter about and slip away, leaving her feeling a little dazed until she thought of other things. She'd been putting it down to daydreaming stupid things – something she'd taken to doing where the Viking of a wizard was concerned with an alarming propensity – but Hermione had a niggling sense of doubt gnawing at her mind every time it happened.

And so she'd refrained from mentioning it to him. She was biding her time, intent on bringing up his intentions towards her when she'd met some of the requirements he was insisting on before he would consider dating her. She was increasing the amount of experience she had with a wizard, and she was doing her damnedest to ignore the raging jealousy and fierce rage that coursed through her every time she thought about him being with other witches while he waited for her to grow up.

Indeed, she was walking a knife edge between trying her hardest to be understanding toward the fact that he was a young male in his prime, he was famous, and he had sexual needs that she wasn't allowed to or entirely comfortable with meeting just yet. She wanted to him to be happy and healthy and safe and she didn't want to imagine him suffering as a result of holding out for her – especially when she was similarly engaging in lewd acts with Theo. But she was also insanely jealous and wanted to tell him that if he couldn't keep it in his trousers, he had no business making plans to date her.

Of course, she kept those thoughts to herself because she was mature enough to rationalise that until they were actually a couple - if they ever became one - she had no business telling Thorfinn what he could or could not do with his body, just as he had no say over what she did to hers. And given the number of tasks on her list for the Rites, she was thinking it would be very much in her best interests to keep her mouth shut on who Thorfinn was shagging. She would be required to snog someone from Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. She would also be committing a lot of sexual acts with Theo or whomever else took her fancy that wouldn't blab about it in order to complete the tasks. As such, she didn't need to go dictating to Thorfinn that if he wanted to date her, he'd better go celibate while she slept around.

Hermione liked to think herself mature for her age and so she squashed down the jealousy she knew she had no business feeling. She also didn't want to be a hypocrite and since she had no business telling Thorfinn what he could or could not do with his body, just as he had no say over what she did to hers. And given the number of tasks on her list for the Rites, she was thinking it would be very much in her best interests to keep her mouth shut on who Thorfinn was shagging. She would be required to snog someone from Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. She would also be committing a lot of sexual acts with Theo or whomever else took her fancy that wouldn't blab about it in order to complete the tasks. As such, she didn't need to go dictating to Thorfinn that if he wanted to date her, he'd better go celibate while she slept around.

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And so her habit formed. She over-analysed the things she'd overheard between Reina and Thorfinn. She fought the urge to tell him he was a git for not just asking her to be his girlfriend now when it seemed obvious he fancied her and he'd have to be an idiot not to have realise she fancied him too. And because she was doing both of those things, more often than not, she found herself shooting Theodore looks across a classroom or the Great Hall, or the bloody corridors that
indicated she wanted to snog him again.

Things had progressed far enough with Theo, in fact, that they no longer needed to even discuss what they wanted from one another. They could be sitting in the middle of the library working on a project for class - as the only two among their respective friend groups who took Ancient Runes they were able to fabricate a lot of pair-work assignments for the sake of spending time in one another's company - and Theo would shoot her a look before twisting his lips and nose to one side and Hermione would know he was suddenly in the mood for sneaking off. It had become their signal for one another. That, or Hermione would simply show Theo her hand when the little green and purple sparks began to dance over her skin and they'd make excuses to ensure meeting up in a forgotten classroom, or an empty broom closet or a little used secret passage was achievable.

Theo hissed when Hermione broke away from his lips, nipping the length of his jaw and trailing a line of kisses down the side of his neck.

"You're distracted," he accused her in a husky voice when he ground himself against her through their respective clothing and Hermione didn't react.

"You're distracting me," Hermione argued.

"Not very well, apparently," he snarked in reply, "Though I imagine that could change if I do this."

He stooped slightly, hooking one hand behind the back of her left knee and hiking her leg up against his hip before he ground against her core once more. He was right. That certainly distracted her from her thoughts about Thorfinn and the state of their relationship.

"Gods," Hermione sighed when Theo did it again while he buried his lips against her neck, licking and nipping her between kisses and making her crazy.

"That's more like it," Theo chuckled as though her reaction amused him.

Hermione was long past the stage with him where she could muster any embarrassment over the words of exclamation, shock or pleasure that he drew from her in moments like this. She was past caring if he thought ill of her for moaning when he made her do so. They'd been at this for months now. With the summer fast approaching, Hermione realised that they really had been doing this for months and months.

"If you keep doing that..." Hermione said breathlessly, her fingers tangled in his short dark hair and pulling in a way she'd learned he rather liked.

"You'll what?" Theo challenged, sounding amused.

Hermione arched against him, grinding him in return and feeling a little flutter of butterflies in her stomach as heat swept through her.

"Shit," Theo groaned softly, his hands on her tightening reflexively, "You want to... progress, sweetheart?"

Hermione nipped his chin gently.

"How far?" she queried.

"That's up to you, Granger," Theo smirked, pulling back from her slightly to meet her gaze by the thin crack of light streaming around the door frame of the broom cupboard they were currently in.
Hermione bit her bottom lip. She'd been giving a lot of thought to the state of her current sexual experience chart of late. She supposed that if Thorfinn was intending to wait until it were a bit more acceptable for her to be dating someone his age, she would have to wait until the end of fifth year, or perhaps into sixth, once she was seventeen and therefore of age in the wizarding world. And she didn't much fancy the idea of telling him they couldn't be a couple when that time came just because she still had tasks left on the Rites to complete that he couldn't help her with. Thus far she and Theo had gone as far as heavy petting and both of them removing their shirts.

"I'm game if you are," Hermione admitted quietly, holding his gaze.

"How game?" he asked, raising one eyebrow.

"Are you asking me if I want to lose my virginity in a dusty broom closet?" Hermione smirked at him in reply.

"Pretty much," Theo nodding, chuckling a little at her blunt question.

"Well... maybe not in here," Hermione said, wrinkling her nose, "You have cobwebs in your hair."

"You're killing the mood, sweetheart," Theo laughed at her words, "Well, if you don't want to do it here, where do you want to go? We're a little strapped for options in this bloody castle. I can't exactly smuggle you into my dormitory in the dungeons."

Hermione snorted.

"I'm sure Malfoy would appreciate the view," she replied snarkily, smirking a bit, and Theo burst out laughing.

"Vixen," he accused, "I swear you torture him about his crush."

"Wouldn't you?" Hermione shrugged, "He's horrid to me, but he still fancies me."

"Enough about him! That will kill the mood. I assume you're not interested in letting me smuggle you into the dungeons right now?"

"Not really," Hermione shook her head.

"Ok, so what can I do to you in this cupboard while we both have cobwebs in our hair?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, "We could go until one of us says stop."

In the dim light of the closed cupboard, Hermione found herself admiring the way Theo's lips switched into that half-smirk of his and she felt another flutter in her stomach. He really was rather handsome when he did that.

"So, if I do this...?" he asked, trailing off as he slid his hand from the back of her knee, down the back of her thigh until he gripped her arse lightly.

Hermione could feel his fingers flirting with the edge of her knickers beneath her skirt.

"I wouldn't object," she replied.

Theo leaned in and kissed her hotly, making her thoughts scatter momentarily. Hermione lost her breath, her eyes closing as her fingers slid from his hair to toy with the buttons on his shirt, popping them open. He rocked his hips against her once more and Hermione moaned softly, kissing him harder, craving more friction at the place between her legs where he pressed his arousal so
insistently.

"And if I do this?" he asked, his voice turning even huskier, sliding around to the aching place there and skimming his fingers under the fabric of her knickers.

Hermione's heart was racing inside her chest and she could feel a slight blush climbing her cheeks to have him touch her so intimately. Theo seemed to take the little whimper she emitted as all the permission he needed before he pressed a little more insistently with his fingers, sliding them against her hot, suddenly-slick flesh and touching the most intimate part of her. Hermione snogged him again, her hips tilting of their own accord. She pried Theo's shirt open hungrily, sliding her hands over his ribs and clutching at him, desperate to feel him touch her even more. New to the feelings of being touched in such a way, Hermione hissed in surprise when Theo's thumb brushed something sensitive at the top of her slit.

She knew from her extracurricular reading that he'd bumped her clitoris, and Hermione whined in the back of her throat when he pulled back slightly, obviously shocked by her hiss.

"Did I hurt you?" Theo asked, concern flavouring his tone.

"No," Hermione breathed, "That was a good hiss."

"Oh," Theo smirked before he leaned in and began nibbling her bottom lip in a way he knew she liked, "So, if I do it again?"

He did it again as he asked and Hermione moaned softly, her whole body trembling when he accompanied the brush of his thumb on her clitoris with one finger sliding down the length of her slit before pressing inside her. She squirmed in delight and surprise, unaccustomed to the unfamiliar sensations, but oh so curious about them too.

"Don't stop," she whispered, burrowing her face into his neck and pressing hot kisses along his clavicle and over his chest.

Theo didn't and Hermione found her hands sliding to his belt, beginning to unbuckle it while he worked that one finger in and out of her slowly, seeming to be thoroughly enjoying the sounds she made and the way she squirmed when he drew circles around her clitoris. Eager to repay the favour as heat began to build inside of her, Hermione unzipped his trousers, knowing he wouldn't stop her or object. Knowing he was just as eager. When she slipped her hand inside his boxers, Theo's breath hitched. When she grasped the solid length of hot flesh she found within, he made a choking sound and his hips jerked.

"Fuck," he muttered, his finger driving into her faster when Hermione began working her hand up and down slowly.

"Am I doing it right?" she murmured to him.

Theo's head dropped back and he began to laugh at her timid question.

"Is there a way to do it wrong?" he asked in reply.

"Of course there... oh gods, right there," Hermione muttered when Theo curled his finger in a beckoning motion within her, touching something sensitive that made her blood bubble.

"There?" he asked, doing it again.

"Mmmm," Hermione hummed, "Sh... show me h... how you do it."
She squeezed his cock lightly in indication.

Theo seemed to get the hint, his finger still tormenting her and making something inside of her begin to wind tighter and tighter as though it might spring free at any moment. She'd read enough to recognise the feel of impending orgasm and Hermione chased the feeling as Theo's free hand moved to wrap around hers upon his cock. He repositioned her hand slightly before he curled his own hand around her smaller one a bit tighter, working it up and down his length. Hermione tried to focus on how he did it, tried to think, tried to breathe without moaning.

"Theo I... I'm..." Hermione whispered urgently, her back arching against the wall where he'd pinned her when he suddenly slipped a second finger inside of her.

"Let go, sweetheart," he murmured to her, "I'll catch you."

Hermione was sure her brain might melt right out her ears when his words, his permission, seemed to snap something free inside of her. Her whole body jerked and a huff of sound escaped her as her head dropped back, her muscles spasming and jumping beyond her control as she orgasmed for the first time. Her knees went weak and she was sure that, were he not pressed against her, she'd have slid right down the wall inside the cupboard.

Theo's triumphant chuckle filled her ears as the high began to ebb and Hermione felt a sparkle of annoyance with him, determined to bring him undone, too. She worked her hand a little faster over him, enjoying the way his chuckle ended abruptly on a gasp. Blinking heavily eyelids open, Hermione watched the way a little frown of ecstasy filled his face, his eyes squeezed closed against her onslaught.

"Fuck," he whispered when Hermione leaned in and began kissing his chest and his neck once more, lazily now, enjoying the bliss that seemed to suffuse her.

Just as he tensed, his hand on hers tightening their combined grip while his hips jerked, Hermione suddenly felt a surge of that familiar jealous fury coursing through her and Theo gasped at the flames she caused suddenly streaked up the length of his cock and began to cover his abdomen, the flames dancing upon his flesh, leaving green and purple marks behind.

"Ah!" Theo groaned, his head dropping back as his hips jerked again before Hermione felt stickiness coat her small palm.

She smirked as he came, feeling proud of herself even as the anger she felt kept tormenting her, leaving more and more marks upon his flesh and causing his knees to wobble. He leaned into her against the wall, breathing hard.

"Bloody hell, Granger," Theo groaned against her neck, pulling her hand away from his cock and letting the flames shoot up his arm rather than continuing to mar his cock and his torso.

"Did that hurt?" she asked, frowning slightly, knowing he always said no whenever it happened, but worried just the same.

Theo's breathless laugh reassured her that it hadn't.

"Best fucking come of my life," he laughed, his forehead resting against her shoulder as he tried to catch his breath.

Hermione smiled despite her fury.

"Hey?" he asked softly after several minutes of simply leaning against one another, the high slowly
"Hmm?" Hermione asked, opening her eyes to meet his gaze when he lifted his head to look at her.

"Kiss me, witch," he commanded quietly.

"You'll get those marks on your face again," Hermione warned him, trying to contain the anger bubbling in her blood that had nothing to do with him.

"No, I won't," he assured her, using his wand to clean her hand before putting both her hands on his ribs and humming happily when the magic sank into him, marring his flesh and coiling around his magical core.

Hermione shrugged, leaning up to kiss his lips softly and enjoying the way he nibbled lightly on her lips before his tongue stroked into her mouth. He kissed her lazily then, slow strokes of his tongue against her own while Hermione felt the fury in her growing. She gripped him tighter and Theo sighed into her mouth. It built and it grew, making her crazy and making Theo's breath begin to hitch.

"Bloody hell," he muttered, pulling back and panting as it roared through her.

"Are you alright?" Hermione asked tightly, "Do you need me to let go?"

Theo's eyes were wide as he stared back at her, and Hermione could feel his heart racing inside his chest under her hands as she gripped his tight, trying to hang onto the anger to keep it from bursting free in a savage display of accidental magic that might very well hurt him.

She didn't understand that part. Somehow, if she touched him and was intimate with him while the flames danced, they didn't hurt him. But if she let him go and were to let the rage inside of her loose, Hermione suspected she'd burn him terribly, especially given they were inside a cupboard, surrounded by stone walls. He seemed to fight the urge to pry her hands from his flesh as long as he could, gritting his teeth and squeezing his eyes closed as he panted. He clutched her wrists tightly, holding them to his flesh even when Hermione tried to pull them from him.

"Don't let go," he said, "I can do it. Fuck! I'm going to hex that fucker stupid if I ever see him again in person!"

Hermione frowned.

"Who?" she asked, confused by his words.

Theo's eyes trailed to her, "Don't worry about it. Ah, fuck!"

He tipped his head back once more, breathing hard as he fought the effect of whatever she was doing to him.

"You said it doesn't hurt, Theo! Let go of me!" Hermione hissed at him, pulling on her arms and trying to stop touching him.

"Shit!" Theo hissed when she managed to get free of him with a sharp tug. He dropped her wrists and slumped backwards against the far wall of the cupboard, breathing hard and groaning softly.

Hermione glared at him before realising that if she didn't aim her anger elsewhere, she was liable to set him on fire. Clenching her fists, Hermione turned away from him and beat the outside edges of her fists against the stone of the wall, trying desperately to let go of the anger. She counted to
twenty in her head, fists pounding, breathing laboured, her forehead pressed to the stone.

"Fuck, don't do that, sweetheart," Theo muttered from behind her, "You'll hurt yourself."

"Don't touch me!" Hermione hissed, though she had no idea if he'd reached for her or not, "I don't want to hurt you again! Blast it all, Theo! You swore it doesn't hurt when I do that to you."

"It doesn't," he replied, still panting and sounding weaker, as though he were pained, "It doesn't hurt, per se, it burns and tingles because your magic races along mine, snatching up bits of it where it's needed."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, still beating the wall, her eyes screwed closed against the rage boiling inside of her.

"Parts of your magic, when you do that, tear and rip, creating little gashes in the magical thread," Theo murmured, "And when you're touching someone with a magical core, your magic automatically gobbles up the magical energy of whomever you're touching to try to mend the rips."

"What?" Hermione breathed, her eyes going wide as she whipped around, "I'm... I'm leeching your magical energy from you when I do that?"

Theo eyed her carefully, lighting his wand to see her better.

"This really isn't a conversation for the inside of a broom closet while I've got my cock hanging out of my trousers, Granger," he sighed, reaching to rearrange himself and zip his fly.

"Explain!" Hermione demanded through gritted teeth.

"Not here," he shook his head, "I need to get you outside before you make the castle explode."

Hermione narrowed her eyes on him before rearranging her skirt and straightening her knickers. She buttoned the top two buttons on her shirt that Theo had undone and she waved her wand at her hair to remove the cobwebs, ignoring the way angry purple and green flames sparked from the end as she clutched the weapon. When she was decent, Hermione opened the door to the cupboard, listening to Theo following behind her. She bit her lip, thinking she was unlikely to be able to reach the Entrance Hall and the grounds before she lost control of her rage. The Astronomy Tower was closer.

Darting off quickly towards the nearest staircase that led in that direction, Hermione hoped Theo would follow her.

--O--O--O--O--O--O--O--O--O--O--

Thorfinn hard fucked O'Brien against the wall of the shower in the dressing sheds with gritted teeth. He spat curses and foul language into her hair as he pressed her, chest first, into the wall, her arse hiked out, hips canted for every brutal thrust he gave his teammate. Part of him knew that though the witch had been hitting on him for months, this wasn't the fuck she'd been hoping for. Most of him didn't give a shit.

No, the seeker on their team might be a rough and tumble witch willing to get gritty and dirty with the boys on the pitch, but she no doubt wanted and deserved better than what Thorfinn was giving her. The witch had made the mistake of cornering him in the showers after practice and while Thorfinn had intended to follow his usual routine and tell the witch, no, he'd been walloped over the head with the most potent rage he'd ever been struck with to date. The walls of the shower rattled as he rutted the witch so hard, she whimpered and gasped, panting heavily as green, purple
and black flames streaked across her pale flesh.

"Thor… I can't…" O'Brien tried to gasp, but Thorfinn was beyond caring at this point what she couldn't do.

He was too furious. Too hate-filled. Too fucking ruthless to give a fuck about her feelings, whether she was enjoying it anymore or even if she was going to come. He wanted to destroy his witch and he wanted to wring Theo Nott's neck. He didn't have to be a genius to know it wouldn't be anybody else driving him up the wall with fury. The number of times over the months since Christmas that his witch had sent him snarling and cursing into a fury because of that little bastard was beyond count.

He'd gone through five brooms in that time, and he didn't mean the tarty witch shaped 'brooms' either. The company selling Firebolts and sponsoring their team was put out with him because of the number of times he'd been struck, mid practice with the unending rage of knowing she was with that little cunt. Worse, she still had no clue what she was doing to him, though he had it on good authority that she was draining Theo's magic every time Thorfinn himself fucked someone.

O'Brien uttered a soft shriek before her body clenched tight around his and Thorfinn snarled like a feral beast, rutting her even harder, gripping her hard enough that in addition to the flames marks on her flesh, she'd have bruises. He cursed ferally as he drove into her repeatedly, knowing he needed to release her soon, before he could put her into a coma like he'd done to eight others so far. Before he could drain her core magic too hard and end up screwing them for the game on the weekend.

Screwing his eyes shut, Thorfinn bucked into her and imagined she was Hermione. She groaned when he jerked himself out of her just before he could ejaculate, letting the jets of hot fluid fill his hand so there could be no risk of coming inside her. He'd learned that lesson the hard way when Antonin had tested one of the witches Thorfinn had put into a coma for pregnancy and discovered a nasty surprise. That little problem had been dealt with outside of anyone's knowledge except for Thorfinn and Antonin. Thorfinn owed Toshka a rather large favour after handling the little swot, whose intention it had been to trap him into wedding her by getting pregnant to him and manipulating him.

He wasn't risking that again.

Cursing as he washed his hand and cleaned himself off before getting out of the shower, leaving O'Brien slumped against the wall but still on her feet and still conscious, if dazed from the drain and the hard fuck, Thorfinn dried off fast before dressing and leaving the pitch. He'd likely regret it at training tomorrow when O'Brien beat the shit out of him for using her, but if he didn't get away from her, he was likely to drain her magic completely.

He apparated to the field he'd set of fire the first time Hermione had kissed Nott. He'd been forced to purchase the place when it became his refuge where he could destroy things free from prying eyes. When he arrived, Thorfinn let the fire and rage explode out of him, Fiendfyre roaring to life, jumping and dancing black and wretched in the shape of a furious lion. He had no control of it today. He'd been developing some control over it, forced to when his witch wouldn't leave Theo be, but this was different. Whatever she was doing now, it was more than she'd done before.

Thorfinn loathed what that meant. He loathed the raging pit of possessive fury deep inside him, biting as his conscience and making him wonder if this time, she was fucking the little bastard. He loathed the idea of her fucking anyone but him. He'd grown to hate fucking the witches he shagged himself when he got an itch that no amount of wanking would scratch. He also loathed himself, as the lion roared, spewing forth more black fire of pure hatred that singed his own hair, when he
realised that as much as he hated the idea of her possibly fucking that little cunt, it meant she was almost ready.

He hated himself for the fact that he was crazed with the idea that, soon, he would fuck her himself.
"Thorfinn, your Mother and I have something we need to discuss with you," Talon Rowle declared one evening at the beginning of the summer.

Thorfinn glanced up, a frown marring his brow as he regarded the man he so resembled before shooting a glance at his dark haired mother and then a quizzical glance towards his grandparents.

"Regarding?" Thorfinn asked suspiciously when his grandmother and grandfather both looked rather baffled by the announcement, suggesting they were as ambushed with this notion as Thorfinn was himself.

Reina was sitting down the far end of the table from him, but a small frown marred her brow as she stared resolutely at the dinner she only picked at. She was in a poor mood as a result of their father castigating her for the incident prior to the end of the school year where Hermione, Ron, and Harry had led her astray, getting her mixed up in a mess regarding a missing Hippogriff and the notorious mass murderer, Sirius Black. She had been properly scolded for the behaviour that had landed her in the hospital wing alongside Ginny Weasley and their cousin, Luna.

She was pouting and Thorfinn suspected that now that his parents had dressed her down for the evening, they'd decided to start in on Thorfinn, as well. Just what he needed when he was having such trouble controlling his temper these days.

"Regarding your status," his father replied, eyes narrowed on Thorfinn coolly.

"My status?" Thorfinn raised one eyebrow. "I hope you mean my status on the team, Dad. My status as anything else is of little concern at the present time."

"I mean your status as an eligible, unattached wizard." Talon talked over the top of Thorfinn's words before he was finished speaking and Thorfinn's back stiffened slowly as his temper flared.

He should have seen it coming. His most recent escapade with a witch had been splashed across the gossip section when Thorfinn has made the mistake of snogging a witch at a party after their recent win on the International circuit in Finland. He'd been photographed 'snogging' some Scandinavian witch with legs up to her ears and the hottest arse he'd ever seen. He had been drunk at the time of the incident. Indeed, he'd been drunk enough that he'd slumped into a chair and practically fallen asleep sitting up.

And he'd woken with a leggy blonde witch straddling his lap and attempting to suffocate him with her tongue. He'd been photographed right at the moment when he'd grabbed the witch to shove her off of him and the picture had been taken out of context, splashed across the gossip column by that wretched bitch of a reporter, Rita Skeeter, who seemed to have picked this year to focus on Thorfinn's rising fame as a star player. His listing for the starting line-up for the Irish league game semi-final against Peru had bought him a one-way ticket to a permanent place on the gossip columns of every wizarding news rag Britain had.

"It's high time you ceased embarrassing yourself and your family by continuing to gallivant around with witches you drop as soon as you've shagged them, Thorfinn," Talon went on.

"Is this conversation really appropriate with Reina present," his grandmother asked, obviously trying to make an attempt at halting the impending fight between father and son when Thorfinn's gaze grew icy.
"Reina needs to learn that there are consequences for all actions," Talon retorted coolly, his expression suggesting he was not interested in his own mother's interference while he attempted to 'educate' his children.

"You have no idea how I live my life, Dad," Thorfinn informed his father coldly. "But for your information, I do not just fuck them and be on my way."

"Language!" his mother hissed.

Thorfinn ignored her as he said, "I'll have you know that I hard-fuck them until they walk bow legged, and then I ditch them."

"Enough!" his father snarled. "Reina, if you're not going to eat your dinner, go to your room!"

Reina lifted her head, her eyes blazing but Thorfinn caught her gaze before she could open her mouth, subtly shaking his head to make sure she wouldn't engage their father this evening. Not again. She'd have no hope of being allowed to have Hermione over for the summer if she argued with him again so soon. Not when the man was in a shit of a mood and looking for a fight.

Narrowing her eyes on him, Reina snapped her mouth shut and pushed away from the table, her chair screeching loudly against the floor. She jumped out of it, leaving it askew as she stormed away and Thorfinn listened to the sound of her slamming as many doors as she could as she went.

"You will not use language like that in front of your sister ever again, boy," Talon growled at him and Thorfinn felt his anger grow. "You've spent entirely too long running wild and I'm through with watching it. You will find someone and you will initiate an engagement with her, or so help me Merlin, I will arrange something for you!"

The fireplace across the room jumped so far up the chimney it was a wonder the whole room wasn't engulfed in flames. Thorfinn's jaw clenched and his eyes flashed and for the first time in their history, Thorfinn caught the way his father's eyes widened slightly at the amount of power he unleashed in his fury.

"You want to run that by me again?" Thorfinn asked, his voice low and dangerous as he glared at his father.

"Do not make the mistake of thinking that just because you're now a hot-shot Quidditch star that you do not still have to abide by the rules of this family, Thorfinn," his father warned him coldly. "You need to settle down. You need to set a good example for your sister. You need to get married."

Thorfinn slanted a glance towards his mother, who was sitting tight-lipped and looking very much like she wanted no part of this fight.

"You feel this way as well, Mum?" Thorfinn asked her. "You think that at twenty-one, I should be entertaining notions of marriage?"

"Your mother and I were married and expecting you by twenty-one," his father snapped.

"Talon," Pandora spoke up, looking determined. "This is hardly the time for such a discussion. Right now, Thorfinn is focused on his Quidditch career and has a semi-final to play in next week. He doesn't have time to be focusing on witches."

"In any case, there's no need," Thorfinn inserted into the conversation when his father opened his mouth, intent on arguing. The man was obviously looking for a fight tonight and didn't care about upsetting his entire family to get one.
His mother and father both narrowed their eyes on him and Thorfinn watched his grandmother's eyes widen when she realised he intended to out his secret about Hermione. She jerked her head around to look at him, vaguely shaking her head in warning, trying to prevent him from sharing the little nugget of information that would undoubtedly make his father explode.

"No need?" his father bit out when Thorfinn took a leisurely sip of his drink, trying to control the urge he had to tell his father to get fucked.

"I've been betrothed since I was seventeen," Thorfinn informed them nonchalantly.

"Excuse me?" his mother said, her eyes wide.

"YOU WHAT?" his father roared, leaping to his feet and causing flames to shoot up the chimney once more. "Your mother and I have not had the chance to meet or approve anyone for such a match. How dare you get betrothed without even allowing us to meet the girl!?!"

Pandora put her face in her hands when Thorfinn smirked cruelly, obviously knowing what was coming before he could say a word.

"You have met her, Dad."

"We most certainly have not!" Talon snarled, "The only witch we've met since you were seventeen was Hermione!"

Thorfinn's smirk grew as he stared drolly at his parents, waiting for the Quaffle to drop. His mother connected the dots first, her sharp hiss of indrawn breath loud in the sudden silence around the Rowle dining table.

"You're betrothed to Hermione Granger?" she asked, looking scandalized. "Thorfinn! She's a child!"

"Not for much longer," Thorfinn replied evenly, taking another sip of his drink. "She'll be fifteen in September. And don't give me that horrified look, Mother. There are more years than our six between Gran and Grandad."

"The Granger girl?" his father asked, suddenly looking rather stumped. "Does she even understand betrothal bonds? How on Earth did you convince a muggleborn witch to form such a bond at such a young age?"

"She instigated it," Thorfinn smirked, reaching to toy with the beads in his long blonde hair.

"Thorfinn," his grandmother warned in a low voice, knowing he was lying.

"What?" his mother asked. "You knew about this, Pandora?"

"Gran helped me pick out the bracelet I got Hermione to reciprocate the bond," Thorfinn said, ignoring his grandmother's warning.

"She gave you those beads?" his mother asked. "You came home wearing those at Christmas during your seventh year at Hogwarts."

Thorfinn nodded.

"She'd only have been twelve!" his mother frowned. "And she's a muggleborn. Does she even know that the two of you are betrothed, Thorfinn?"
"She's knows we're something," Thorfinn sighed, leaning back in his chair and taking another sip of his whiskey. "But not in as many words, no. She is aware that trading jewellery with intent forms such a bond and she is aware such things exist. I may have informed her that I hadn't given her the bracelet with the intent of forming the bond. Which was true. I gave it to her intending to reciprocate the one she initiated."

"Technicalities won't save you, son," Titus spoke up from the far end of the table where he was watching the proceedings with his arms folded over his chest. "How are you maintaining the bond between you when she's away at school and you've been shagging other witches? What are you doing messing around on her?"

"She's too young for me yet," Thorfinn shrugged his shoulders. "I maintain it by anonymously sending her jewellery every birthday. And by sending her so many of my jerseys. Most of the kids at school think we're betrothed anyway – those who know what to look for – because she's always in my jerseys and she wears the jewellery I give her."

"And because you snatch her up from Hogsmeade and drag her along to your games every time you have a Quidditch match here that coincides with a trip to the village. How she didn't get caught missing all year with how long she spends away with us while they were all on the lookout for Sirius Black all year is a mystery to me," Titus shook his head.

Thorfinn didn't bother mentioning the Time-Turner Hermione had been using. She'd had to give it back when she'd dropped Divination and Muggle Studies.

"So she has no idea you're betrothed?" Talon demanded. "You've been defiling the bond by shagging other witches?"

He looked utterly disgusted with Thorfinn.

"What do you want from me here?" Thorfinn rolled his eyes. "Hold off on getting laid while the twelve year old matures? I don't imagine you want to encourage me to defile my intended while she's still a child."

His parents and grandparents both looked rather displeased with his comment.

"Fifteen is not so very young, Thorfinn," Titus said quietly. "Your grandmother and I were betrothed and even engaged by the time she was fifteen."

"Yes, but you grew up in times when forty year olds married and impregnated ten year olds, Grandad," Thorfinn replied. "I wasn't about to risk that. And I've been holding off on instigating any kind of 'relationship' with Hermione until she's a bit older because when the press gets wind of it, they'll vilify me and label her a tart."

"And what, exactly, do you plan to do about telling her that you're betrothed?" his mother demanded.

Thorfinn sighed, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms over his chest.

"Date her until she's of age and then ask her to marry me," Thorfinn shrugged. "She's muggleborn. She'll flip if I tell her we're betrothed. If I just let her think it's the natural progression of a relationship, I doubt she'll object."

"What makes you so sure she even fancies you, Thorfinn?" his mother demanded. "That little witch has far bigger things on her mind that Quidditch, no matter how often you bring her to your games."
At her words, Thorfinn smirked once more.

"She seems to have a bit of a thing for me when she snogs me," he retorted.

"She's been snogging you?" Titus asked, looking amused.

"You couldn't tell?" Thorfinn asked. "Gran nearly walked in on us a few months ago when I had her here before the game against the Arrows at the start of the season."

"Didn't she spend Christmas with you, Antonin and Reina?" Talon asked, frowning.

"Yeah, why?" Thorfinn asked.

"Where did she sleep?" he asked suspiciously.

"In my bed." Thorfinn grinned. "With me. Between me and Reina, technically, but she snuggles."

His mother lowered her face into her hands as though it was all too much for her to handle. A Rosier before she'd married Talon Rowle, Thorfinn supposed such things were not the proper pureblood way that his mother had learned from the cradle and the idea of her future daughter-in-law doing something so improper obviously worried and rather upset her.

"This has been going on under our noses the entire time and we didn't notice?" she asked, her voice slightly muffled.

Thorfinn rolled his eyes. The number of things his parents didn't notice about his life could fill a book.

"You're snogging her without bothering to court her?" Titus asked, frowning like he disapproved. "That little witch deserves better, Thorfinn."

"She's still jailbait, Grandad," Thorfinn sighed, tipping his head back to stare at the ceiling to keep from thinking too hard about his favourite witch and about the problems it would solve if he could court her now. "Believe me, if I didn't think they'd vilify me in the papers, cut me from the team and potentially throw me in prison, I'd be doing more than courting her."

"If that's the case, you shouldn't be snogging her, Thorfinn," his mother scolded. "Either she's too young to court, or she's old enough to be snogged, and therefore to be courted. I'll be dispatching an owl to her family tomorrow. You're home for most of the summer in the lead up to the World Cup, yes? She'll stay here."

"Where are we going to put her?" Pandora asked. "You've invited the extended family to come and stay here, dear. All the guest bedrooms are full and you'll already have Luna in with Reina."

"She can bunk with me," Thorfinn offered. "I doubt she'll mind."

"That wouldn't be proper," Talon argued.

"There's nowhere else to put her, dear." Pandora shrugged. "Not unless she climbs in with Titus and I in our bed, and I rather think she'd object."

"She slept in Thorfinn's bed in Ireland, darling," his mother placated his father quietly. "And they are betrothed. They have been for three years already."

"Hermione doesn't know that," Talon argued and Thorfinn knew that he wasn't overly fond of the girl as a friend to Reina, let alone as his future daughter-in-law. Talon thought her too loud and
opinionated. How he could object to the idea of his son marrying a witch who possessed many of
the same traits that Pandora Rowle possessed herself, was beyond Thorfinn but the man objected to
her nonetheless.

Thorfinn rather thought his father just didn't like being spoken to by a child the way his mother
ordinarily spoke to him. She was sharp-tongued, quick-witted and brave. She didn't back down
from the idea of engaging Talon Rowle in a debate or even an argument if she felt her opinions
were important enough to be argued. She most certainly did not approve of Talon's unfortunate
habit of being an old-fashioned misogynist in most things; or of the pureblood and upper class
customs of wizarding society. She didn't tolerate them and openly challenged them every time they
were mentioned. She was also smarter than Thorfinn's father happened to be - or at the very least,
more knowledgeable about almost everything - and Thorfinn knew his father didn't like to be
proved wrong.

"Well, perhaps it's time she found out, Thorfinn," his mother said, glancing in his direction
meaningfully. "I'd like you to inform her, and soon. If you truly don't wish to unsettle her with the
information -and Merlin knows, she'll likely pitch a fit over such an archaic idea - then I
recommend that you begin to court her at the very least."

Thorfinn smirked to himself. He'd tell Hermione about their bond when the time was right and not
a minute sooner.

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Hermione was sitting in her backyard when her neighbour roared up on his motorcycle. Scott
Rinkleworth. She hadn't spoken to him since last summer, despite promising she would see him at
Christmas. She felt a bit bad about it as she watched him cruise into his garage and park his bike.
Watching him over the rim of her sweet tea, Hermione noted that he'd filled out a bit more and
grown taller since the last time she'd seen him. He looked to have grown his hair a bit too.

"Hermione?" Scott asked, peering over the fence as he began peeling himself out of his protective
riding gear and rounding the garage to cross his own backyard. He'd grown since last summer and
could easily see over the fence without having to
stand on tiptoe.

"Hi, Scott." Hermione smiled at him. "You want something to drink?"

Scott raised one eyebrow at her.

"That's how you greet me?" he scoffed. "I don't see or hear from you all year, but you rock up and
just invite me over for a drink like you left just yesterday."

"Is that a 'no'?" Hermione asked, feeling like maybe she'd spent too much time with Theo and
Thorfinn when she realised she was giving Scott attitude. She was in a mood, if she was being
honest.

They'd received an owl from Mrs Rowle that morning, notifying Hermione's parents of the busy
Quidditch season finals that were being hosted in Britain for the first time in many years. They'd
requested that Hermione be allowed to join the Rowle family at their Tower home for the summer
for the purpose of spending time with Reina, attending the Quidditch World Cup, and otherwise
learning about her culture and her magical heritage. Her parents weren't thrilled with the idea.

Hermione was meant to be going with them to visit their relatives in Russia and in France, having
promised to do so last year. They'd taken time off especially and she was supposed to be travelling abroad for most of the summer. They were arguing about whether Hermione would have to attend their holiday or if she should be allowed to be with her own 'kind', so to speak.

"You got sassy while you were away," Scott observed, grinning at her a little.

"I was always sassy," Hermione retorted, watching with some appreciation as the muggle boy hopped the fenced between their houses and crossed the yard towards her.

Realising he meant to hug her in greeting, Hermione got to her feet and allowed him to pull her in a warm hug.

"How have you been?" he asked her while Hermione breathed in the diesel and sawdust scent of him.

"Good, and you?" Hermione asked. "Sorry I didn't get home for Christmas."

"I knew the minute you said 'if' that you wouldn't be home for it." Scott shrugged his shoulders at her. "But it's good to see you, love. How long have you been home?"

"Only since yesterday," Hermione told him. "Mum and Dad picked me up from the train station last night."

"Wicked!" Scott grinned as he pulled back from hugging her. "Alright, what are your plans for the summer? How long are you going to be around this time before jetting off again?"

Hermione smiled at him.

"That's currently being debated," Hermione admitted. "Mum and Dad took some time off work for the summer to head to Russia and France to see our relatives there. But I also got a letter this morning from a friend, asking if I'd be allowed to spend the summer with her."

"The big guy's sister?" Scott asked, frowning slightly. "The one who picked you up last year?"

Hermione nodded. "Yeah. So if I spend the summer with Reina, I'd be leaving next week. If Mum and Dad decide to insist on dragging me to the family events in France, we're leaving in two weeks."

"So either way, I get you for at least a week, yeah?" he grinned.

"Essentially." Hermione nodded.

"Wicked. You promised me you'd let me take you for a spin on my bike."

Hermione laughed, recalling that she had, in fact, done so.

"I did," she agreed.

"Well, what are you doing now?" he asked. "I'm meeting the boys in Earl's Court a bit later. You could come?"

"The same boys who picked on me?" Hermione raised her eyebrows.

"Nah, I don't really hang with that crowd anymore." Scott shook his head. "Different schools; different friends. A few of 'em went off to boarding school like you. You've never met any of these guys, I'd reckon."
Hermione thought about it for a moment.

"You want to go now?" she asked, raising one eyebrow.

"Unless you had plans for sunbaking?" Scott grinned at her. "If so, I'd be more than happy to let you get back to it while I perve from my side of the fence."

"And you called me sassy." Hermione laughed, giving him a light shove. "What are you meeting your friends for?"

"Oh, we're in a band," Scott told her, "We've got a lunch-time gig down at one of the pubs down there."

"You're in a band?" Hermione laughed, raising her eyebrows.

"Yep. My folks laughed too, when I told them. We're pretty good, though. You should come and see us play. If you're only home a week, I've got to make the most of monopolizing your time."

Hermione laughed at his words.

"Alright, let me go and make sure it's alright with Mum and Dad. What should I wear?" Hermione asked.

"Not that," he frowned at her outfit, "You got any jeans?"

"Jeans? Scott, it's sweltering."

"Yeah, but I don't want you to burn your leg on the muffler or the exhaust on my bike," he told her. "You need fabric protecting you. And you don't want to stand out like a sore thumb in the pub. All the lads will hit on you if you go down there dressed like that."

"The horror," Hermione rolled her eyes. "You want something to drink while I ask Mum?"

"Sure," Scott nodded.

Hermione led the way into the house where her parents were still discussing things about her summer plans.

"Hey Mum?" Hermione called, fixing Scott a drink in the kitchen.

"What is it, darling?" Jane called, wandering into the kitchen. "Goodness! Scott, I didn't know you were here."

"Hi Mrs Granger," Scott smiled politely at the woman.

"Scott's just asked me to come and watch his band play a lunch time gig today," Hermione told her mother. "Is it alright if I go?"

"You just can't wait to get away from us here at home, can you darling?" Jane asked her, though she was teasing.

"I promised him last summer that we'd catch up but then Finn picked me up for Reina's, and I didn't get home for Christmas and I sort of owe him," Hermione explained.

"You're not going on that motorcycle, I hope?" Jane asked, eyeing Scott.
"Erm..." Scott said.

"It'll be fine, Mum," Hermione said, thinking that if she could handle flying and apparating, she could handle being on the back of his bike.

"You really want to go?" Jane asked her, knowing Hermione hadn't been as fond of Scott in their younger years.

Hermione nodded her head. Her mother sighed, looking like she didn't approve, but also didn't want to discourage the idea of Hermione having muggle friends as well as some magical ones.

"Alright, but I want you home tonight for dinner," Jane told her.

"Thanks Mum," Hermione grinned, "I'll go and get changed."

Leaving Scott in the kitchen with her mother, Hermione raced up the stairs to change into a pair of jeans and a red tank top. She hauled her hair into a bun, only too aware of the mess it would become in the wind on a motorcycle or under a helmet. When she was ready, Hermione raced back down the steps and found Scott.

"That was fast," he grinned at her, raking his eyes over her appreciatively in a way Hermione had grown accustomed to seeing Theo do when no one else was looking.

"I'm not a girly-girl," Hermione shrugged her shoulders.

"Let's go," he smiled.

He led her out of the house and into his own garage. Hermione watched from the garage and he strolled into the house, telling her that he needed a fresh shirt. He pulled it off over his head as he was walking away from her and Hermione found herself eyeing the expanse of muscled flesh that made up his back as he went. He caught her looking too, glancing over his shoulder to tell her he'd be back.

Hermione's cheeks turned pink to have been caught perving on him, but she couldn't deny that he'd filled out since the previous summer. Not to mention she'd grown rather more interested in all things sex related and become alarmingly aware of the opposite sex. When he came back wearing a fresh shirt and smelling like he'd applied fresh deodorant and cologne, Hermione was tinkering around with his bike, trying to figure out what things were from what she remembered him telling her last summer.

"Scared?" he asked her.

"No," Hermione admitted, grinning at him over her shoulder when he came up behind her.

"Brave one, eh?" he chuckled. "I mentioned that it's good to see you, yeah?"

"You did," Hermione nodded.

"From that look you were giving me before, I reckon you think it's pretty good to see me too, love," he teased.

"Oh please!" Hermione rolled her eyes. "Say it to my face and not my chest, Scott. Are you taking me riding or not?"

He laughed, looking like he approved of her sassy attitude.
"Alright, put this on, and then jump on behind me, yeah?"

He handed her a spare helmet before donning his own and climbing on the bike. Hermione did as she was told. Climbing on behind him and wrapping her arms around his waist without prompting. She heard him chuckle as though he approved before he started the bike and roared down the drive.

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"Oh, those ridiculous muggles!" Rhonwen Rowle hissed in annoyance, tossing down the letter quilled in Hermione Granger's handwriting on the dining room table and pulling an expression of severe annoyance.

"What have they done now?" Titus Rowle asked of his daughter-in-law.

"They are insisting on dragging Hermione to Russia and France to visit with their family abroad," Rhonwen grumbled. "I expressly stated in my last letter that if they would be willing to compromise on the matter, we would be most appreciative, pointing out that the World Cup has not been hosted in Britain in almost a hundred years. They are insisting that Hermione needs to reacquaint herself with her muggle family abroad and they won't be returning until the end of July."

"The Cup isn't until the 25th of August, Mum," Thorfinn reminded his mother.

"That is utterly beside the point, Thorfinn," Rhonwen snapped. "What does the girl need to bother with connecting with non-magical family abroad? She likely hasn't seen them since she was a child."

"They see them every year in shorter intervals," Thorfinn corrected the woman. "Last summer, before I picked her up, she'd had her extended French family staying for two weeks before they had to return home. And I remember her complaining in a letter to me during the summer at the end of her first year that she'd been forced to spend two weeks in Russia with her family there."

"My point, darling, is that they are muggles and while it is nice, I'm sure, for them to all spend time with one another, I do not doubt that she feels out of place amongst them, given that she is magical and they are not."

"Some of them are magical," Reina told her. "She's distantly related to the Dolohovs and the French Malfoys. A cousin of hers will be getting her letter inviting her to Beauxbatons shortly."

Thorfinn smirked at his sister when their mother's dark hair began to crackle with sparkles of magic in her annoyance.

"Do you or do you not both want Hermione here for the summer?" she demanded of her children.

"Of course we want her here," Reina rolled her eyes. "But she's got to spend time with her family too, Mum."

"In the not so distant future, we will be her family," Rhonwen snapped. "Those parents of hers are being utterly unreasonable."

"Unreasonable?" Pandora scoffed. "Wanting to see their daughter for more than one month out of the year?"

Rhonwen lost her temper at the notion of everyone ganging up on her and pushed away from the
table in a huff, stomping out of the room just as Talon was entering it. Thorfinn watched with amusement as his mother barged right into her husband because she was so preoccupied over the idea of not getting Hermione to the Tower that she didn't see or hear him coming.

"Something wrong, Kitten?" Talon asked, unusually jovial as his wife barged into him with her hair crackling while she muttered undoubtedly unkind things about muggles.

"Muggles!" Rhonwen cursed as though it were a filthy word before reaching up and pressing her lips to those of her husband.

Reina began to giggle to herself over their antics when Talon - apparently feeling highly pleased about something for the morning - dipped his wife low, tangling his fingers into her hair and snogging her despite their audience. Thorfinn rolled his eyes at his parents, alarmed by the uncommon display of affection and beginning to suspect that his father must be in a very good mood indeed. Something, Thorfinn was thinking, that likely didn't bode well for him.

"What's he so happy about?" Thorfinn asked of his grandfather.

"The Malfoys are hosting a Lughnasadh Ball this summer and your mother has just confirmed that your little witch will be back in the country and ready to be collected by us in time for it," Titus informed him quietly, shaking his head at his son and his daughter-in-law as they continued to snog like teenagers. "I imagine he's rather tickled by the notion of having you escort Hermione to the Ball."

Thorfinn shook his head, rolling his eyes again.

"She's not fifteen until the nineteenth of September, Grandad," Thorfinn reminded him.

"Details." Titus waved a dismissive hand. "If you escort her, it will make a statement in the upper circles that you're not entirely footloose."

"It'll give the press an opportunity to crucify me, more like," Thorfinn grumbled.

"You can't keep Hermione to yourself forever, lad," Titus laughed.

"For a little while would be nice," Thorfinn muttered, wanting his witch. "Quincey?"

"Master?" the little elf popped into the room beside Thorfinn's chair.

Thorfinn raised his eyebrows at the elf, wanting to hear what his witch was up to.

"She's still sleeping, Master." Quincey rolled her eyes at him.

"Still sleeping?" Thorfinn raised his eyebrows. "At this hour?"

He glanced at his watch, frowning when he saw it was almost nine.

"She was up late into the night reading the book Mistress Pandora sent to her, Master." Quincey patted his arm quellingly and Thorfinn sighed.

She'd been being reckless this summer. Quincey had been giving reports that Hermione was spending an inordinate amount of time with that muggle neighbour of hers. Thorfinn was thinking he was going to have to scare the lad off before things got out of hand.

"Can you let me know when she wakes up?" Thorfinn asked the elf.
"You're obsessed, you do realise that, don't you?" a Russian accented voice spoke from the doorway. Thorfinn wasn't the only one to look over in surprise to spot Antonin Dolohov leaning there casually.

"Toshka? What are you doing here?" Thorfinn asked his best friend and roommate.

"Antonin, dear, how are you?" Pandora spoke up, rising to her feet and moving over to greet him.

"I'm well, Gran, and you?" Toshka asked, allowing the witch to embrace him before he moved over and shook hands with Titus.

Reina jumped out of her chair to hug the Russian idiot and Thorfinn eyed his sister's exuberance with some concern. He could hardly tell the girl to keep her feelings off of his best friend when Thorfinn himself was betrothed to her best friend, but he wasn't sure he liked how much interest she'd been paying Toshka lately. He loved the pair of them but Toshka was broken and twisted. Thorfinn wouldn't stand for the git being inappropriate with his sister. Not that he thought Toshka was even aware that Reina seemed to have developed a small crush on the handsome bastard.

"Hey krasavica," Toshka greeted the witch, embracing her when she rushed over to him.

"I didn't know you were coming!" Reina began to chatter, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

Thorfinn continued to watch his friend, noticing idly as Toshka moved that he was limping slightly and that there were dark shadows under his eyes as though he hadn't been sleeping well. Thorfinn had been home at the Tower for a little over a week and Antonin had remained in Ireland for work. Or so Thorfinn had thought.

"I've been transferred back to the British division of the Ministry," Toshka told him, catching his frown of concern as he dropped down to sit beside Thorfinn at the breakfast table before reaching for some bacon.

"What? Why?" Thorfinn frowned.

"The Irish Division isn't getting enough work for me," Toshka sighed. "The huge backlog of stuff they had that needed my attention has been dealt with and things have been a bit too quiet lately. It was either transfer me or sack me."

"You're moving back here?" Reina asked excitedly.

"Looks that way," Toshka said, not at all looking pleased about it. "They gave me options. Here, Egypt or Russia. The Horde were really pushing for Russia because of the strings my family name will pull for them over there."

"They're probably right," Thorfinn told him. "I know you don't want to go because your dad wants it, but there would be more for you to do – more exciting shit to do, anyway – than what you'll get in Britain. Why don't you go to Egypt?"

"I was going to," Toshka admitted. "But Weasley is on the Egyptian Curse Breaker team."

"Weasley?" Thorfinn frowned, "Which one? I thought he was in Romania chasing dragons."


"So what?" Reina asked. "You're going to sit in the British bank dealing with the likes of Old Mrs Parkinson coming in with all her cursed objects to find out if they'll still kill muggles when
touched? And besides, Ginny mentioned that Bill had been transferred to the Russian branch because it puts him closer to Charlie where he works in Romania."

"Girl's got a point, son," Titus chimed in. "You stay here and you'll spend almost all of your time arguing with elderly biddies about boring trinkets."

Antonin sighed.

"You remember what happened when Weasley was at school with us?" Toshka asked, slanting a glance at Thorfinn.

Yes. Thorfinn remembered. Bill Weasley was, for want of a better word, pretty bad-ass. Popular, gifted, sharp-witted, and all-round a decent bloke, he'd been Head Boy while they'd been a few years behind him. And he'd busted the pair of them one night when they'd been up to something very far from being within school rules. He hadn't reported them, but he had kept an annoyingly close eye on them for the rest of the year until he'd graduated. After he'd hexed the pair of them stupid and thrown a few punches for good measure. They hadn't had the chance or really, the inclination, to get even get with him before he graduated.

"You think he'd give you trouble?" Thorfinn asked.

"Wouldn't you?" Toshka asked, raising one eyebrow.

"Probably," Thorfinn sighed, "You could go anyway. We were a pair of dumb kids. I doubt he'd hold it against you in the workplace eight year after the incident."

"There was an incident?" Titus asked, looking intrigued and concerned.

"Busted us up to a bit of mischief one night at the near the end of fifth year," Antonin smirked. "The type of thing you hold a grudge over. If he's not in Egypt, I suppose I could head down there, though."

Thorfinn's grandfather looked both like he wanted to know, but also like he knew he was better off not knowing about, lest he lose his temper over it or incriminate himself somehow.

"And Russia is out because of your Dad?" Reina asked.

Antonin sighed.

"Well, mostly because of him. Then there's that other reason that it'd be in my best interest to stay far away from Russia." He slanted a haunted look at Thorfinn and Thorfinn knew he meant that he didn't think he could share a country with Tatiana and her fiancé.

"Oh dear," Pandora sighed. "More enemies, dear?"

"The worst kind," Antonin admitted in a tight voice. "The woman I was betrothed to and the bastard who took her from me."

Silence reigned around the breakfast table and Thorfinn's parents stopped snogging as everyone stared at Antonin for his announcement of something they'd clearly had no knowledge of until that moment.

"You were betrothed?" Titus asked, frowning deeply.

Antonin nodded.
"From my ninth birthday until my eighteenth," Antonin nodded. "Not by choice, mind you. My father and hers arranged it when we were children and bound the promise to see us wedded by a Blood Oath. Her father died not long after I came of age. Until we severed it, I was only too keen to be shot of her and vice versa."

"You severed a nine year betrothal?" Thorfinn's mother gasped. "Oh, Antonin, I had no idea."

She moved around the table and Thorfinn watched the way his best friend's jaw clenched as she ran an affectionate hand through his dark hair in comfort.

"It's nothing," Antonin muttered. "But it'd be best if I stayed far away from Russia and the temptation to murder her new fiancé."

Thorfinn noticed the way everyone looked slightly alarmed by Antonin's cold tone. He also caught the way Reina slipped from her chair and silently left the dining room without looking back.

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Hermione stared out the window of her Aunt and Uncle's chateaux in Paris, admiring the evening skyline. They'd been in France for two weeks and she was ready for home. It made no sense to her. She could spend months on end away at Hogwarts, or the entire summer with Reina at Rowle Tower, or weeks and weeks with Harry, Ron and Ginny at the Burrow without thinking of home all that often at all.

Yet here, she ached for it.

She missed her friends. She felt like she hadn't seen Harry and Ron in far too long, despite it only having been a month since school ended for the year. She missed the way Ron nagged her about helping him with his homework when he left it to the last minute. She missed the way Harry could make her laugh when he was in the mood to be sassy about something. She missed plotting and planning with them both about some new way to break as many school rules as possible – something that was doing wonders for checking off a number of the tasks on her Rites list.

She missed Luna too, with her odd ways and her alarmingly insightful comments and her home-made jewellery. She missed the way the girl tended to blurt out whatever she thought or felt at any particular moment and the way she always had a copy of the Quibbler on her person or somewhere very close by. She missed Ginny, with her infatuation with Harry and the preoccupation of trying to get him to fancy her without alerting her brother to the fact that she fancied Harry. She missed having to remind the girl to breathe in Harry's presence at times when she would seize up and get all awkward and shy around Harry because she fancied him so much.

Most of all, she missed Reina. There was just something about her best friend that made Hermione happy. They could giggle over stupid things, or heatedly debate the merit of Werewolf regulations – a hot topic after Professor Lupin's secret had been outed - or when they were in the mood - they could whisper and gossip about the boys they fancied. Something made all the easier when Hermione had begun sneaking around with Theo – which Reina, of course, knew about – and when Hermione had realised Reina didn't object to the idea of Hermione fancying Thorfinn.

Hermione suspected, as she stared out across the city skyline, that Thorfinn was the biggest reason for the ache in her chest. She missed him. Gods, she bloody pined for him, if she was being honest. She felt terrible because she'd missed the Quidditch World Cup semi-final between Ireland and Peru. She missed trading insults with him and saying things that she didn't mean for the sake of bravado because if she'd didn't tell him he was a moron, she was in danger of blurring out that she was in love with him. She missed curling up against him, invading his personal space and breathing
in his citrus and smoke scent.

She'd been writing to all of them almost relentlessly since the summer had begun. She was sure the people at the owl office here in France – something she'd been directed to by a lovely lady who'd spotted her playing with her wand on the Metro – were entirely sick of. She'd found an entrance into Wizarding Paris not far from where her Aunt and Uncle lived, just a few short stops on the Metro away, in fact. She'd been slipping in and making the most of learning about French wizarding culture while her parents made the most of catching up with her father's siblings and cousins.

Indeed, the people at the Post Office now knew her by name and she was sure her cousins were beginning to think her very strange indeed for the fact that she was receiving letters on a daily basis – Reina and Luna had been very excited to hear everything they could about France - yet never seemed to check their mailbox. As she stared out the window that evening, missing her friends desperately, Hermione was paying very little attention to the small girl with pale blonde hair that crept up behind her.

"Hermione?" a small, French accented voice asked and Hermione almost jumped a foot in the air.

"Arabella?" Hermione asked, spinning around and spotting her youngest cousins standing before her, looking very nervous indeed. "Is everything alright? You look….

Hermione trailed off when the girl glanced over her shoulder to make sure they were alone, before she frowned at the button for a moment and looked back up at Arabella, who was in the middle of frowning so intensely that she looked as though she might burst a blood vessel at any moment. Glancing back at the button – which Arabella was staring at intensely – Hermione watched with no small amount of wonder as her cousin practiced wandless magic.

Before her very eyes, the small green button transfigured itself into a large green beetle.

"Arabella!" Hermione breathed, her eyes going wide before a smile spread across her face. "You… magic? You can do magic?"

Arabella beamed widely at her.

"So can you," the little girl informed her. "When we were little, you used to play with me when the others were mean to us both – me because I'm the youngest, and you because you're different. You used to turn flowers into butterflies and make things fly around the room without touching them. I... I've been trying to do it since I was four."

"You're a witch?" Hermione asked, stunned. "Goodness. You're a witch like me."

"A witch?" Arabella frowned, looking scared. "People call us witches?"

"It's not a bad term," Hermione placated the girl quickly. "It's a very good thing. We can do magic. We are witches."

"You can still do it too?" Arabella asked.

Hermione smiled. "I'm not allowed to do it with my wand outside of school, but yes. Watch."

Holding up her hand, Hermione called on the magic within her, making purple flames danced over her fingers.
"You have a wand?" Arabella breathed, looking like she'd just been told everything she'd ever dreamed of was coming true.

Hermione pulled out the device and showed her.

"You'll have one too," Hermione assured her. "You'll be eleven in a few weeks, won't you? When you turn eleven, you're going to get a letter, delivered by an owl, and you're going to be invited to attend a magical school like the one I attend."

"You go to magic school?" Arabella said, her eyes wide.

"Oh yes," Hermione smiled. "I go to the British school – Hogwarts. I expect you'll be invited to attend Beauxbatons Academy shortly. That's the magical school here in France. There are schools all over the world. Oh, this is wonderful!

Hermione launched into an explanation of all things magic, enthralling her cousin for hours on end, and even when they were called down to dinner, Hermione and Arabella were so engaged in their conversation that the taunts and snide comments from Hermione's other cousins about her front teeth and her wild hair and her know-it-all ways didn't register at all.

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The sound of rapid footsteps barely interrupted Hermione's musings as she stood outside a trinket store in La Rue Sorcier, trying to decide whether she wanted to buy little Eiffel Tower key-chains that doubled as a light source with little bits of starlight mounted into the top for Harry and Ron as souvenirs. Indeed, the sound of those footsteps meant less than nothing to Hermione Granger in that particular moment, right up until the second that a pair of strong hands seized her upper arms from behind.

Giving a soft squeak of surprise, Hermione found herself feeling rather startled indeed when someone decidedly male spun her away from the trinket store – keychains still in her hands – and around the side of the store. When the wizard in question pressed her into the wall of the alley he'd somehow manipulated her into before his lips crashed down upon hers, Hermione might've wondered, briefly, if she was dreaming. And when she dismissed the notion of odd dreams, Hermione rather decided that nice though the kiss happened to be when the stranger snogging her ceased being quite so bruising about it, she really didn't like how she'd ended up in this position.

Even if whomever was kissing her rather kissed like she were a lifeline he were clinging to. Even if she found herself melting against a strong chest when she ought to be stomping on his foot and demanding an explanation or defending herself. Even if he tangled his hands into her riotous curls, mussing them up as though he meant to surround himself with them while he kissed her. Bringing her hands up to push against his shoulders, Hermione frowned amid the kiss when he refused to budge, his tongue sliding against her own and proving the that French way of kissing really was the best way.

Pushing a little harder against her assailant and forcing him back a step, Hermione tore her lips from his, her eyes opening to glare at the wizard. The wizard who wasn't even looking at her. He turned his head away, toward the mouth of the alley, as though he were listening for something. Her mouth began moving before her brain could catch up with what she was seeing, and Hermione began to castigate the boy in rapid-fire French without registering the platinum shade of his hair or the aristocratic cast of his features.

"Just who do you think you are, grabbing someone and assaulting them this… Oh, my Merlin! Malfoy?"
"How do you know my name, Chère?" the blond wizard before her drawled in perfect French, glancing in her direction curiously before looking back toward the mouth of the alley where a number of grown wizards suddenly raced past, their wands drawn.

Hermione got the feeling that this boy – this Malfoy boy, no less – was running from those wizards when he turned back to look at Hermione, propping his shoulder against the wall of the alley and smirking down at her, his back to the street as though to better conceal his identity should anyone glance in their direction. She stared up at him, her mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water as she gaped in confusion at the sight that her eyes were telling her was Malfoy, yet her brain was pointing out that though he had answered to the name Malfoy, he wasn't the Malfoy she'd been referring to with her tone of utter disgust.

"Wait… you're not Draco Malfoy," Hermione commented, staring into his handsome face and noting that though he bore the same platinum blond hair, a similar build and even the same pointed sort of features, his eyes were a vivid shade of blue, rather than grey.

He was taller than Draco, too, and perhaps a littler broader. Indeed, he looked older than Draco Malfoy, perhaps sixteen or seventeen instead of fourteen.

"Draco?" the boy raised one eyebrow, looking highly amused by her confusion. "Nope. Not me, Chère. That ponce is a cousin of mine though – distant one. You know him?"

"I go to school with him." Hermione nodded, still gaping at the boy before her and trying to control the urge she had to smack him right across the face - as she'd done to Draco - just to see if his reaction would be the same. "If you're not Draco, then who are you? I know you're still a Malfoy."

"Drystan Malfoy, at you service." He winked at her, taking her hand and pressing a kiss to the back of it with all the suave gentility of a proper gentleman.

Oh dear.

"French Malfoy line, I presume?" Hermione frowned slightly, her brow furrowing and an uncomfortable sort of roil beginning in her stomach.

"Was it my accent that gave it away?" he smirked at her. "You're British, I take it? If you know Draco and go to Hogwarts with him, you must be."

"I erm… Did you say your name was Drystan?" Hermione asked, feeling a little lightheaded and rather like she might be ill at any moment.

The boy blinked at her for a moment before he nodded, apparently thinking her onset of illness was actually just her swooning in his presence. Just like Draco, Hermione thought inwardly, thinks entirely too highly of himself.

"Oh dear, I really wish you hadn't kissed me, Drystan" Hermione said, pressing a hand to her stomach in the hopes of preventing the vomit she felt rising from making an appearance.

"I think you'd be the first witch to ever say that," he informed her, looking mildly affronted but nonetheless amused now. "What did you say your name was, Chère?"

"Hermione Granger," Hermione told him. "You and I are… Erm… Cousins, actually."
Drystan Malfoy looked alarmed by the very idea. His blue eyes widened and he flinched back ever so slightly from her, his eyes scanning her from head to foot and looking sceptical that they could possibly be related at all, let alone that they could be cousins, no matter that they were, technically, third cousins, once removed.

"Cousins?" he asked blankly. "You don't look like a Malfoy. And your name is Granger? There are no Grangers on my family tree. Trust me, I've been forced to study the wretched thing extensively."

"No, I don't imagine I'd be on it," Hermione admitted, shaking her head at him. "I'm muggleborn, you see? But my great-grandfather was Lamar Malfoy, of the French line. He married a muggle woman and was undoubtedly blasted off the tree. My paternal great-great-grandparents were Adella and Demonte Malfoy."

"Lamar….?" Drystan's eyes went wide at the names. "Oh shit…"

Hermione watched the way he frowned at her for a long moment, obviously concerned to learn they were related and unnerved by the mention of Lamar Malfoy. Hermione had dug into her family tree extensively - with Pandora's help - after Theo had informed her that she was related to the Dolohovs and the French Malfoys. She knew that Lamar Malfoy had been rather a joke of a wizard with very little magic and that he'd been blasted off the family tree by his father, Demonte Malfoy when he had married Hermione's great-grandmother - the descendant of a Dolohov squib. It was believed that Lamar had been murdered by one of the others amid the French Malfoy line, in fact, a sibling, cousin or uncle was suspected of expunging the embarrassment he was from their family history.

"I think that you had better come for a little walk with me, Hermione Granger," Drystan told her quietly, all joking and flirtatious banter set aside at the idea that they might be related.

"I hardly think your extended family will be interested in meeting me, Drystan," Hermione replied, suspecting he either wanted confirmation of her heritage, or that he planned to do away with her, lest her existence tarnish the Malfoy name.

"Actually if you're a descendant of Lamar, I know someone who will be very interested indeed to meet you, Granger," he said. Hermione marvelled at the fact that despite his French accent, he sounded almost identical to Draco Malfoy when he said her surname that way.

"I... I need to pay for these," Hermione made excuses. "You snatched me away from the front of that store before I could pay for my things."

He looked down to see the souvenirs she'd been thinking of buying.

"I'll handle it," he muttered. "Just..."

Hermione frowned slightly when he tucked her hand through his elbow like a proper gentleman intent on escorting her.

"Oh, Merlin!" Hermione gasped. "I almost forgot that Arabella is inside!"

"Arabella?" he asked, glancing down at her.

"My first cousin – she's muggleborn like me, but she's been manifesting her accidental magic. Her letter for Beauxbatons will arrive any day now, I'm sure of it."

"There are more of you?" Drystan asked her in a strained voice.
"Just Arabella and I that I know of – at least those of my cousins who are magical. She has siblings and I've more cousins here in France who aren't magical but are of the same line," Hermione admitted, pulling her hand free of his elbow and dashing inside the store. "Arabella? Where are you? Blast it all, where is that girl?"

Hermione hunted through the store, ignoring the way the clerk eyed her suspiciously, obviously thinking her a thief. She found her cousin toward the back of the store, seated on the floor and playing with a number of magical dragon toys.

"There you are!" Hermione sighed in relief when she spotted the ten year old.

"Hermione?" Arabella looked up. "Aren't they wonderful? Look, they can fly on their own."

She prodded one of the toys with her finger and it took flight to soar across the aisle land on a nearby shelf.

"Oh dear," Drystan's drawling voice came from behind her.

"I know they can fly, sweetheart." Hermione smiled at the girl. "Are you ready to go? This nice boy is a cousin of ours and he'd like to meet you."

"More cousins?" Arabella sighed. "Don't we have enough of those already? Wait, if he's in here... are you magical too?"

The girls eyes - which Hermione suddenly noticed were very much the same vivid shade of blue as Drystan's - went wide as she eyed the boy behind Hermione.

"She's almost identical to Maeva," Drystan muttered. "Oui, Chère. I'm magical too. Get on up from there and I'll take the two of you to meet the rest of your magical relatives, shall I?"

Arabella jumped up, bounding over and stretching up on her toes as she spouted greetings, suddenly remembering her manners and attempting to brush her cheek to that of the tall blond wizard. Drystan sighed when Arabella clung to the front of his robes, pulling on him in her attempt to reach his cheek. He rolled his eyes at Hermione, who couldn't entirely hide her giggle of amusement, before he leaned down to brush his cheek to Arabella's in greeting.

"This really wasn't how my day was supposed to go," he complained haughtily when Hermione took Arabella's hand and led the girl to the check out where she paid for the souvenirs she'd been clutching since Drystan had grabbed her.

"Oh, please!" Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "You were running from those other wizards when you grabbed me. I hardly think you planned on hanging around here too long anyway."

Drystan's eyes went wide at her words, obviously shocked to know she'd seen through his little plot.

"Just... Keep your head down, witch," he muttered. "And don't fight me if I grab you again."

"Try to remember that we're third cousins before you kiss me again, yeah?" Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Third?" he glanced at her.

"Once removed," Hermione nodded.
"What are you worried about then?" he rolled his eyes. "I thought you were going to tell me we were more closely related. Third cousins is completely legal and not even frowned upon."

Hermione threw up in her mouth a little.

"Don't be so dramatic." Drystan rolled her eyes at the way she gagged. "And don't pretend you didn't enjoy the kiss I gave you before you realised who I am."

Hermione stuck her tongue out at him and she squeaked when he reached up, quick as lightning, and flicked it.

"Don't be rude," he chastised. "Come on, let's get out of here before those morons I beat at gobstones in the alley come back."

"You were hustling a gobstones game?" Hermione demanded in a whisper.

"Who said anything about hustling?" Drystan asked, though he smirked, obviously amused that she was sharp enough to know he'd ripped off the wizards that had been chasing him.

Apparently her cousin was entirely too much like a sly Slytherin for anyone's comfort and Hermione narrowed her eyes on him as he led her and Arabella out of the store and down the street.

"Where are we going?" Arabella asked.

"There's an apparation station around the corner," Drystan told her.

"We're not old enough to apparate," Hermione told Drystan.

"How old are you?" he asked, frowning at her.

"I'll be fifteen in September," Hermione replied. "Arabella's only ten."

Drystan sighed.

"Right. Then we need a Floo," he muttered. "Ah, Merlin, those thugs are coming back."

Glancing down the street, Hermione spotted a number of wizards coming towards them, though that hadn't spotted Drystan yet. They were hunting around, snatching hold of blonde wizard's in the street and trying to locate him.

"How much did you take from them?" Hermione asked in a low voice, taking his arm and turning him towards a nearby store that sold sweets. "Arabella, wouldn't you like a sweet?"

"Oooh!" Arabella crowed, dashing towards the food with bright eyes as she saw the wizarding style of food the shop sold.

"What are you doing, Granger?" Drystan asked when Hermione turned him so that his back was too the street before she stood behind him and pressed her front to his back.

"Hush up and pretend to be her father or her elder brother buying her a treat, Malfoy," Hermione whispered, wrapping her arms around him from behind and trying very hard to look as touristy and as old as possible in the attempt of fooling the thugs into thinking they were a happy family going about their day.

"Which one would you like, Arabella?" Drystan asked, falling into the role with ease. "Chère, you want a sweet?"
He spoke English as he asked his questions, deepening his voice slightly and making it seem like he were a foreigner.

"Yes, please. Do they have cauldron cakes?" Hermione said in English, leaning around Drystan's far side so that he would turn his head away from the thugs, who'd spotted his blond hair and were heading their way.

"What the bloody hell is a cauldron cake?" Drystan muttered over his shoulder, meeting her gaze.

"I'll take that as a no," Hermione replied. "I don't know then, one of those glazed Dragon Claw shaped cakes will do." She pointed to the sweet.

"Can I get this one?" Arabella asked, coming over to them and tugging on the front of Drystan's robes.

Her small stature for her age made her look much younger than ten when she did that and Hermione smiled, peeking over her shoulder to see two thugs still eyeing them while the rest looked like they'd bought the performance.

"Of course you can, Imp," Drystan said, pushing affection into his voice and reaching to smooth his hand through Arabella's hair.

Another thug moved on, but one of them kept watching the three of them, and Hermione didn't like it. He was a big brute of a wizard with thick black facial hair and a nasty scar through his left eyebrow.

"Can I have more than one?" Arabella asked, dashing back to the display case and all but pressing her nose to it, wanting to buy everything. Hermione chuckled to herself, recalling thinking the same thing the first time she'd been allowed into Diagon Alley when she'd learned she was a witch.

"What do you think?" Drystan asked, turning his head over his shoulder to meet her gaze once more.

"I think Scarface isn't buying the performance," Hermione muttered, watching the bearded wizard come closer out the corner of her eye.

"One way to fix that," Drystan muttered, his eyes darting to her lips once more.

He was right. Squishing down her ick factor and going up on her toes, Hermione kissed him a second time. Pressing her lips to his, Hermione closed her eyes and pretended they weren't related. Turning a little more, he snogged her soundly and Hermione decided that she really was going to have to work on the way she simply melted into the kiss. It simply wouldn't do at all. When she pulled away, Drystan smirked at her and the expression reminded her entirely too much of Draco.

"Get me something to eat before I eat you," Hermione pretended to grumbled, releasing him and stepping around him to stand between Drystan and Scarface, pressing one hand to her stomach and feigning pregnancy cravings.

Drystan laughed at her words and began ordering the thing she'd said she wanted, getting Arabella a selection of sweets as well.

When Hermione looked toward Scarface again, he had turned his attention away and was continuing on up the street.

"He's gone," Hermione told Drystan as he paid for the sweets and handed her the one she'd wanted.
"Excellent," Drystan grinned. "You're good in a crisis.
Hermione rolled her eyes at his complimentary tone.

"Shut up and let me get the taste of snogging my cousin out of my mouth, yeah?" Hermione retorted.

"Touchy," he rolled his eyes at her. "Honestly, most of the wizarding families in Britain marry second and third cousins to one another. I don't know what you're getting your knickers in a twist about."

"You may recall that I go to school with your cousin, Draco?" Hermione reminded. "And that I happened to be beyond horrified at the idea of snogging him before I realised it was you?"

"Wait!" Drystan said, suddenly grabbing her arm tightly and peering down at her shrewdly.

"You that Hermione Granger?" he asked, blue eyes widening. "The one Draco's mad for?"

"I do wish people would stop saying that," Hermione sighed. "Honestly, the way the git treats me, you'd think you could all use your brains and realise he loathes me."

"Oh yeah, loathes you so much that he harped my grandmother for months for information on Lamar Malfoy and any offspring he'd produced. The little shit tried for months to prove you weren't just some worthless muggleborn from no decent line. That sod wanted to marry you, witch," Drystan informed her.

"Stop," Hermione begged. "I don't want to hear it. Draco's rotten to me and my friends. He's rude and cruel and annoying and if he actually fancied me, he'd be nice."

"Wait... Didn't he tell me the entire thing was a waste of time because you've accepted some other bloke as your suitor? What was his name? Rowle?"

"Thorfinn Rowle," Hermione sighed, her stomach doing a little flip. "And we're not a couple at the moment. Malfoy got his wand in a knot over a gift Finn gave me and the fact that I support him in his Quidditch career by wearing jerseys with Finn's name on it."

"That was the one," Drystan smirked. "You've got my cousin all twisted up over you, cousin."

"Technically he's my cousin too," Hermione pointed out, making a face over the idea.

"Yeah, but Draco's my seventh cousin. Which makes him, like twelfth cousins with you, a few times removed. Most people in the world are a bit related, you know. If you get funny over it all the time, you'll die alone, Granger."

Hermione rolled her eyes at him.

"In any case, I expect that my great-grandmother and our shared great-great-grandmother would rather like to meet Lamar's two magical descendants," Drystan went on. "So come along, before the thugs comes back."

"Wait..." Hermione said, staring at him wide eyed. "They're still alive?"

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"Drystan, darling, where have you been... Goodness!" a witch in perhaps her early sixties stuttered to a stop. "Merlin. Erm... Drystan, dear, who've you brought with you?"
"Hello Grandmother," Drystan greeted the witch, moving forwards to take the witch's hand and press a kiss to the back of it just the same way he'd done to Hermione. "I'd like to make a bit of an announcement, actually. Do you think we could get everyone into the sitting room?"

"Everyone?" his grandmother asked, looking alarmed.

"Everyone," Drystan nodded. "In particular, Grandmother Adella and whichever siblings and descendants of Adella and Demonte's children can be roused at a moment's notice."

"Oh Circe!" Drystan's grandmother muttered, eyeing Hermione and Arabella with no small amount of curiosity and alarm.

"You really don't need to do this, Drystan," Hermione told her cousin, frowning. "Honestly. Don't go bothering everyone just for us."

"Ah, but I must, dear cousin." Drystan winked at her. "Arabella, after all, will be attending Beauxbatons alongside many of us in the coming term. It would hardly be appropriate for my siblings and our cousins to remain unaware of her until such time that she makes her appearance in September."

"Cousin?" his grandmothers asked, her eyes going wide, "Oh dear. Tonnie!"

A house-elf appeared before the woman with a pop.

"Mistress?" the elf asked, bowing low.

"Rouse every Malfoy elf," the woman commanded. "I want every member of the family - extended family included - in the sitting room within five minutes."

The elf bowed again before vanishing and Hermione sighed.

"This is so exciting," Arabella whispered to her, taking Hermione's hand and peering around the grand chateaux with wide eyes, drinking in everything she could.

Hermione had to bite her tongue on the need she had to warn her cousin that they might not be given an entirely warm welcome.

"Now, Drystan," his grandmother said. "Cousins?"

Drystan grinned at the woman.

"Third cousins, once removed," he confirmed with a nod, "Grandmother, may I present Hermione Granger and Arabella... are you a Granger too?"

"Devereaux," Arabella replied. "My mother's maiden name was Granger."

"You two are first cousins?" Drystan waved a finger between Hermione and Arabella, directing his question to Hermione.

Hermione nodded.

"Right. Well, Hermione Granger, Arabella Devereaux, may I present Countess Amelia Malfoy, my beloved grandmother and your... Oh, it's too complicated but it'd take a stab at second cousin once or twice removed," Drystan went on.

"Countess," Hermione said, curtsying and watching Arabella look at her before doing the same.
"Well, at least you aren't complete savages," the witch said, eyeing them shrewdly.

"The shock that must be," Hermione smiled sweetly and the woman narrowed her eyes on Hermione slightly.

"And you know how to play," she said with a smirk after a long moment. "My, but the stir this will cause. I do hope my dear grandmother can stand the shock of meeting her great-great-granddaughters."

"Play?" Arabella asked, looking up at Hermione, obviously confused.

"Don't worry about it, Arabella," Hermione told the girl quietly. "Suffice it to say there is a learning curve in your future."

"Just how is it you happened across your... cousins, Drystan?" the Countess asked.

"Bumped right into one another in La Rue Sorcier." Drystan smirked before shooting a wink at Hermione.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Well, let's just hurry along to the sitting room, shall we? This is hardly the time for loitering when the family is gathering."

Hermione fought the urge to roll her eyes again as the witch strode off through the house, insisting Drystan take her arm and escort her. Holding Arabella's hand, Hermione followed along behind them, dreading meeting her extended family more than she could say right at that particular moment.

"It'll be alright, Hermione," Arabella whispered to her, patting her hand reassuringly.

Hermione wasn't so sure, but she bit her tongue on a retort when they entered a large sitting room filled with Malfoys. Dear Merlin, how many of them were there? Hermione wondered if her eyes were bugging out of her head as she stared at them all. Ranging in age from toddlers to elderly people so old they must surely have one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel, the number of Malfoys within the room was close to seventy or eighty, by Hermione's best guess.

Eerily, they all waited in silence rather than arguing, fighting or demanding to know why they'd been brought there. Most alarmingly, Hermione spotted Draco, Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy among the gathered French Malfoys, along with a witch that Hermione suspected must be Draco's paternal grandmother.

"Granger?" Draco asked, curling his lip at the sight of her.

Nobody shushed him out loud, but the number of looks shot in his direction quelled any further questions or comments he might have. Hermione caught the way he eyed her, his grey eyes raking over her petite frame, obviously taking note of the summer dress she wore that reached her knees and boasted sheer lace across her midsection, hugging her figure closely. The white of the fabric had the effect of making her look particularly innocent, whilst the lace in the middle that flirted with showing flesh peeked towards alluring. She'd been rather pleased when she'd put it on that morning, but now Hermione found herself wishing she were wearing shapeless robes.

Had she not grown accustomed to looking beyond the sneer that boy almost always wore, Hermione might've missed the appreciation that glittered in his grey eyes and the way he stuffed clenched fists into the pockets of the robes he wore.
"Contessa? What is the meaning of this gathering?" one of the elder Malfoys of the French line asked. He was perhaps a brother of the Countess.

"Drystan has brought to my attention two girls we rather thought you all ought to meet," Countess Amelia Malfoy informed them all in a cool, calm tone. "Adella, my dear, could you come out here please?"

Hermione held Arabella's hand a little tighter when the girl pressed herself to Hermione's hip, obviously nervous now in the face of so many Malfoys. They all bore the type of guardedly curious non-expressions Hermione has seen many purebloods wear. She wondered idly if it was something learned from birth or an unconscious habit they all picked up.

When a delicate, yet decidedly strong looking witch made her way forward amid the Malfoys – the others moving out of her way with the greatest deference – Hermione felt her breath catch in her throat. She was sure she'd never seen anyone as old, yet as put-together looking as this witch. Her face was lined with wrinkles and her back bent slightly as age and prolonged exposure to gravity attempted to bow her forwards – a battle gravity seemed to be losing. She was immaculately dressed, her long hair white – pure white rather than the white blonde of most of the other Malfoys – pulled into a tight bun atop her head. She walked with a cane, one gnarled hand still baring perfectly manicured nails curled around the tool as she moved forwards.

"Drystan?" Adella Malfoy asked, her voice strong and sharp as a shard of ice.

"Grandmother Adella." Drystan released Amelia and moved forward to take his great-great-grandmother's hand, bending over it and pressing a kiss to the back of it.

More gentlemanly manners, Hermione noted.

"I have found two witches I believed it rather prudent to have you meet, Matriarch," Drystan said quietly. "These two are Hermione Granger and Arabella Deveraux."

He pointed to each of them in turn and Hermione watched the way the elderly witch's sharp blue eyes scanned first over Arabella, narrowing slightly on the way the girl was expressing her fear over the situation by clinging to Hermione. And then they shifted to Hermione herself and Hermione had to fight the urge she suddenly felt to dip into a curtsy before the woman.

"They are the only magical descendants of Lamar," Drystan told the woman quietly. "Muggleborn, obviously, but they have magic. Arabella is almost eleven and will be attending Beauxbatons alongside myself and the others in the Autumn. Hermione is about to enter her fourth year at Hogwarts, where she attends alongside Draco. They are…"

He stopped speaking when Adella held up a hand, cutting him off without a word.

"Lamar's descendants?" she murmured. "Tell me, how is it that you come to be amongst us, Hermione Granger?"

The witch walked closer to them slowly.

"Amongst you here within this room, or amongst you as a living, breathing witch?" Hermione clarified carefully, watching the woman watch her with intrigue.

"Ah," the witch's lips twitched at the question. "You must be Larmar's descendant. He always knew when to ask the right questions. Tell me, who was my Lamar to each of you?"

Hermione swallowed and licked her lips before answering, "Lamar Malfoy was our great-
grandfather. He married Isabella Boisan and the couple had six children – our grandmother, Adeline Malfoy, among them. She married our grandfather, Frank Granger and produced four children, my father Clarence, and Arabella's mother, Clarissa, among them. Arabella is the youngest of four siblings, but she has been the only one to express magic. I am an only child and have been attending Hogwarts since I was eleven."

Adella clucked her tongue for a moment before a small smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. "And she has memorised her family tree, too. My, you must be a clever little witch."

Hermione lowered her head modestly for a moment, giving Arabella's hand a reassuring squeeze. "Tell me, Arabella, have you been able to do magic long?" Adella asked of the girl.

"I…" Arabella's eyes went wide and her hand tightened on Hermione's. "The first time I did it I was six. My brother pushed me from a tree and I thought I was going to land on my head, but I didn't. I… flew."

Hermione smiled reassuringly at the girl.

"I couldn't do it when I wanted unless something bad happened until I was nine," the girl went on in a stronger voice when Adella graced her with a small smile. "I've been practicing since Hermione showed me how she could make things fly and turn flowers into butterflies and make things disappear and reappear at her word when I was little."

"Hermione has been able to do magic a good deal longer then, I trust?" Adella asked, lifting her eyes to Hermione's.

"Since I was born," Hermione whispered. "One of my Mum's favourite stories is to tell of how I vanished the needles the nurses at the hospital tried to inject me with when I was three months old."

A soft murmur of noise went through the gathered Malfoys at her answer.

"Indeed?" Adella asked, one eyebrow raised. "And tell me, Arabella. You said you could only do accidental magic until you were nine. Does that mean you can perform magic now at will?"

Arabella nodded.

"Show her your button trick, Arabella," Hermione encouraged her cousin softly.

Arabella did as she was told, fishing her green button out of her pocket – she seemed to always carry it with her – and holding it out on the palm of her hand to show the woman. Adella leaned in, squinting a little to see what it was. When she nodded to Arabella, Hermione watched the young witch focus on the button until it transfigured into a large green beetle – larger this time than when she'd shown Hermione. Indeed, the huge beetle dwarfed Arabella's small hand and the girl had to release Hermione to keep the bug from escaping.

"My, my." Adella clucked her tongue again, her smile growing a little more. "And you, Hermione? Are you able to perform wandless magic?"

"I am." Hermione nodded, stepping back from Arabella slightly before summoning her own magic and watching the bright purple flames dance over her fingers, growing until they became a pair of fireballs in her palms.

Many of the Malfoy's gasped at the sight when the flames took shape, transforming into the shape
of a lioness that prowled up the length of Hermione's arms, growing as it went yet not scorching her clothing. When the flame-lioness leapt to the floor it was nearing in size to a real lioness and it prowled towards Adella Malfoy curiously. Hermione watched, carefully controlling the flames and the magic that produced them to prevent any damage to the floor where she stepped or to allow her to harm the elderly witch.

"Fiendfyre," Adella practically purred. "Can you control it, girl? Or is it likely to devour the house."

"I have control of it," Hermione murmured softly, beckoning with her fingers and watching the lioness stalk back towards her. "She only gets away if I get exceptionally angry."

"She's gotten away from you before?" Adella ascertained.

"Once," Hermione admitted. "The Ministry had to intervene to save my house when I was twelve."

"Can you re-call the magic within you?" Adella asked, looking intrigued.

Hermione nodded, calling the magic back to her until the lioness shape amid her flames butted against her hands as though she were a real feline begging to be scratched, as Hermione touched the shape, the magic absorbed back into her skin without burning her until the flames and the bright purple glow receded entirely.

"Lucius?" Adella called over her shoulder, eyeing Hermione with intrigue now.

"Matriarch?" Lucius Malfoy drawled, sauntering closer to the witch.

"How long have you know of the girl's existence?" Adella asked him.

"I have known of her since Draco mentioned her over Christmas in his first year, though I'd no idea she was descended from Lamar until today. There is very little resemblance," Lucius informed her.

"Draco knew," Drystan said quietly, eyeing Hermione like he wanted to snog her all over again after her display of power.

"Draco?" Adella asked.

Draco's cheeks turned pink at being called upon and Hermione smirked to herself.

"I was aware of her ancestry during my first year," Draco said begrudgingly. "I didn't feel it was important enough to bring to your attention as she is still muggleborn."

"Powerful and descended from my son, is what she is," Adella corrected. "Drystan, how did you find them?"

"Entirely by accident," Drystan replied, smirking at Hermione now. "I had the luck to happen upon Hermione in La Rue Sorcier when I was rather in need of a distraction. Once she recovered from her shock at encountering me, she pointed out our familial bond."

"Indeed?" Adella asked,

"I brought her to you at once, Matriarch," Drystan offered with a charming smile that Hermione did not doubt had talked more than one witch out of her knickers. "She and Arabella are, after all, my third cousins."

"Surely there is some mistake," a petulant looking witch in her thirties spoke up from the gathered
group. "The young one resembles our own dear Maeva, but the elder girl looks nothing like any Malfoy I've ever seen."

"No, she looks rather more like Dolohov, actually," Countess Amelia spoke up, still eyeing Hermione speculatively.

"I am descended from the Dolohovs as well," Hermione nodded her head. "Lamar married Isabella Boisan. Isabella's mother's name was Anastasiya Dolohov."

"Squib, wasn't she?" Adella asked, raising one eyebrow.

"I believe so, yes," Hermione nodded head.

"You've got the Dolohov signature to your magic too," Adella commented. "They have laid claim to you?"

"So I'm told," Hermione nodded. "Antonin Dolohov is my fourth cousin and a… friend. He gifted me a Temnyy Klinok Smerti on my thirteenth birthday."

More whispers among the Malfoy clan.

"My, but you are a little more than a mere mudblood, aren't you Miss Granger?" Lucius commented quietly, eyeing her curiously in a way that rather made her skin crawl.

"Surprise," Hermione replied before she could bite her tongue.

Adella began to laugh very softly at her word.

"My Lamar," she murmured. "Producing magical offspring – powerful magical offspring at that. Drystan, my darling, you've done a very wonderful thing bringing your cousins to me today."

Drystan smirked at the praise.

"Tell me, Hermione Granger and Arabella Devereaux," Adella went on. "How would you like to be Malfoys?"

Hermione wondered how many of them caught the way she flinched away from the very idea, her eyes landing on Draco and narrowing hatefully.

"You… want us?" Arabella asked in a small voice. "Hermione said that there were some people who wouldn't be very nice to me when I got to school because my Mum and Dad are muggles."

"Hermione, it would seem, is no stranger to blood prejudice," Adella commented. "However it will not do to have two so magically gifted witches of Lamar's line remaining unclaimed by their magical family. Especially when you, Hermione, have already been claimed by your Dolohov relatives. Though you don't seem overly fond of the idea of belonging among Malfoys. Why is that?"

Hermione opened her mouth, intent of spitting out an answer along the lines of her experiences with Malfoys only being unpleasant. But then her eyes slid to Drystan. Lucius had been rude, but not wretched when she'd encountered him before her second year at Hogwarts. And Draco had surely been a little cockroach to her any number of times, though, as her eyes slid past him she could practically see how he really felt about her glittering in his grey eyes – eyes, she noted idly, that he'd inherited from his mother.
Draco may have been wretched to her in his spurned fury, but Drystan had been bearable. At least, in the sense that he'd snogged her silly and that he was obviously one for mischief. He hadn't made any inane comments about her being muggleborn. In fact, he'd brought her before her extended family and her great-great-grandmother without prompting and he looked rather like he hoped she'd accept the offer.

Not that she had much choice without making an enemy of everyone in the room. Swivelling her gaze back to Draco, Hermione raised one eyebrow at him.

"Shall you tell her, or will I?" Hermione asked of her least favourite person.

Draco looked affronted, his top lip curling away from his teeth in annoyance with her for addressing him at all.

"Draco?" Adella asked, turning in his direction.

"Granger and I don't exactly see eye to eye, Matriarch," Draco offered diplomatically. "We aren't friends at school. Rather, she is friends with my enemies and so there is a nasty history between the two of us that, I do not doubt, makes her hesitant to be associated with Malfoys given that I've been her only example of Malfoy folk."

"In other words," Drystan spoke up. "He's a right sod to her and her friends and she doesn't trust us as far as she could throw us."

"She's hardly mistaken in being cautious," Lucius muttered just loud enough for Hermione to hear.

"Perhaps then, it would be prudent for her to see that we are not all rude children," Adella suggested, her eyes sparkling with what Hermione suspected might be amusement over the idea. "Those of you with places to be, begone. Those of you still of school age or curious about our extended family, remain."

Hermione watched with no small amount of surprise when most of the people within the sitting room remained, only a few of them departing that she suspected must have jobs or business meetings to attend.

"Tonnie!"

The elf appeared with a pop.

"Matriarch?" Tonnie bowed so low that her nose touched the floor.

"Serve morning tea in the dining room for all of us," Adella commanded and the elf disappeared once more to go about her task. "Now. Come, girls. We'll have tea."

Hermione wasn't sure how she felt about that idea in the slightest.

Drystan escorted the woman away through the house, Hermione taking Arabella's hand once more and following behind them while the rest of the Malfoys trailed behind until they came upon a lavish and expansive dining room. Unsure where to sit once Adella was seated at the head of the table, Hermione made eye contact with Drystan. He smirked slightly before nodding towards the seat to the direct left of Adella, moving around to pull it out for her and tuck it in underneath her as she sat. Arabella received the same treatment beside Hermione before Drystan sat beside her.

They all waited as food and pots of tea appeared along the table before the teapots began pouring the tea while everyone reached for cakes and biscuits. Hermione herself accepted a cup of tea and
a cupcake with pink icing before fixing her attention on Adella once more. The woman was imposing in her power, despite her small stature and her old age. She reminded Hermione very much of Pandora Rowle and of Professor McGonagall, in fact.

"Now then," Adella said. "You, Hermione attend Hogwarts. Tell me, what subjects do you take?"

Hermione bit her lip.

"All of them," she admitted. "Or I did, until this summer. I dropped Divination and Muggle Studies after that. Utterly dull subjects."

"I wasn't aware one was allowed to study all of the subjects a school has on offer. Do they not limit them?" Adella frowned.

"Ordinarily they do, yes. I was given special permission and a Time-Turner to attend all of my classes and to take so many subjects because I'm… rather gifted at studying," Hermione cheeks turned pink.

Draco, who was sitting across the table a few spots down piped up to say, "She's an insufferable know-it-all, Matriarch."

Hermione glared at him.

"Why it has ever been considered amusing to make fun of a person for knowing more than oneself, Draco, is beyond me," Hermione retorted. "Broadcasting one's own ignorance by pointing out the smarts of someone else seems rather a poor way to soothe one's own insecurities."

Drystan began to laugh.

"She told you, cousin," Drsytan muttered to Draco, who looked like he aimed a kick at Drystan under the table.

"Broadcasting one's own academic merit is a rather poor way of allowing one's enemies to believe that one is anything other than transparent and open to easy manipulation, Hermione," Draco replied. Hermione startled at the sound of him speaking her first name.

"Ah, I see you weren't kidding about the tension between the two of you," Adella smiled suddenly, the expression taking years off her face and rather stunning Hermione speechless. "You are, however, both correct. Tormenting someone for being smarter than you is folly, but proving one's own brilliance at every turn leaves you open for manipulation, Hermione."

She reached out and patted Hermione's hand softly and Hermione gasped at the contact, a zing of magic shooting up her arm.

"You felt that, didn't you?" Adella smirked at her when everyone else fell silent at the contact and the gasp Hermione emitted. "Do you know what it is?"

"The formation of a familial bond of pure magical energy between two blood relatives," Hermione answered.

"You truly are bright, aren't you, dear?" Adella smiled fondly at her. "Yes, that's what it is. Do you know what it means?"

"That I no longer have a choice about being acknowledged as a Malfoy descendant," Hermione sighed. "Anyone who knows what to look for will recognise that I belong to this bloodline and this
family as surely as you recognised my bond to the Dolohov bloodline and the Dolohov family."

"She bonded with you?" Countess Amelia asked, frowning. "Through touch alone?"

"She is truly gifted," Adella said quietly "And extremely powerful. As Matriarch of the Malfoy line – the oldest living member of the bloodline, I am head of the family and I hold a certain power over the rest of you. I can see you know this, Hermione. That you can feel my magic through touch is uncommon without focused intent. Tell me, if I do this…"

Hermione watched the way the elderly witch tipped her head to one side, undoubtedly practicing wandless and nonverbal magic. She could see it dancing in her eyes and sparking along her magical core before it reached out like an invisible hand and wrapped around Arabella – who remained oblivious if the way she continued eating her cake and looking at Hermione curiously was any indication.

"Don't," Hermione warned, watching the magic as it coiled suddenly around the magical core within her tiny cousin, threatening to overwhelm it and snuff it right out, or perhaps to pull it from the girl as though she no longer deserved it.

"Ah… you can see the bond, can't you?" Adella murmured. "You can see my intent and my magic."

"If you snuff it out of her, great-great-grandmother or not, you will not like the consequences, Adella," Hermione warned the witch quietly, feeling her own magic beginning to rise in response, in a need to protect the little girl she'd exposed to these people and this world.

"You dare to threaten the Matriarch?" Amelia hissed, looking furious and appalled.

"She is right to do so," Adella held up a hand to ward off the fury of the others. "Let me see then, perhaps this will warrant a different reaction."

Uncoiling from around Arabella like a snake, the woman's magic travelled across the table to Draco and Hermione watched the way he tensed, his eyes shifting to the woman even as his core magic – suddenly visible to Hermione while Adella's magic touched it – seemed to writhe against hers like snake poisoned with its own venom. Alarmingly, Hermione felt her own magic surface once more, this time with a little crackle of purple sparks flitting from the end of her fingers.

"You've a very rare gift, Hermione Granger," Adella informed her. "One that has not manifested in this family since my Lamar disappeared. If I do this…"

Her magic seemed to tighten around Draco's and despite Hermione's best efforts to sit uncaring, not at all giving a stuff about Draco Malfoy, she felt her own magic rise in return.

"Can you stop it?" Adella challenged her when Draco began to squirm slightly in his seat. "Can you pry my magic from his? I suppose the more important question is, can you refrain from helping him?"

Hermione clenched her fists, another flurry of purple sparks dancing on her fingertips.

"Don't," Hermine warned again.

"Don't fight the urge, Hermione," Adella chuckled. "I know you want to stop me from tormenting dear Draco. He's very uncomfortable right now, aren't you darling?"

Draco's teeth were gritted as he glared at the woman and Hermione knew what the witch wanted
from her. The true sparking of a familial bond with the Head of a bloodline created a powerful link not only to the Matriarch or Patriarch, but to everyone of that bloodline. It would push Hermione to protect every member of that family, and indeed, push them to protect her in return. By picking on Draco, Hermione's least favourite person, Adella was proving that magic would always outweigh dislike, prejudice and even hatred.

"Stop," Draco hissed between gritted teeth. "Stop, Matriarch."

"Don't ask it of me, boy," Adella shook her head. "Ask it of Hermione. She can stop me. She can see what I'm doing to you."

"Matriarch," Narcissa spoke up, looking very much like she wanted to hex the witch.

"Ah yes, your mother wants to protect you; indeed, everyone at this table is wanting, on some level, to protect you, darling. But Hermione is the one who must stop me. Lucius, if you try that again, I'll pick on you next, dear."

Hermione watched the way a coil of bright silver magic attempted to pry the coil of almost translucent magic Adella gripped Draco with, from the boy.

"Did you know, Hermione, that this is how we rip one from the family tree? From the bloodline. In times when witches and wizards are disowned, their familial-magic is yanked from them by the matriarch or patriarch of that family, leaving them bereft of the bond linking them to their House and, at times, leaving them magically bereft, or at the very least diminished for the loss. You see, you dislike Draco. I can feel it, but your link to us is formed and now you sit there, wanting to protect him despite that," Adella said softly. "Can you do it? Pry my magic from his."

"What is the purpose of this demonstration?" Hermione asked instead. "I am aware of how such links work, Adella."

"I'm curious to see how the link to our bloodline connects with the link to the Dolohov bloodline. You see, there are those who can overcome the need to protect their family. Can you? I'm curious. With two powerful bloodlines to choose from, you can potentially harm one of us if doing so protects a Dolohov, and vice versa. You could, with the proper motivation, kill one of us for the sake of one of them. I want to find out how strong you are and whether or not you are a threat."

"If you don't let him go," Hermione warned, magic sparkling in her hair now even though she really didn't want to protect Draco Malfoy.

"Blast it all, Granger, just stop her," Draco hissed from between clenched teeth.

Hermione narrowed her eyes on him while Adella tightened her magical grip, essentially strangling Draco's magical core. A cold, unwelcome part of her that Hermione wasn't comfortable knowing about wanted to let it happen; wanted to see how it worked and see Draco suffer. The rest of her, however, was suddenly reaching out and curling around Draco's magic as well. Hermione hissed when a sense of his magic – cold to the touch in a way that made her tingle – brushed against her own.

Adella's magic against hers was far more frightening. She could feel the raw power of the witch, could feel it slowly strangling Draco's magic. And she could feel her own magic, torn between pressing closer and jerking away from Adella's power before Hermione bit the bullet, so to speak. Digging her own magic underneath Adella's, Hermione projected her own around Draco's until it engulfed his before pushing outwards with it, forcing Adella to loosen her grip.
Draco drew in a ragged breath as though he'd been suffocating physically rather than simply doing so magically.

"Ah," Adella hummed.

"I don't understand what's going on," Arabella whispered to Drystan, obviously confused since from a non-magical perspective, it looked simply like Draco was making faces and Hermione was sparking slightly.

"Don't worry about it, Chère," Drystan told her, patting her hand. "You'll understand when you're older."

"Hermione, let go," Draco whispered from across the table when Hermione continued to surround his magic with hers while Adella's magic prodded her own.

His eyes were wide with alarm as he stared at her and Hermione pulled her magic back within herself quickly, alarmed to hear him use her first name again.

"Can you see the links between all of us, Hermione?" Adella asked, pulling her own magic back to herself and leaving Draco be.

"I…" Hermione squinted slightly, "No."

"You can see mine," Adella disagreed.

"Not exactly," Hermione said, "It's more like I can…. Feel it."

Adella smiled.

"Can you feel it when I do this?" Adella asked and Hermione uttered a soft shriek of alarm when the woman's magic struck out suddenly like a snake, pulling at a part of her that did not at all like being touched by Malfoy magic.

"What did you do?" Hermione gasped, clutching at her chest and trying to pull her own magic around the part of her that Adella had struck. "I… that…. Don't do it again. Ever."

Adella's eyes twinkled.

"You are bonded," Adella murmured softly. "A strong bond. Stronger than I've ever seen."

"To you?" Hermione frowned. "To the Malfoy bloodline?"

"Oh no," Adella shook her head. "You are, but not with the part of you I touched."

"Dolohov?" Hermione frowned, confused.

Adella shook her head. "No, this part of you is Dolohov."

Using her magic once more, the witch yanked at a different part of Hermione's core, making Hermine hiss between her teeth. Her arm hair stood on end and Hermione's teeth bared of their own accord but she made no other sound.

"You feel the difference?" Adella asked. "No, the part of you I pulled on," she did it again, and again, Hermione shrieked. "That part is not yet linked by a solidified familial bond, nor through sanctified marriage."
"Then what is it?" Hermione asked in a whisper, clutching at her chest and breathing hard, feeling like the woman was pulling at her very soul when she touched that part of her. As though she were trying to rip the heart from her chest and show it to her.

"That's a soul bond – a bond of the heart that signifies you belong to and have every intention of tying yourself to someone," Adella told her quietly, before leaning over to whisper into Hermione's ear. "So tell me, Hermione Granger, just what is Thorfinn Rowle to you?"
Thorfinn Rowle sat bolt upright in bed with a shout when he felt something suddenly yank on his betrothal bond to Hermione. Clutching at his chest, Thorfinn tried to make sense of the world.

"QUINCEY!" he shouted, not at all liking the way it felt when something or someone messed with his bond.

This wasn't the sharp, cutting pain of Hermione hooking up with some other wizard, though he'd felt a brief sting of that earlier that morning and had been informed by Quincey that the little brat had been accosted and snogged by some Malfoy wizard – not Draco, or Thorfinn would've murdered the git – and that it had been for the purpose of protecting the kid. Something, Quincey assured him, that had made his witch gag and throw up a little in her mouth when it had happened because the kid was apparently her third cousin.

Thorfinn didn't much like the idea, but something about the knowledge, and perhaps the effect her relationship to the kid had on the situation seemed to have dulled the effect it had on his bond to his witch. Where it felt like a stinging, aching pain deep inside of him that manifested as jealous rage when she snogged Theodore Nott, the effect when she'd snogged this cousin – Drystan Malfoy, he was told – hadn't been the same. It had still burned with the feel of knowing another man was touching Thorfinn's witch, but it hadn't incited the jealousy because the familial bond overrode the betrothal bond, negating the rage somewhat in the same way him hugging Reina would prickle the bond for Hermione, but not make her jealous.

"Master?" Quincey asked, appearing and looking at him wide-eyed and alarmed. "Master, Quincey doesn't like it! Make it stop!"

The elf climbed up on the bed and sat on his chest, pressing her hands to his chest where it ached inside his bond as though she could prevent the pain of it.

"What's happening to her Quincey? Is she in danger?"

"No, Master." Quincey shook her head, tears filling her large eyes. "The Malfoy Matriarch be pulling on her bond to you, Master. She be showing Miss Hermione the difference in the bonds. Master! She be telling Miss Hermione that it be a soul bond! She be telling in a way that Miss will remember. Not like she don't remember when people say 'betrothal' because of her filter. Make her stop, Master"

The elf began to cry, still pushing on his chest as though trying to protect Thorfinn's bond to his witch.

"Filter?" Thorfinn asked, his eyes narrowing. "Quincey, what do you mean by saying her 'filter'?"

"Oh no! Quincey is sorry Master!" Quincey blubbered. "The magic in her mind, Master. The magic that makes it so whenever someone be telling her she be betrothed to you, or she be thinking too much about jewellery and betrothal bonds and marriage, she be knowing, but she be forgetting because the thoughts be sucking into her mind trap, Master."

Thorfinn's blood ran cold at her words.

"She… Quincey, did you put that magic on her?" Thorfinn asked.

"No, Master," Quincey shook her head.
"Did she do it to herself?" Thorfinn frowned.

"No, Master," Quincey said again, wiping at her eyes before pressing against his chest once more.

"Who? Who put some kind of filtering magic into her head to make her forget that she's betrothed, Quincey?" Thorfinn asked in a tight voice.

Quincey blinked at him, looking surprised.

"You don't know, Master? Quincey thought Master telled him to do it. Quincey thought Master wanted to make sure she not be knowing and not be angry with Master until Master could court her, like proper. Quincey didn't intervene because Quincey thought Master be wanting her to have it."

"Who?" Thorfinn demanded, seizing hold of the elf and giving her a gentle shake to cease her rambling and her sobbing.

"Master Antonin," Quincey whispered. "Master Antonin did it when Master bringed Miss Hermione to the Bats and Arrows Quidditch match last year."

Thorfinn would kill him.

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Antonin Dolohov believed himself to be a mostly reasonable person, all things considered. Sure, he was a little twisted; he was a lot broken; he was prone to irrational outbursts of rage and he'd almost killed someone that one time. But he was nonetheless a mostly reasonable wizard.

Thorfinn Rowle, on the other hand, was not a reasonable person. He was prone to explosive, fiery rage; being unpredictable; and not thinking things through when his temper got the best of him. Something that was demonstrated, rather worryingly, when the big git exploded into Antonin's bedchamber at Rowle Tower. Something further illustrated when the raging Viking, shirtless as he was, dove onto the bed with Antonin, knocking his wand away and beginning to pummel the living shit out of him.

"Oi!" Antonin shouted in protest before catching a right hook to the jaw that made his head spin.

Thorfinn kept punching him until Antonin was relatively certain the bastard meant to kill him. Not knowing what he was so furious about, Antonin had no idea how to stop him. The hulking bastard had straddled him by now, pinning him to the bed and pummelling every part of him that he could reach.

"THOR!" Antonin protested, managing to wrench one fist from under the covers where they'd been pinned and slugging the big idiot across the face to get his attention.

He was pretty sure he popped a knuckle for his trouble, too.

"What did I fucking say?" Thorfinn growled at him, glaring as a cut appeared on his cheek from the ring Antonin wore.

"About what?" Antonin asked, trying to block the next hit Thorfinn aimed at his jaw.

"Hermione!" Thorfinn snarled. "What did I say about you laying hand or wand on her?"

Antonin frowned, trying to figure out what Thorfinn was on about.

"I haven't touched her," he protested. "Stop hitting me!"
"You have touched her!" Thorfinn snarled, glaring at him. "You put a fucking filter in her mind!"

Shit. He'd almost forgotten about that.

"Well…. Fuck," Antonin sighed.

His nose crunched when it met Thorfinn's fist and blood spurted everywhere before Antonin's own temper flared. Bucking the big Viking off him, Antonin summoned his wand and hexed the fucker stupid, watching him sprawl on the bed, stunned, while Antonin tried to deal with the mess that was his nose. Cursing and muttering, he left Thorfinn on the bed and stumbled into the bathroom to wash his face before he could even think about healing his nose.

Thorfinn roared when the hex wore off, coming after him and blocking the bathroom door.

"Stop, or I'll curse you, pizda!" Antonin threatened, aiming his wand at the sod and meeting his gaze in the mirror.

"You messed with her fucking mind!" Thorfinn snarled at him.

"I protected you," Antonin argued. "Don't take another step, mudak, or I swear you'll miss the World Cup for drooling in the Spell Damage unit at St. Mungo's. I protected you. That little bitch was sniffing around asking questions and putting things together. She knows you're betrothed and she was going to flip about it. More to the point, she was going to confront you and it was going to get messy. With the spells you've done to tie her to you, she's fucked."

"Why did you mess with her head? What did you even do?" Thorfinn growled.

"I put a trap inside her mind. Anything pertaining to betrothal bonds, claiming jewellery and marriage filters into the box. It's still there, she still knows it, but she can't focus on it until I lift the magic," Antonin told him.

"Why?" Thorfinn asked, scowling fiercely.

"Because she's fourteen, you bloody git! She's fourteen and she's got a whole list of shit on the fucking Rites to complete. Things you can't help her with. And if she knows you're betrothed before she completes them, she won't get them done with the kid of Nott. Or whoever else takes her fancy. If she doesn't get them done, she violates the blood oath and she'll lose a good deal of her magic. It'll ruin her. So I filtered her mind until it's more appropriate that you two figure things out in regard to your bond. I also prodded at her inhibitions a bit to make her more willing to act on her hormonal teenage urges when it comes to sex to get the tasks done faster."

He realised as he said it that it had been the wrong thing to say. Indeed, Antonin Dolohov was thinking that last little nugget of information could happily have accompanied him to the grave. Especially when his forehead was brutally introduced to the cold glass of the mirror, shattering it as an enraged Viking tried to kill him all over again.

~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~

Russia, by comparison to the two weeks she'd spent in Paris after being introduced to the French Malfoys, was utterly boring. She had found her way to the Russia equivalent of Diagon Alley and La Rue Socrière, but she hadn't had the fortune of encountering any Dolohov family members she would be able to connect with. After two weeks in the company of Drystan Malfoy and his siblings and cousins, that made for a rather dull time.

She was ready to go home long before their time in Russia was up. She missed home. She missed
her friends, she'd been gnawing a whole in her lip thinking about Thorfinn and, Merlin, she just wanted to get home and get to Rowle Tower and pummel the git silly and then snog his socks off. She was sure she'd never missed anyone quite so much as she missed Thorfinn. She hadn't been able to stop thinking about what Adella had told her about a soul bond and how it linked her to Thorfinn and the Rowle family. About how it wasn't yet solidified and wouldn't be unless they claimed her or she married into the family.

She couldn't stop thinking about the idea that Thorfinn would be home for almost the full length of time that she'd be staying at Rowle Tower, too. She couldn't stop thinking about him, period. She wandered Ulitsa Chudes listlessly, looking in windows, collecting souvenirs for her friends and trinkets for herself that she spotted and wanted. And all the while, she thought about Thorfinn. Sometimes she'd find herself sitting outside the Pryanikshop, nibbling her gingerbread and daydreaming about the last time she'd snogged him. Other times, she found herself in her bed at her Uncle's place in Moscow, imagining herself doing with Thorfinn some of the things she'd done with Theo.

Constantly, he was on her mind. She'd catch the scent of smoke and think of him. She'd eat citrus fruit and think of him. She hear announcements and gossip about Quidditch while she loitered in Ulitsa Chudes and she'd think of Thorfinn. She positively ached for him and she couldn't stop thinking about the idea of soul bonds and the questions Adella Malfoy had put to her. What was Thorfinn Rowle to her?

He was….

Hermione wasn't even sure she could qualify him. He was the wizard she'd fallen in love with, she knew that. He was her friend. Her tormenter. Her safe place. He was everything she wanted, and everything she planned on having just as soon as she was old enough that he wouldn't get in trouble for dating her. She'd made her mind up about that whilst nibbling churchkhela almost a week ago. She wanted him and she was going to get him.

Knowing he wanted her too made her think it was possible, but Hermione wasn't deluded enough to think that he would wait for her celibately, and truthfully, she wouldn't ask him to. She didn't much like the idea that he was shagging other witches, but the fact was he was human. He had needs. She had needs too and she'd been seeing to them with Theo. She'd made another decision that in the coming year, she would lose her virginity. Whether it was to Thorfinn himself, or to Theo or some other boy that took her fancy, Hermione wanted to get a jump on seeing the Rites complete so that she could stop worrying about them and so that she could, when the time came, commit to Thorfinn without worrying about needing to shag someone on a teacher's desk.

Her disgustingly romantic side argued that she could sneak Thorfinn into the school and have his assistance for such things, but the notion was beyond ludicrous. She couldn't and wouldn't ask him to risk his career, his freedom and his reputation should he be caught sneaking into the school for such things. And anyway, Hermione was relatively certain Dumbledore had ways of detecting people when they entered the castle in human form, and since Thorfinn wasn't an Animagus, registered or otherwise, there was no way they'd be able to pull it off without getting caught.

Therefore, the sooner she got everything out of the way, the better. She was going to be fifteen in September, and plenty of people lost their virginity at fifteen. Hermione wouldn't be the first, and in fact, she was rather looking forward to it. Whether Theo would be ready for such a step so soon was another matter, but if he wasn't, well, Hermione was thinking that there surely must be one of the older boys who might. She'd also been running names through her head of who might potentially be a decent back-up should Theo not be up to the job. That, and she knew she still needed to snog a Gryffindor, a Ravenclaw and a Hufflepuff.
The Gryffindor she'd landed on was going to be interesting, to say the least, but Hermione was rather looking forward to finding out how things would play out there.

Sighing to herself as she nibbled more of her gingerbread, Hermione glanced down the busy street and noticed that there happened to be a wizard watching her from a few shops away. His shoulder was propped against a wall and he eyed her curiously. Hermione eyed him in return, noting his dark hair, dark eyes and rather dark looking intentions. She didn't know his name, but it wasn't the first time she'd spotted him. He seemed to be a frequent face amid the crowd of the magical street.

Caught staring, he raised one eyebrow at her challengingly and Hermione found herself returning the expression. A childhood spent with Ron and Harry for friends had made her brave. Association with Thorfinn and with Theo had made her a little cocky, but wary underneath the arrogance, and two weeks spent being rather inseparable with Drystan Malfoy had Hermione feeling a just little too big for her britches.

Using her foot, Hermione kicked out the chair across from her own and nodded her head at the seat, maintaining eye contact with the wizard as she did so. The invitation to have him join her was clear and Hermione watched a particularly cruel smirk grow upon his face. A sudden chill ran down her spine at the sight before he pushed away from the wall and sauntered toward her. The longer she watched him, the more the hairs on the back of her neck stood up and Hermione's hand itched for her wand. Indeed, she found it diving into her pocket seeking the reassurance of hold the weapon.

When asked about it later, Hermione would never be able to explain the unnerving sensation of watching anyone move with such a predatory gait. There was something about the way the dark haired wizard stalked; the way he moved; even the way he held himself, that made her feel uneasy. When he stepped back with lightning quick reflexes as a child burst out of a store, Hermione began to suspect there was something non-human about him.

He stalked with the grace of a big cat, but she was thinking when she caught a strange shattering of gold within his dark eyes that he had far more canine in him that feline. Werewolf. Hermione had only ever encountered Remus before today, but as she studied the wizard she'd believed to be a boy maybe a year or two older than herself, she began to think he was older than that. There was cunning in those eyes. Cunning and an animalistic hunger that didn't at all resemble the hunger she'd come to know in the eyes of Thorfinn or Theo.

No, this was a hunger like he wanted to infect her. Like he wanted to sink his fangs into her flesh and feel it give way, ripping and tearing beneath their sharp points. Sharp points he flashed at her as he drew level with her table and sat down.

"Zaika," he greeted her with a wolfish grin that revealed fangs. Hermione wasn't sure she appreciated being referred to as a bunny.

"Volk," Hermione replied evenly, regretting having invited him to join her and feeling the urge to let him know she knew exactly what he was.

"Tell me, Zaika, how does a witch bearing ties to the Dolohov line and the Malfoy line smell so..." He trailed off, leaning towards her slightly, his eyelids fluttering as he inhaled her scent deeply.

"If you use the word 'dirty', I'll maim you, wolf," Hermione threatened.

He growled in reply though he smirked, and Hermione could tell he was amused when she tensed, jerking her wand from her pocket and aiming it at him from her lap.
"Not with that, you won't," he laughed, "You invited me over here, little girl, you should know how to play."

"What do you want?" Hermione demanded, "I've seen you watching me."

"I want what all men want, little bunny," he replied, "And I can smell that you want it too."

Hermione squirmed uncomfortably in her seat, not at all liking this man and the way he'd obviously picked up on the faint scent of her approval before she'd realised he was terrifying.

"You're mistaken," Hermione replied.

"At least you've mastered the prejudice of the bloodlines you claim, no matter the muggle dilution," the werewolf drawled at her without bothering to introduce himself.

Hermione felt scalded by the implied slur that she was a racist.

"My lack of interest has nothing to do with your condition," Hermione replied evenly. "One of my friends happens to suffer the same. My disinterest in born of a more… primal reaction."

"Mmm, I can smell the fear pouring off you, Zaika," the wolf agreed.

"And you've mistakenly assumed it relates simply to your being a werewolf, rather than to your entirely predatory and rather unsettling way of looking at me like that," Hermione replied. "You'll have to forgive me, but I am not one of those women interested in a man who is as likely to kill me as kiss me."

The werewolf had the audacity to laugh at her frank manner.

"Oh, I'd kiss you, Zaika," he promised, licking his lips in a wolfish manner as his eyes traced over her from head to foot, making her hair stand on end. "I'd pry your thighs apart and kiss that sweet cunt that, even now, is moistening at the very idea."

Hermione's cheeks flamed at his crass words, no matter their falsehood.

"Again, you're mistaken. And I must say, your manners need work. It's one thing to be an animal when the moon is full. There is really no call for it throughout the rest of the month. You've made no attempt of introducing yourself, and you're being vulgar," Hermione chastised and for just a moment, the wizard looked utterly shocked by her words.

Obviously he'd been expecting outrage, embarrassment or simply for her to get up and leave. Not that Hermione hadn't considered all three of those things. But she was trying her hardest to maintain an un-rattled façade that would do Thorfinn and Theo proud. She was also calculating her chances of escaping him should he attempt to follow her if she left or if she tried to run. While her first instinct had indeed been to do just that; to get up, leave this place and return to her muggle Uncle's home; Hermione had a terrible feeling this chap would follow her. In fact, she was beginning to think she would be safest if she stayed right where she was, in the middle of the bustling, busy street where there were lots of witnesses to prevent her from becoming the victim of his hunger, sexual or otherwise.

"Alexei Romanov, at your service." The werewolf smirked at her, his teeth partially shifted towards canine fangs in his mouth and on display when he made that expression at her. "And who might you be, brave little bunny?"

"I hardly feel comfortable giving me your name after you've been vulgar," Hermione replied. "How
"Are you, Romanov? I thought you were closer to my age, from a distance, but from up close you look to be in your twenties at least."

"Now whose manners are lacking?" the wolf challenged her. "My age is of little importance, though up close you are much younger than I anticipated. What are you? Fourteen? Fifteen?"

"Fourteen," Hermione admitted, hoping it might deter him from his sinister intentions.

"You've bled," he shrugged.

Hermione blushed at his words.

"What do you want with me, Romanov? Besides the obvious, which you won't be getting," Hermione asked him.

"Won't I?" he asked, smirking cruelly. "I've been watching you, Zaika. I know that though your blood reeks of Dolohovs, it's tainted by muggle filth too. I know that any number of your 'family' have strolled by you without sparing you a glance. I know you're alone. You, little rabbit, are prey. Young. Alone. Unlikely to be missed by anyone in this part of the world who can reach me."

Hermione's whole body began to tremble and the werewolf before her smirked wickedly as he inhaled her fear. From her seat, she watched the way his body quivered with restraint to remain in his chair. She gulped when he shifted slightly and she suddenly spotted the tent he was making inside his trousers.

She was scared now.

Terror gripped her. It was one thing to be desired by a friend or crush. It was entirely another to be craved by an unknown man who obviously found her fear arousing and who'd baldly referred to her as prey. She did not doubt that he would hurt her if he could. She needed to think of a way to be rid of him, but none came to mind. She couldn't run. She got the feeling he would either run her down, or he would simply track her scent all the way home where he might also hurt her muggle family.

She knew using magic against him would be largely ineffective. As a werewolf, his lycanthropy would protect him from any magic she could fling at him that wouldn't outright kill him, and in her current state, Hermione doubted she'd be able to master anything very powerful. Not when fear made her whole body rigid.

She couldn't run. She couldn't fight. Her options were looking slim. And given that she'd noticed him watching her occasionally over the past few days, Hermione was thinking he wasn't the type who would likely grow impatient of waiting. She didn't doubt that if she tried to sit there all afternoon until the shops closed and darkness fell, he would sit with her and wait. And if he was forced to leave by having Hermione alert someone else to her predicament, she suspected the bastard would disappear only long enough to make it seem as though she'd 'cried wolf' before following her home and hurting her or her family worse for the trouble.

"Why me?" Hermione asked of the werewolf in a small voice.

"Young. Alone. Pretty enough to eat." He licked his chops again and Hermione felt she was in fear of fainting in her terror.

Her heart was pounding inside her chest so loudly she could hear it roaring in her ears. She didn't doubt the wolf across from her could hear it too, given the way he began to drum two clawed fingers on the edge of the table in time to its rapid beat.
"Would that be in a… literal sense… or a sexual sense?" Hermione squeaked.

Alexei Romanov regarded her for a moment, tipping his head to one side like a dopey mutt, his eyes assessing her carefully. Hermione didn't like the way he lingered over the hint of cleavage showing thanks to her sundress, or the way he licked his lips hungrily again as he eyed the pulse fluttering in her neck. Crossing her arms over her chest to try to hide from his gaze, Hermione kept her wand trained on him even though it would be of little use to her should she try to hex him. Nothing she could think of outside of Dark Curses she'd never attempted would have much effect on the werewolf other than to antagonise him.

"Haven't decided yet." He shrugged. "You'd make a decent werewolf."

"I wouldn't," Hermione whispered, shaking her head as tears filled her eyes. "I'd be awful at it."

Romanov laughed at her coldly, obviously aroused by her fear and not at all moved by the tears that overflowed her eyes and trickled down her cheeks as her terror seemed to take control of her. She was panting heavily now; her hands were clammy, and the back of her neck was drenched in sweat. Her whole body throbbed with the urge she had to run. Part of her mind rationalised that if she ran he would have to make a scene by chasing her. That he might want to avoid that. The rest of her mind pointed out that if she tried it, he might let her think she'd gotten away, only to have her lead him home to her family.

From the sight of the blood crusting those claws on the ends of his fingers, Hermione got the feeling that he would have no qualms ripping her muggle family limb from limb while she looked on, impotent to do anything to save them. She wasn't even supposed to use magic outside of school and given that she'd been the one to invite him to join her, she could hardly argue self-defence when all he'd done, so far, was sit with her and say things that scared her. She twitched fearfully when he leaned forwards slightly, breathing in the scent of her terror once more and obviously enjoying it.

"What's it going to be, little bunny?" Romanov crooned, suddenly leaning further forward in his chair, one hand lifting to tangle in her loose curls as he forced her to meet his gaze. "Shall we sit here until the shop-keep asks us to leave? Shall you try to run on home to your muggle family four blocks over? Oh yes, I know where they live, Zaika. I've been stalking you awhile now. That mother of your looks just like you. Wouldn't she scream as I rutted her little witch right in front of her eyes before tearing her throat out?"

He chuckled cruelly, leaning toward her even closer until he was almost nose to nose with her.

"I almost hope you'll run, just for that," Alexei murmured to her. "Or will you come along quietly with me now? Sacrifice yourself to save them?"

"Just let me go. Please?" Hermione whispered, clenching her eyes closed in her fear, certain she might wet her pants at any moment when she felt the wolf's hot breath ghosting over her cheeks. His breath wasn't putrid, though she'd expected it to be. Indeed, other than the lupine gold in his dark eyes and the claws tipping his fingers and those sharp teeth, he looked entirely like he belonged sitting outside a café with a pretty young witch.

She imagined they even looked like a couple, about to snog despite the tears tracking her cheeks and the way her bottom lip trembled in terror. Trying to focus her mind, trying to think past her fear, Hermione attempted to call on the Fiendfyre inside of her that usually was so easy to access. She'd been teaching herself since the end of first year how to control that fire, beginning with little sparkles of light and letting it grow. She'd told herself throughout the journey as she taught herself a magic considered Dark for its destructive capabilities that it was worth it because one day it
Yet here she sat, in need of such power but utterly incapable of summoning even the faintest puff of her magic. Doubt gnawed at her mind in that moment, warring with her terror before combining with it. Every wretched thing anyone had ever told her about how being muggleborn made her magically inferior suddenly preyed on her, making it even harder to focus.

"Your mouth is so pretty when you beg, Zaika," the werewolf practically purred, his eyes brightening all the way until the brown of his human eye-colour was gone and only the gold of the wolf remained.

"I'll say it again if you'll let me go, Alexei," Hermione whispered. "Please, please let me go? I just want to go home."

He shuddered at the way she used his first name, as though they were friends, as though he had bothered to learn her first or last name before he began being vulgar and threatening her.

"You've been taught to play, little witch," he muttered. "But I'm not letting you go."

"Why not?" Hermione asked, hoping that if she could engage him in discussion, he'd forget his attempts to kidnap her long enough for her to control her magic.

"You smell good," he informed her. "No one will miss you in the magical world. And I have my orders."

"Orders?" Hermione asked, pulling back slightly, her eyes frantically searching for someone, anyone who might help her.

"I wonder if the Alpha would let me keep you, Zakia," he murmured, his eyes falling to her lips before he used the pad of his thumb to trace their shape.

Hermione hated him for that. That was something Theo always did to her when he pried her bottom lip from between her teeth to keep her from biting it. Something Thorfinn had done a few times when he was thinking about kissing her. She couldn't bear the thought of this monster doing the same thing, touching her so intimately. Anger surged inside her at the touch and Hermione hissed when her magic exploded out of her, a big ball of Fiendfyre bursting free and slamming into the werewolf, blasting him back from her and toppling over every table of the café.

Hermione was on her feet, limping slightly as a result of her own chair toppling, before anyone else could react beyond the screams as a wildly leaping lioness made of purple fire pounced on the werewolf before beginning to devour everything in sight. The tables and chairs began to groan and melt under the heat. The little umbrella's for shade went up in flames. People screamed and shrieked in terror and alarm.

And Hermione ran.
stumbled into the Russian equivalent of Knockturn Alley and Hermione's stomach clenched, her fear growing even more as she eyed some of the witches and wizards in this part of the world. Many of them scuttled about their own business, their hoods drawn up and their faces hidden.

She walked quickly, trying to make it look like she had purpose and not like she was being pursued; trying to make it look like she was not to be messed with. Lifting her chin, Hermione adopted a stomping gate that she ordinarily used when planning to tell someone off for breaking the rules and she felt slightly better.

Right up until something heavy slammed into her from behind, propelling her face-first into a wall of the alley and knocking her into a daze. Something that snarled menacingly, sharp fangs scraping her ear and hot breath washing over her skin, making it crawl with dread.

"Did you think you could outrun me, Zaika?"
Chapter 28

Burning flesh. He reeked of it. Hermione could feel blood soaking through the back of her sundress and staining her skin, none of it her own. She'd definitely hit him with her explosion of raw magic, but obviously the werewolf who'd been hunting her was quicker on his feet that she'd have liked. Hermione couldn't help but scream when he tangled a clawed hand into her curls at the back of her neck, wrenching her head back by them and forcing her to meet his gaze, even as he ground his erection against her arse, her body jammed up against the wall.

"Scream, you little bitch!" he snarled into her face. "No one down here will help you."

Tears overflowed her eyes and Hermione cried out in agony when he drove a balled fist into her ribcage on her left side. She both heard and felt several of her ribs break beneath the assault. Winded and in pain, Hermione tried to struggle, true fear permeating her body now, paralysing her, leaving her helpless. He drove his knee between her thighs and Hermione had a terrible feeling that she was going to pay for almost burning him alive.

One clawed hand – the one he'd punched her with - snaked across her midriff and Hermione cried out in agony when he sank his claws through her dress and into her flesh, leaving long, bloody gouges in their wake. She screamed in pain and fear when he began to bunch the skirts of her dress, yanking them upwards.

He was going to rape her, it occurred to Hermione dimly. Right there in the alley. Her cheek, bloodied though it was, pressed against the brick of the alley wall allowed her a terrible view of men and women continuing about their business as though this weren't happening right before their eyes. At least, most of them did. Hermione didn't know if she hated those who ignored what was happening more than she hated those who'd turned to spectate. From this angle she could clearly see more than one wizard, looking on, leering at her, looking at though they wouldn't mind a go themselves.

Tears tracked down her cheeks, stinging the scrapes and cuts she could feel forming and Hermione screamed again.

"Get off me, you fucking bastard!" she shouted in English, wriggling and trying to get free of the wretched hold the wolf had on her.

Romanov ground his cock against her arse, nipping her earlobe harshly.

"I'm going to enjoy this, you little cunt," he practically purred into her ear, his claws sliding up the back of one now-bared thigh and shredding her underwear.

It fell in scraps at her feet and Hermione cried harder; fighting; wriggling; trying to get free. Romanov released her with one hand and pulled back just far enough to try freeing himself from his trousers. Hermione mule kicked him in the shins.

"Rough, little thing, aren't you?" he snarled, still bleeding upon her from his burned and bloodied chest.

Hermione screamed again when he lunged suddenly from behind, sinking his fangs into the fleshy part where her shoulder met her neck. It hurt. It hurt more than anything she'd experienced up until that moment. Not being a full moon, he couldn't infect her with a full, raging case of lycanthropy with his bite, but he could hurt her and he could maim her and he could make her a little lupine.
She was still screaming and still kicking when a Russian accented voice suddenly snarled out a curse she'd never seen performed.

"Crucio!"

The foul creature attacking her howled in agony, his fangs and claws tearing free of Hermione's flesh as he collapsed to the filthy stone pavement beneath Hermione's feet. Her skirt fell back into place and Hermione turned to look at her saviour. She could say with all certainty that before that day, or in any of the days that followed, she'd never been as happy to see Antonin Dolohov as she was right in that moment.

As she watched him through one rapidly swelling eye while he tortured the monster who'd attacked her, Hermione Granger could honestly say she was suffused with a vicious sort of glee at the creature's pain and suffering. Indeed, she felt it right up until the minute she lost consciousness.

Antonin Dolohov released the spell and darted forward to catch the little mudblood witch before she could fall to the ground. He winced at the amount of blood gushing from her midsection and the wretched gurgle he could hear when she drew in a breath, making him think she might have a punctured lung.

"Fuck!" he snarled, wanting nothing more than to continue torturing the werewolf who'd done this to her until he went mad or died.

He couldn't though, not with the witch in need of medical attention. Scooping her up against his chest, Antonin glared at the werewolf were he lay on the ground, whining and whimpering, before he threw one final curse – his signature purple curse designed to slowly rot it's victims from the inside, out, at the bastard. He disapparated with a crack.

Knowing it was likely the last place he'd be welcome, but not trusting himself to go anywhere else, Antonin landed with a pop outside the home of Tatiana Rasmussen and began pounding on the door while he cradled the limp form of Hermione Granger.

"Fucking hell, little mudblood, what did you get yourself mixed up in this time?" he muttered to the witch in his arms before pounding on the door again.

He heard a voice from inside, calling that she was coming and not to rush her. Antonin almost groaned at the sound of it. Tatiana. He hadn't seen her in months. And she was not going to be happy to see him. Fuck.

The irate witch snatched open the door, her eyes narrowed and her expression pinched in annoyance at the rude way he'd been banging on the door.

"Dolohov?" she gasped, glaring at him before jerking back, her eyes going wide in surprise at the sight of Granger, bloody and unconscious in his arms.

"I need your help," he told the witch seriously, barging into her house before pounding on the door again.

"My help! Blast it all, Antonin, you can't keep showing up like this! Who is that? I won't have you dragging me into your illicit activities!" Tatiana snapped as Antonin hurried down the hallway and into her sitting room.

"QUINCEY!" Antonin shouted, hoping against hope that the elf would be nearby or that she would hear him from Britain.
"What in Koschei's name is a Quincey?" Tatiana demanded, stomping her foot. "No, don't put her there! She'll get blood on everything, you blithering idiot."

Antonin watched the witch snatch up a throw rug from the back of a nearby settee and lay it out on the floor in front of the fireplace.

"Help me, Tasha," Antonin pleaded with her. "Please? I know you don't want me here and we've got enough shit festering between us to last a lifetime, but I need you to help me save her."

"Who is she?" Tatiana demanded as he lowered Hermione onto the throw. "Isn't she a little young for you, Dolohov?"

"She's my cousin," he blurted, pulling out his wand and muttering healing charms as he tried to fix her, tried to stem the bleeding from her midsection and her neck.

"Oh, for the love of Merlin!" Tatiana muttered, watching him and clearly noting that for all that Curse Breaking might be his profession, he was rubbish as healing charms. Antonin Dolohov was made for inflicting pain, not mending it.

The dark haired witch he'd been bonded to elbowed him aside and Antonin drew in a ragged breath at the way the touch prickled their bond, trying to reform it.

"QUINCEY!" he shouted again, determined not to let their issues get in the way of healing the witch Thorfinn couldn't seem to live without.

The elf appeared looking alarmed.

"Master Dolohov… argh!" Quincey squealed in horror at the sight of Hermione, bleeding upon the floor. "No! Not my Mistress Hermione! Master Antonin, no!"

The elf rushed towards the girl, flicking her fingers and performing more complex healing charms than Antonin had ever seen. Hermione's ribs gave a sickening crunch as they snapped back into place and healed. The girl gagged and began coughing up blood with a sickening squelch. Tatiana turned her onto her side to prevent her from choking on the blood that must've been filling her lungs.

"Quincey, her neck, can you heal it?" Antonin asked the elf.

"Elf magic not be working proper on wounds inflicted by dark magic," Quincey shook her head.

"It's not dark magic. She was bitten by a werewolf," Antonin argued.

"Master Antonin, you be knowing better than most that all magic and all magic creatures be having their own signature, dark or light. Elf magic not be working on werewolf wounds. I fix broken ribs because they not magic made. Bites and claw marks not be Quincey's to heal," the elf told him, her voice high with tension.

"When you're finished, bring Thorfinn here, Quincey. I don't care what he's doing. You find him and you bring him here," Antonin commanded the little elf.

"You be watching her while Quincey be gone?" Quincey asked.

Antonin nodded and the elf disapparated with a crack.

"You have an elf?" Tatiana asked him, raising one eyebrow as she continued healing the gashes
across Granger's midsection.

"She's not mine," Antonin shook his head. "She's Thorfinn's. Listen, Tasha, when he gets here, he's going to go berserk. And he's going to want to hunt down the monster that did this to her. Can you keep an eye on her?"

"I won't enable you and your friends to commit crime, Antonin!" Tatiana hissed at him. "If Nikolai knew you were here, he'd curse you."

Antonin's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Don't mention that slimy little cunt to me, pchelka," Antonin warned her. "Not if you want all your furniture to remain intact."

Tatiana curled her lip at him.

"You barge into my home, dragging some bloodied and broken child, no doubt involving me in crime and Dolohov affairs that I've never wanted any part of, and now you snarl about my betrothed?" Tatiana demanded in a dangerous hiss and Antonin's left eye twitched.

"I'm your betrothed, pchelka, and I will be until the day I die, severed bond or not, so do not mention that fucking pizda to me, witch," Antonin snarled back at her. "I need you to look after the fucking child while I prevent my best friend from tearing Russia apart as he hunts down the bastard that laid a hand on his witch."

Tatiana's face paled at his words and his cold expression. Right as she opened her mouth to reply, Quincey popped back into the room with Thorfinn Rowle in tow.

~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~

Thorfinn Rowle felt cold dread wash through him when Quincey snatched his hand, tears pouring from her eyes, before disapparating him with a sharp crack. He landed in an unfamiliar room and his expression pinched when he laid eyes on a witch he didn't know and an irate looking Toshka.

"Antonin, what...?"

Blood. The bastard's robes were covered in blood.

"Master," Quincey sobbed over a body laying upon the floor, the cause of the blood on Toshka. His heart stopped.

Right there inside his chest, it stopped beating long enough that he felt dizzy. Hermione. The little witch, drenched in blood, her dress torn, bleeding from her mouth, her middle and her neck, lay prone upon the floor with blood trickling from her mouth.

The roar built in him unnoticed and tore free as he flung himself to his witch's side, shoving the witch tending her out of the way and clutching at the curly-haired swot.

"What happened?" Thorfinn demanded, his wand trailing over the wound on her neck, the power of the bond between them and the wretched spells he'd done on behalf of his witch knitting the flesh back together in a most unnatural fashion.

"I found her in an alley, about to be raped and screaming," Toshka told him in a soft voice.

Red.
Everything went red.

"Who?" Thorfinn snarled, baring his teeth like a wild animal as the fireplace roared with flames so high that they would undoubtedly shoot right out the top of the chimney.

The rage inside of him was like nothing he'd ever felt. Stronger even than the terrible aching surge of the blackest power that filled him when Hermione was unfaithful to their bond, a darkness took over Thorfinn.

"A werewolf," Antonin admitted. "I hit him with the Crucius curse and planned to torture him into madness, but she fainted from her wounds and the terror before I could kill him. I left him in the alley."

"Russia?" Thorfinn confirmed their location.

Toshka nodded his head.

"Take me to where you found her," Thorfinn hissed, pressing a kiss to his witch's forehead. "Quincey, heal her. Protect her."

Quincey nodded fearfully.

"You," Thorfinn turned his attention on the other witch in the room. "Who are you?"

"Tatiana," Toshka told him. "My Tatiana, so jam that tone when you talk to her, Mudak."

"Tatiana, anything you can do for my witch, you'd best do," Thorfinn said softly, watching her face pale at his wretchedly sinister tone. "You've already irreparably damaged one person I care about. If anything happens to my witch under your care while I slay the bastard who did this to her, tonight will be your last."

The witch nodded her head shakily, drawing back from him in fear.

"Quincey, bring me to her when she wakes," Thorfinn growled at his elf. "Toshka, let's go."

Antonin nodded his head, holding out his arm, intent on apparating Thorfinn to the site where his witch had been hurt. The jerk behind his navel barely registered before he landed in a filthy pavelstone alley. There was blood on the wall and the ground where they stood and Thorfinn looked around, searching for the bastard who had laid a hand on his witch. Whoever he was, he was gone, but Thorfinn would find him. Find him and skin him alive before pulling his eyeballs from his head and feeding them to him.

"He's gone. Fucking wolf," Toshka grumbled, scouting around.

Thorfinn vibrated with rage, lunging at the nearest passerby, and shaking them as he began demanding information.

"They won't tell you, Thor," Toshka shook his head. "This isn't the sort of place where people step in to help someone in distress or where it pays to see anything not your business."

"They all stood around and did nothing while my fucking girl was nearly brutalised?" Thorfinn demanded, rounding on his friend, Fiendfyre dancing up his arms, black and terrible.

"Look, if Knockturn Alley had an abusive uncle, this place would be it. Half of the fuckers in this shit hole would probably have looked on and done nothing. The other half? They'd have jacked off
to watch that fucking wolf rape your witch. A few would have likely tried to join in. You won't get any information out of them. The fucker won't have gotten far. I hit him with my signature curse. He'll be burning from the inside out as we speak."

Thorfinn's eye twitched in his rage.

"If they can't help me," he said in a tight voice, "If they didn't help her, then they burn, Toshka…. What the fuck is that?"

He pointed at something Antonin suddenly bent down and picked up. It was a strip of pale blue fabric, obviously shredded. Toshka cringed as he stood.

"Ah, shit," the Russian breathed, closing his eyes in horror. "It's… a shredded tatter of what used to be her knickers. She's not wearing any. When I found her, the pizda had her dress hiked to her tits and was fishing his cock from his trousers. I'm betting the wolf has the part of the garment that would have touched her cunt."

As he stopped speaking, Antonin Dolohov erected the strongest shield charm he knew. Thorfinn barely registered the movement as the animalistic war-cry tore from his chest and flames of the deepest black engulfed the entire street. The screams of the dead filled his ears while they did their dying and Thorfinn felt no remorse. He watched the grizzled face melt right off a man while the bastard screamed, and Thorfinn's only thought was that the cunt had done nothing when it had been Hermione screaming. If that fucking werewolf was in any building or hiding amongst the wretches in that alley, he would die along with them.

~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~O~

Hermione Granger woke with a vague sense of terror still gripping her, a sting in her neck and an aching burn in her chest.

"Mistress Hermione?" a squeaky voice asked and Hermione blinked her eyes open to meet the enormous orbs of a house elf hovering over her.

"Quincey?" Hermione asked, frowning at the sight of the Rowle elf that so often tended Thorfinn's needs. She'd met the elf whilst visiting with Thorfinn in Ireland last Christmas.

"You is awake!" The elf wailed, flinging herself onto Hermione's legs and cuddling her. "Quincey is so sorry, Mistress. Quincey be letting you get hurted. Quincey will punish herself, Mistress."

"That's really not…. Um…. Quincey, you're hurting me," Hermione winced, looking around the room fearfully and trying to recall how she'd gotten there. The last thing she could remember was the sight of Antonin Dolohov coming to her rescue.

Warily, she noted the bright, well-matched décor of the room and decided that this surely couldn't be the home of the werewolf. It also wasn't Antonin and Thorfinn's flat in Dublin, so Hermione found herself thinking that she had no idea where she was.

"You're safe," a witch's voice said quietly and Hermione whipped around – her side aching and throbbing in protest to the movement – to spot a dark haired witch perhaps of an age with Antonin and Thorfinn.

"Who are you?" Hermione demanded, aiming her wand at the witch.

"She be Master Antonin's witch before they break things off," Quincey informed her, patting her head and her cheeks and her shoulders as though trying to offer her comfort.
"Tatiana Rasmussen," the witch offered her name. "You are Antonin's cousin, I'm told?"

"I… in a sense," Hermione admitted with a blush. "Fourth cousin, once removed…. I'm muggleborn though. The descendant of a Dolohov Squib."

"Ah," the witch nodded, her face smoothing into an expression of understanding. "That is why no other Dolohov likely in the alley where you were found came to your rescue. Claimed or not, they do not associate with those they do not know."

Hermione nodded her head.

"How did I get here? Where's Antonin?" Hermione asked, looking around for the Russian wizard.

"He and your blonde wizard left to pursue your attacker," Tatiana informed her, not at all looking happy about it. "When he returns, I mean to hex him for involving me in this. We are no longer bonded and my fiancé will not be pleased when I tell him Dolohov was here. Again."

"You are Antonin were involved?" Hermione asked, raising her eyebrows. "I was under the impression he didn't even like witches. I never see him with any."

Tatiana looked extremely annoyed by that piece of news.

"Wait… did you say that Thorfinn was here?" Hermione asked, her mind catching up with what the woman had told her.

"I get him, Mistress Hermione," Quincey cried. "He be telling me to get him when you waked."

The elf disappeared with a pop.

"He is a very angry man, your wizard," Tatiana informed her.

"I was just attacked in a foreign country," Hermione pointed out. "And honestly, if I didn't think I'd end up in trouble again, I'd like to hunt down Romanov myself."

Tatiana shot to her feet.

"Did you say Romanov?" she asked, her face paling wretchedly.

"I… yes," Hermione admitted, sitting up slowly and finding herself laid on a bloodied rug upon the floor before a fireplace. "The werewolf who attacked me, his name was Alexei Romanov."

Tatiana gasped, clutching at her chest.

"You…. Oh dear," Tatiana whispered.

"You know him?" Hermione asked, frowning at the witch's reaction.

"He was in my year group at Koldovstoretz," Tatiana whispered. "Infected not long after we graduated, he… he is a murderer, a… a monster."

Hermione found herself feeling the need to roll her eyes over the dramatic notion of declaring the bastard a monster as though she weren't laying on the floor, covered in blood and aching from his attack. Before she could formulate a reply that wouldn't inform the woman that she might be an idiot, there was a pop as Quincey returned with two wrathful looking wizards.

Her heart ached at the sight of Thorfinn. His expression was twisted to one of hate as he arrived,
his gaze blazing and the fire in the hearth beginning to roar with the power of his magic and his fury.

"Thorfinn?" Hermione practically whimpered at the sight of the wizard she'd been thinking of as hers for longer than she wanted to admit.

"Princess?" he asked. He glanced down at her worriedly, obviously momentarily disoriented.

When he saw her, he flung himself down beside her, hauling her into his arms and cuddling her to his chest, pulling her right into his lap despite the blood coating her clothes and her skin. A wretched sob tore from Hermione's chest at the sight of him, his familiar smoke-and-citrus scent clouding her mind and making her feel safe like nothing else could.

"Fucking hell, Princess," Thorfinn murmured into her hair. "You're safe, Baby-girl. I've got you. You're safe."

Hermione cried harder at his words, burrowing her face into his chest, snuggling deeper into his strong, familiar hold.

"You're probably hurting her, Thor," Antonin murmured. He moved over to put his hand on Thorfinn's shoulder. "She's pretty banged up, mate. Punctured lungs and broken ribs ache awhile even after they're healed."

Thorfinn loosened his hold but he didn't let go, continuing to mutter reassurances to her.

"Antonin?" Tatiana said softly. "I must speak with you about this. The monster who attacked her. I know of him. He is... he will not be easily stopped."

"You know who it was?" Thorfinn asked. His head jerked up so he could meet her gaze.

"I told her," Hermione said softly.

"You know his name, Princess?" Thorfinn frowned at her, leaning her back in his lap to meet her puffy-eyed gaze.

Hermione nodded her head.

"He said his name was Alexei Romanov. Finn... he said... he said he had orders to hunt me, or people like me, in any case. People who were alone, young, and unlikely to be missed until it was too late."

Thorfinn made an inarticulate sound of rage.

"Tatiana, what do you know of him?" Antonin asked. He gripped her forearms tightly, forcing her to meet his gaze.

"He said his name was Alexei Romanov. Finn... he said... he said he had orders to hunt me, or people like me, in any case. People who were alone, young, and unlikely to be missed until it was too late."

Thorfinn made an inarticulate sound of rage.

"He... We went to school together. He was bitten shortly after we all graduated," Tatiana said quietly. "Even before he was bitten, he was not a nice man. He was the type you didn't want to find yourself in a deserted hallway with. He liked to play with Dark magic. His Temnyy Klinok Smerti light was so dim it gave almost no light off at all, but as far as I know, it never drove him to seek his own end... He was bitten the summer after graduation when he went on an extended trip to Britain. 'Finding himself', his sisters said. He found trouble. I have not seen him since school, but he... he infected three of his sisters and ripped his father's throat out before he disappeared."

"No one has seen him since?" Antonin asked.
Tatiana shook her head.

"He's been watching me for days," Hermione supplied. "He told me so. I was eating gingerbread in the street outside a cafe when I noticed him. The other day he was in the book store while I was buying books. When I saw him today, he was leaning against a wall, watching me."

"You invited him to join you, didn't you?" Thorfinn said through gritted teeth.

Hermione nodded her head guiltily.

"I... I wanted to see what his problem was and find out why he was staring at me. I thought he was younger than he is too. From a distance, he looked closer to my age than yours. I thought it might be France all over again - a distant cousin trying to figure out who I am and why I carry the Dolohov signature on my magic," Hermione explained softly. "The closer he came, the older I realised he was and the creepier he seemed."

"What did he do to you, Princess?"

Hermione closed her eyes and burrowed her face back into his chest as she told him how Romanov had threatened her, had told her he'd followed her home; had told her he was torn between eating her or infecting her.

"He said he followed you home?" Antonin asked sharply when she was finished explaining.

Hermione nodded.

"Quincey, can you take me to where her parents have been staying?" Antonin asked the elf.

"What are you going to do?" Hermione asked fearfully, looking up at him.

"If he knows where they live, he'll go after them. He was gone by the time I took Thor to where I found you, Granger," Antonin said quietly. "That means your muggle family are in danger. I will... Well, it's probably best you don't know what I'll be doing to them to make sure they suddenly have an urge to flee Russia. Those who live here will be overcome with the need to move closer to your other relatives in France. Your own parents will be urged to end your holiday a few weeks early and will go home - without you."

"But..." Hermione frowned, trying to puzzle out how he would accomplish all that when she knew how stubborn her family members could be.

The Imperius curse, she realised. He would use the Imperius curse upon them to direct them all to his whim.

"Promise me you won't hurt them?" Hermione asked. Her eyes were wide with worry. "Just... just tamper with their minds enough that they'll be protected and... I know you don't like muggles, Toshka, but please... be gentle?"

His mouth twisted slightly, though whether it was displeasure at her use of the nickname Finn used for him, annoyance that she still felt the need to ask him not to hurt them even though he'd just saved her life, or frustration over the idea of being told not to hurt them, Hermione couldn't be sure.

"I'll be gentle, Mishka," he promised, his dark eyes boring into hers for a moment with something that looked a lot like compassion. "Tatiana? Do you have anything she can put on that won't be covered in blood? Maybe a bath will help?"
Tatiana bit her lip, glancing down at Hermione carefully. A small frown marred her brow for a moment, before it smoothed into an expression of resigned compassion as well.

"I'll fetch something. Come along, Mishka." The witch used the same term of endearment that Antonin had used, calling her a little mouse. "Upstairs with you and we'll get you cleaned off."

"Quincey runs the bath!" the elf declared, still sniffling.

Tatiana waved her hand to grant the elf permission.

"Thor? Are you coming with me, or will you be staying with her?" Antonin asked. He watched them as Thorfinn got to his feet, still cradling Hermione in his arms and cuddling her to his chest.

"Can you handle it?" Thorfinn asked seriously. "I don't think I can let her go."

Antonin nodded. "As soon as Quincey's finished upstairs, I'll have her take me to them. Pchelka? Thank you."

Hermione watched the way Tatiana's cheeks turned pink at the address and at the way Antonin drew the woman into his embrace briefly, pressing his lips to the middle of her forehead in the only expression of tenderness of affection Hermione could ever remember him displaying. Tatiana looked a little like she wanted to scold him, and a bit like she wanted to melt into his embrace. Hermione didn't know what the deal was between the two of them, but she could tell they had some unresolved issues with one another.

"Upstairs, first door on your left for the bathroom." Tatiana directed Thorfinn, who refused to put Hermione down despite her - admittedly feeble - protests.

The hulking Viking of a wizard carried her up the stairs and into the room where he'd been directed. Quincey was still inside, setting the bathtub full of hot water and what smelled like healing oils.

"Shower first, Mistress." Quincey pointed. "You be needing to wash the blood off."

"I... um... Finn, I need you to put me down," Hermione told the blond holding her as she looked up into his eyes.

"I don't think I can let you go, Princess," he admitted quietly. He held her to himself possessively.

"I didn't say you had to let me go," Hermione whispered in reply. "Just put me down and help me get my dress off."

"You...?" he brilliant blue eyes widened at her words.

"If you leave me now, I'm likely to break down and sob," Hermione said, her cheeks turning pink at the admission of her vulnerability right then. "So just... please? Help me get the blood and the terrible reek of his burnt flesh off me."

"You realise..." he began, trailing off as he lowered her to stand on her own two - decidedly wobbly - feet.

Hermione knew what he was asking. Did she realise that she was essentially asking him to join her in the shower? Did she realise she was inviting him to see her naked? Rather than speaking, Hermione let him hold her in his gentle grip before reaching for the skirt of her sundress and ripping it off over her head. She knew she was naked underneath but for her bra. She knew that,
logically, she ought to be terrified at the idea of a man - any man - seeing her naked or being naked with her after almost being raped. But she didn't. Right then, she felt completely safe with Thorfinn and like she would fall apart if he left the room or even if he stopped touching her.

"Bloody hell," Thorfinn muttered. He fought to keep his eyes fixed on her face and he lost that battle when Hermione reached around and unclasped her bra, letting it slide down her arms to fall at her feet too.

"Your stomach," he murmured. He reached out to trace the wound where Romanov had slashed his claws into her soft flesh. It didn't hurt anymore, and the bleeding had stopped thanks to whatever Tatiana or Quincey had down to heal her.

"Finn, can I...?" Hermione bit her lip before reaching for the hem of his shirt, asking his permission to remove the garment from his person.

He nodded, letting her lift it as high as she could before he pulled it off over his head. While he did so, Hermione let her hands stray to his belt, unbuckling it and unfastening his trousers. He made a soft noise of surprise when she pushed the fabric off his hips, watching it slide down to puddle around his ankles. While he toed off his shoes, Hermione kicked off her sandals and glanced up into Thorfinn's face before reaching for his boxers. He watched her with curious, hungry eyes as she slid her thumbs beneath the waistband and flicked the boxers off his hips. They followed the path of his trousers to puddle around his now-bare feet, and he stepped out of them.

Hermione and Thorfinn eyed each other for a long moment, both standing stark naked before one another as they had never done before.

"You alright, Princess?" he asked. He was watching her face when her brow furrowed slightly.

"Are you mad at me?" Hermione asked him softly. She watched Quincey out the corner of her eye as the elf moved over to run the shower and get it to an appropriate temperature.

"For what happened with the wolf?" Thorfinn confirmed. "No, Baby-girl. I can't be mad at you for that. You thought he was someone else, and didn't know he was a monster. And when you realised, you did what you could to get away from him. I... you weren't the only one to use Fiendfyre today."

He looked down for a minute before lifting his eyes to hers once more and Hermione would swear there was a darkness there that she'd never seen before.

"I killed them all, little lioness," he whispered. "When Toshka found the tattered remains of your underwear and told me that none of those fuckers had tried to come to your aid I... I lost control. The whole street was engulfed in black fire. It's gone. I watched their faces melt and I listened to their screams as they died."

Hermione gulped audibly. Her mind was racing, trying to catch up to what had happened, trying to process; to rationalise; to make sense of it all.

"Erm... I..." Hermione bit her lip, unsure how to express that though she ought to be horrified, that she was technically staring at a murderer - that she'd turned Finn into a murderer - Hermione was instead feeling... grateful. Elated. Pleased that he'd avenged her pain and humiliation. Pleased that he'd wiped such terrible people from the planet. "I don't think you and I will be welcomed back to Russia, Thorfinn."

Thorfinn's eyes went wide at her words, his expression having darkened as though expecting her
condemnation for what he'd done. He looked shocked. Almost amused by the way she'd processed the information he'd given her.

"I don't think we will either, Baby-girl," he said. A small chuckle escaped him. "You're not... horrified?"

"I... I know I should be but... no." Hermione shook her head. "I... thank you. Gods, what an awful thing to say! But... thank you, Finn. I don't think I'd ever be able to feel safe thinking that Romanov might still be out there, surviving what I did to him and what Antonin did to him."

"There's no guarantee I killed him, Princess," Thorfinn warned her. "But if he was in any of those buildings or anywhere in that alley, he's dead."

"And if he wasn't?" Hermione asked.

"Antonin's already got people looking for him. If he shows his face ever again, they'll report to Toshka and he'll tell me."

"And you'll kill him?" Hermione whispered, raising her eyebrows.

"I'll rip him apart piece by piece until there's nothing left, Hermione," Thorfinn vowed. "You're mine, you hear me? Mine. No one hurts my Princess without answering to me."

Tears trickled from her eyes once more, dribbling down her cheeks at the ruthless tone in his voice and the fierce expression on his face as he made such a vow. She didn't even think about their nakedness as she went up on her toes, pulling his face down until she could kiss his lips. Thorfinn made a slight noise of surprise to find her skinny frame suddenly pressed intimately against his strong one, but he gripped her tight and hauled her up his body as he kissed her back. Hermione wrapped her legs around his waist, locking her ankles against the small of his back. It occurred to her as she snogged him fiercely that she ought to be embarrassed about being naked in front of him, or uncomfortable pressed so intimately against him. His erection was trapped between their naked bodies and he held her to him tightly. When he stepped under the spray of the shower, he didn't put her down. He held her even tighter, kissing her even harder. Her pulse spiked and her whole body throbbed with a combination of pain from her ordeal and desire to have her way with him.

She didn't even know what it meant to have her way with someone yet, not really, but Merlin, she wanted to. He'd killed for her. She loved him.

"It probably sounds paltry to say," Hermione gasped breathlessly when she pulled her lips from his, the water of the shower cascading over her curls and down her back. "But it's really good to see you, Finn. I really missed you."

Thorfinn laughed, laying his head against her forehead carefully.

"Fucking hell, Princess, I missed you," he admitted, still laughing. "Circe's fucking cunt, I almost lost you today, Baby-girl. I can't lose you. Promise me I'll never lose you."

Hermione felt warmth and happiness and love bubble up inside of her at his words.

"I promise you'll never lose me, Finn," she whispered, holding his blue-eyed gaze seriously.

He stared into her eyes for a long minute, several things dancing across his face too fast for Hermione to read.

"Fuck," he whispered before leaning into her and capturing her lips once more.
Hermione kissed him back with everything she had inside of her. She kissed him until the residual fear over being attacked slipped away. She kissed him with how much she'd missed him, her tongue sweeping against his needily. She kissed him until the pain inside her chest and the ache in her neck where she'd been bitten stopped mattering to her because her whole body was throbbing with need and love for Thorfinn instead. She kissed him until she couldn't even think beyond how much she wanted him to ravish her right there against the wall of the shower.

"Finn..." Hermione whined in her throat, rocking her hips against his and making him hiss because his hard cock was still trapped between their stomachs.

"Fuck, Princess," he muttered, his head tipping back when Hermione kissed his neck hungrily. "You're not making it easy on me here."

"I don't want to make it easy on you," Hermione replied. She nibbled his earlobe and smirked when his hips bucked involuntarily. "I want you to ravish me."

Thorfinn groaned.

"Fucking hell," he groaned into her hair. "I can't, Baby-girl. I won't take advantage of you. Not after the scare you had today."

"Please," Hermione whispered. "That whole time, I was terrified of what he was going to do and how much it would hurt and how everybody would see but no-one would save me and all I could think was, 'not like this', 'not with him' and 'it should be Finn'."

Thorfinn groaned again, bucking against her once more, his grip on her tightening to bruising levels as though he were fighting for control.

"You're too young, Hermione," he whispered.

"The wolf didn't think so," Hermione retorted. "And I don't think so. I know what I want, Thorfinn. I've known for weeks that I want to lose my virginity. I would very much like to lose it to you."

Thorfinn hissed in a sharp breath and Hermione could almost hear the wheels in his mind turning.

"Fuck!" he cursed again. Hermione got the feeling his moral compass was outweighing his desire right then. "Not today, Baby-girl. I'm not letting you out of my sight again until I must, though. So, if you're still ready to lose it a week from now, we'll revisit the issue."

"You're torturing me," Hermione accused, wriggling against him.

"Don't you squirm like that again, Princess," he hissed, grabbing her hips and holding her still. "Fucking hell, woman, you're covered in blood and you've just survived some bastard trying to rape you. Hold still and let me take care of you without seducing me into deflowering a traumatised minor, would you?"

Hermione whimpered unhappily in the back of her throat before capturing his lips with hers once more, knowing she wouldn't get what she wanted, but revelling in his kiss just the same.
She was going to be the death of him. Thorfinn supposed that he ought to have accepted that by now, but he hadn't. Not yet. Hell, he didn't know if he would ever be able to accept it, but the fact remained. As he leaned back against the wrought iron of the bathtub with the little witch pressed back against his chest in the bubbly hot water, Thorfinn just knew she would be the death of him.

He was in over his head. That much was clear. He could feel the darkness inside of him now. He could feel the rips in his soul. He'd heard about them before, read about them and studied them in-depth during his NEWTs at school. The rips, he'd learned, were the effect of his magic tearing – his very soul ripping open from the abhorrent act of murder. And he'd committed mass-murder today for his witch. Fuck, he'd done worse than that. Arson. Murder. Torture. He was guilty of them all.

He didn't regret it. With Hermione leaned back against his chest, her eyes closed and her thumbs massaging the tendon in his batting hand, Thorfinn knew he'd do it all over again in a heartbeat for the little witch. She was strong, he'd give her that. Stronger than he'd realised. She'd always had a smart mouth and a barbed tongue, but she was resilient in a way he hadn't expected.

A girl like Reina would've been sobbing; trembling and terrified after surviving the type of ordeal Hermione had endured. Someone like Reina would have been afraid of being alone with a man – especially of being naked with one. Merlin, she'd have been even more horrified over the idea of Thorfinn murdering anyone for her.

Yet Hermione sat calmly, her eyes closed, her hands busy as she hummed a little tune he didn't know. She didn't tremble. She didn't cry. She simply let him hold her in the hot water as she worked the tension out of his forearm, wrist and hand. She didn't even seem to mind the lead pipe he was pressing against her back. She'd survived something no witch – no woman – should ever have to face and she'd been injured terribly as a result. She had the scars and the wounds to prove it.

His face was hung over her shoulder and Thorfinn could see – all too well – the bite mark that fucking wolf had left on her. Romanov had caught the fleshy part of her neck where it met her shoulder, leaving a raised, jagged red tear behind along with a few puncture-hole scars from the individual fangs sinking into her skin. Thorfinn's free hand was curled around her stomach, his fingers tracing the scratch the wolf had left across her middle where he'd practically tried to gut her with his claws.

Thorfinn didn't know for sure if the bastard was dead, but he hoped he was. He hoped, because he knew that if this Alexei Romanov was still alive, Thorfinn would find him and he would murder him a little at a time. He wouldn't be swift in his execution of that monster. No, Thorfinn was imaging the types of things he would do if he ever got his hands on that cunt. They weren't kind. They weren't decent. They were obscene.

"So," Hermione said. Her fingers continued working at the muscles in his forearm, making his cock twitch with every drag of her thumbs along the tight tendons.

"So?" Thorfinn asked.

"Are you excited for the World Cup?"

Thorfinn's eyebrows shot up. Could she truly be that resilient? Or was she simply trying to distract
her thoughts to other, more pleasant things than what she'd endured? He was leaning toward the second one purely because he didn't think anyone could be that strong without help. Maybe it hadn't really hit her yet. Hell, maybe she spent so much time ending up in dodgy situations with the likes of Potter and Weasley that she was that strong and could bounce back that fast.

Or maybe she was looking for a distraction to keep from thinking about what had happened. Maybe she wanted to take her mind off her problems and the new issues she would have to face amid her day to day life as a result of the werewolf bite, that she needed a distraction. Thorfinn was thinking that if that was what his witch needed, that’s what he’d give her.

"I'm terrified," Thorfinn admitted, laughing. "I'm excited to play and honoured that I made the starting side at all. But I'm terrified. Towards the end of the season with the Bats we were hitting some pretty high attendance numbers from the fans, so I'm getting used to having pretty big crowds watching me play. But this is going to be hundreds of thousands of people. If I mess up, the whole world will be watching me do it."

Hermione shook her head and chuckled as though she found the notion of his terror amusing.

"You're not going to mess up, Finn. You'll do great. The Irish have got the best brooms, the best team in the league and one of the best beaters the league has seen in twenty-five years."

"Been memorising the sports page of the _Prophet_, Princess?" Thorfinn asked, smirking.

"I've been following my favourite player," she corrected him.

"We don't have the best Seeker. We'll be going up against Bulgaria in the final and they've got Krum. Some kid who came up in the leagues out of nowhere. He's still at school, actually. And he's better than our Seeker."

"Maybe so, but the Seeker's only job is to end the match," Hermione reminded him, as though he might've managed to forgot. "Yes, if he catches the snitch, he wins his team one hundred and fifty points, but that's not actually that big a deal. Not when the Irish have you flying around and flogging bludgers hard enough at people to knock them unconscious and knock them from their brooms. If you can help keep the other team out of action long enough for your team to score, even with the points for catching the snitch, Bulgaria doesn't stand a chance."

Thorfinn grinned at her words.

"You might have to give me that pep-talk again in the sheds before the game, Baby-girl," he told her.

"I don't mind repeating myself," she said. "You did save my life, after all. It's the least I can do to repay the favour."

Thorfinn tightened his arm around her, holding her close and pressing an affectionate kiss to the side of her neck.

"You don't need to repay the favour, Princess," he said. "You just need to stay out of trouble in future, wherever possible, deal? I don't think it will bode too well for either of us to go committing arson every time you get into trouble and while I'll likely get away with the murders I committed today, I'd rather not have to make a habit of it."

She nodded, turning her head slightly so she could meet his gaze.

"Did I remember to thank you?" she asked. "Because I'm grateful. I need to thank Antonin, as well."
If he hadn't come along when he did, I don't imagine I'd be a very happy girl, right now.”

"I need to buy the bastard something nice for saving my witch," Thorfinn agreed.

"I like it when you call me that," she whispered. Her eyes lifted to meet his carefully and Thorfinn smiled.

Fucking hell, he was in so far over his head with this witch.

"Good," he answered, cuddling her closer. Thorfinn ducked his head to peck her on the lips. "I mean to keep calling you mine for as long as you'll let me, Princess."

"Yours?" she asked. Her voice was full of her unspoken questions and Thorfinn felt a squeeze inside his chest. He knew she wanted clarification of what he meant. He knew she wanted to know whether he was outright asking her to be his witch exclusively.

Thorfinn didn't rightly know. Circe knew he wanted to make her his and never share her with anyone else. Merlin knew they were already more intimately linked than most people ever would be – even if she didn't consciously know it yet. And Salazar knew that he couldn't claim her until she'd completed the Rites or she'd lose her magic. That or they'd get caught trying to complete the Rites on her list together.

He'd never regretted initiating her into them more than he did right then. Not even when she'd been snogging Nott.

"You're my Princess, Jail-bait," Thorfinn said.

He could practically feel her deflate against him in her disappointment. And he hated himself for it.

"Still Jail-bait?" she asked. Her tone went flat as she turned in his hold to face forwards once more, refusing to meet his gaze in what she perceived to be his rejection of her.

Thorfinn gritted his teeth.

"Don't sit there and pout like you aren't Jail-bait, witch," Thorfinn said. He pulled his forearm from her hold when she dug her thumbs in just a bit too viciously for his comfort. "I know it's not what you bloody well want to hear, but it's the truth. You're fourteen, Hermione. I might bloody crave you like no one else and I might be hanging out for the day you're old enough that I can make you mine in every way known to wizard-kind. But right now you are fourteen and I'm almost twenty-one. It is thoroughly illegal for me to be sitting in this bathtub naked with you."

"Illegal?" she scoffed. She twisted in his hold, spinning on her arse in the bubbly hot water until she was sitting between his knees, her legs drawn up to her chest, and glaring at him. "You're seriously going to argue legality with me about this, Thorfinn? You killed people today. You set an entire alley and everyone in it on fire! For all I know, I killed people too when I unleashed that Fiendfyre to blast Romanov. And you're sitting there arguing the legality of my relative age comparative to yours?"

"What do you want from me, Baby-girl?" Thorfinn asked. He shook his head, his eyes darting between each of hers and he tried to get a read on her mood; as he searched for some clue over what she truly wanted from him.

"I want you to acknowledge the fact that you and I have been playing this ridiculous game of flirtation and banter since we bloody well met!" She shook her head in frustration. "We flirt and we fight and we share intimate personal details about our lives with one another. We snog in a way
that makes my toes curl. We play this stupid back and forth game, pushing the boundaries of propriety and morality because of the age difference between us. And it's fun and it makes me crazy, but I need to know, right now, what exactly this is supposed to be."

She huffed out a breath of frustration. Thorfinn opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off before he could get a word in.

"Look, I really don't want to be that girl who has to define something with a label for it to mean anything. I'm not that girl, and I really hope you know that, Finn. But I do need to know what this," she wiggled a finger between the two of them, "is supposed to be. Because right now I'm sitting naked in a bathtub in a foreign country with you. I was recently in a shower with you, similarly naked, while snogging you and wrapped around you like a koala to a tree. You snog me and you taunt me with promises of what you plan to do to me someday and you say things like calling me your witch. Bloody hell, Thorfinn, you killed people for me! But you can't decide, one way or the other, whether you want an exclusive relationship with me that involves sex – all because you're concerned that I'm not legal yet?"

She was breathing hard by the time she finished, and if he didn't know better, Thorfinn might almost think that had she had fangs, she'd be baring them at him.

"Are you finished?" he asked. She narrowed her eyes on him dangerously for his tone but Thorfinn held up a hand to stop her before she could scold him or tell him to shove it. "Don't look at me like that, I genuinely want to know if you were finished and will let me speak."

She nodded sharply, her lips pursing into a tight line. When she didn't speak, Thorfinn took that as his cue. He paused for a moment to gather his thoughts, dragging one hand through his damp hair as he tried to find the right words to explain why he wasn't currently watching her ride him, slow and easy, right there in the tub.

"Do you understand that when I initiated you into the Rites in your first year, you took a Blood Oath to complete them?" he asked seriously.

Hermione nodded again, one sharp jerk of her head up and down.

"And being that you're you, I'm going to go ahead and assume that you're aware of what happens to a witch or wizard who breaks a Blood Oath," Thorfinn said. She narrowed her eyes further. "Yeah, thought so. Now, here's the problem, Princess. Your age is a factor. It's going to be a factor until you're of legal age within the wizarding world, because no matter how backward some wizarding traditions might be, a big one we've moved with the times is that underage girls shouldn't be engaging in sexual acts with grown men. A big part of it relates to Sex Magic and the types of rituals that surround it, but another part is the effect that magic can have on a witch or wizard before they're mature enough to handle it. Mentally, you might be mature enough to handle just about anything, but physically you're still growing."

"I haven't grown an inch in the last year," she argued.

Thorfinn smirked at her.

"Not in height, Baby-girl, but trust me, the rest of you is growing rapidly." He shot a pointed look towards her bare breasts and enjoyed the way her cheeks turned pink. "That being said, I believe you are mentally and magically capable of withstanding and rationalising sex and sexual acts – hell, you're probably more mature about them than I am and have been since I met you. Society, however, has other ideas. And if I was nobody, not in the spotlight about to play the biggest game of my Quidditch career, I'd already be bollocks-deep inside you, Princess. I don't want you to think
that I'm holding off because I don't want you or don't fancy you. I think this should be more than enough proof that I want you really, really bad."

Thorfinn gripped his own turgid cock in one hand, watching with amusement and more than a little desire when she darted a gaze down to his dick. She looked back at his face before her eyes were drawn south again and Thorfinn groaned when she subconsciously licked her lips.

"Fuck, when you do that, I want you even more, Kitten," he said. "But the age thing is still a factor. The other problem is the Rites."

"You don't think we'd be able to get away with completing them all at Hogwarts without you getting caught," she surmised.

"I know we'd get caught. It's not common knowledge, but Dumbledore's got that place rigged to trigger him with information the minute anyone human crosses into that school. And I've got to tell you, Princess, Transfiguration was not my best subject. I haven't got a snowball's chance in hell of mastering Animagi before you graduate. So unless Dumbledore suddenly gets really lax with the rules, we'd get caught the minute I entered the school. You'd get expelled, or reprimanded pretty harshly at least, and I'd likely get fined or sent to Azkaban if we tried anything on school grounds before you're seventeen."

"You're refusing to acknowledge anything between us for the sake of ensuring I can keep my Blood Oath and perform all the tasks of my Rites without the complication of a boyfriend who isn't whomever I have to shag to do so." She frowned at the idea.

"Trust me when I tell you that it fucking kills me, Princess," Thorfinn said quietly. "If it weren't for the risk to your education and my career, not to mention the risk of you feeling guilty for having to fuck someone else, I'd have asked you to be my witch, exclusively, the day I snuck you out of Hogsmeade."

Hermione blinked at him in surprise for a long moment and Thorfinn wondered what was going through her pretty little head. She didn't seem to know what to make of the information, or even what she wanted to do about any of it. Thorfinn knew the feeling. He'd been warring with himself on the matter for what felt like years now.

"So, what is the solution?" she asked.

"I've got no bloody idea, Princess." Thorfinn ran his hand through his hair, sighing heavily. "What do you want to do about it?"

Hermione looked thoughtful at his question, nibbling her bottom lip while her brow furrowed in concentration.

"I don't know what to do. On the one hand, you've made several valid points. I don't think I'd like the resulting fights and tension with you that would come from the idea of completing the Rites with Theo or whoever else I have to engage in order to finish them. On the other hand, I don't want to complete them with anyone else - I don't want to complete them, period. Not to mention we've been snogging and are sitting naked in the bath together. You bloody well killed people for me and just admitted you'd have asked me to be your girlfriend last year if not for my age and the Rites and your career. So, I suppose the obvious solution is to do nothing."

"Nothing?" he frowned.

"Well, if we can't be together, then trying to be would likely result in hurt feelings all around, and
that would just get too messy. I'd rather not risk losing your permanently for the sake of trying when we're currently doomed to failure," she explained.

"And just what are you proposing we do about the fact that you're coming to the Tower for the rest of the holidays? It's full of people, Baby-girl. My extended family from Norway and Finland have come to stay in preparation for the cup. Your usual room is full, and Luna's been staying with Reina, so there won't be room for you in there. Mum and Dad are planning to put you in with me, citing our close friendship and penchant for snuggling anyway."

"I'm sleeping in your bed until I go back to Hogwarts?"

Thorfinn smirked at the way her cheeks turned pink over the very idea.

"Got a problem with that?" he asked.

She blinked slowly.

"You do realise that spending that much time in close quarters with me is going to make it look like we're a couple anyway, don't you?"

Thorfinn nodded.

"The plan was that we tell my extended family that we're an item, to avoid the explanations, but yeah. You'll be bunking with me, Princess."

"And you're going to be able to bunk with me without shagging me for the rest of the summer?" she asked. "I'm not going to shove off for a bit if you decide you want to drag some other witch into bed with you and I'm intimately acquainted with your virility, Finn. I won't stand for being kicked out so you can screw someone else whilst continuing to refuse to shag me. Especially after admitting that you want to be with me."

"What do you propose?" he asked, smirking at her.

He was intrigued to find out what she might say on the matter. He wouldn't ask her to leave his bed while he fucked someone else. Hell, he wasn't sure he even wanted to fuck anyone else, ever again. But he knew he would, eventually. It was inevitable. He'd fly into a rage the next time she snogged or shagged someone for the sake of the Rites, and then he just knew he'd fuck some other witch.

"In regard to you not shagging? Or in reference to your virility whilst sharing with me?" she clarified. "Honestly, I already offered myself to you and you turned me down, Finn. You decide what you want to do about it. Keep in mind that I will be right there, in bed with you every night until I return to school or you return to Ireland."

She stared at him seriously, those chocolate eyes boring into him in such a way that he almost wanted to squirm in his seat.

"I did say I'd consider the idea of shagging you when you're not traumatised, Princess," Thorfinn reminded her. "The questions becomes, do you want to shag me badly enough that you'll do so without being in a committed relationship with me and knowing that at the end of the summer, you'll go back to school to complete the Rites and I'll likely return to being a bloody rake until I can have you without those stupid fucking Rites hanging over us."

"In other words, you want to shag me without the strings of dating me," she deadpanned.

"Don't say it like that, Princess," Thorfinn sighed. "I can't pull off an open relationship with you.
Not without murdering people. Hell, I want to murder that kid of Nott already for touching you, even though I shag around all the bloody time. It's hypocritical, but it's how I feel."

She stayed silent for so long after that, Thorfinn began to think she might be angry with him. She didn't look it, but who really knew how the mind of a witch worked?

"Essentially you're torn between having anyone find out you're shagging a minor, whilst continuing to want to do so," Hermione surmised.

Thorfinn supposed that was the case. He shrugged his shoulders at her, unsure how to make it plainer. The fact was, he wanted her. Badly. But she was young, right now she was traumatised, and the entire summer was going to be torture if they weren't doing something. She was still very young, but if she was going to be losing her virginity, Thorfinn wanted to make bloody sure that it would be to him.

"Well, this is shaping up to be an exciting summer, in any case."

Thorfinn snorted at her words, watching as she spun right back around in the water and reclined back against his chest once more, apparently choosing to leave the topic alone for the time being. He dropped a kiss to the top of her head as he encircled her slim form with his strong arms, thinking that the sooner he could get her home to Rowle Tower, the better everything would be.
Travelling internationally with the assistance of a House Elf was not fun. Hermione groaned when she landed on her knees outside of Rowle Tower. Thorfinn remained standing, as did Antonin. Apparently, they were a little more used to travelling with the help of the elf. Hermione's stomach heaved, and her throat burned as she heaved up her breakfast.

"Shit! You alright, Princess?" Thorfinn asked, stooping beside her and gathering her hair away from her face as she heaved again.

"Quincey is sorry!" the elf exclaimed. "Quincey didn't mean to make Mistress Hermione feel icky!"

"It's all right, Quincey," Hermione assured the elf. "It's not your fault that I've a weak stomach."

The elf wrung her hands together nervously. She'd been a mess since the attack, blaming herself for not realising Hermione was in danger. Hermione argued with her that since she wasn't a Rowle, there was no way she could've known unless she'd been watching her every second of every day, which would have been absurd. The poor thing had chores and other tasks to handle. She couldn't be running after Hermione and watching her every moment. And if she could, then they had a problem.

"Maybe some tea, Quincey?" Thorfinn asked of the elf.

"Quincey brings it. You take it inside, Master?" Quincey asked.

"Up in my room, yeah," Thorfinn nodded, helping Hermione back to her feet and flicking his wand to remove the evidence of her sickness.

"Reina is going to lose her mind when she sees her," Antonin muttered, eyeing the looming structure of Rowle Tower in the early morning sun.

"The whole family will be shocked. They weren't expecting you until the twenty-fifth, Princess."

"I... do we have to tell them what happened?" Hermione asked in a small voice. "I don't want them to give me that look like I'm a fragile victim."

Thorfinn threaded his fingers through hers comfortingly, holding her close and feeling another surge of rage over what had almost happened to her, combined with a simmer of pride at how well she was handling the aftermath of her attack. She didn't seem to be suffering any side-effects as far as mental breakdown, and for that, he was thankful.

"We'll tell them your folks took ill and headed home early so I came to get you," he said. "Toshka, are you staying too?"

"Unless your relatives have overrun my room, yes," Antonin nodded.

"You never did say what you were doing in Russia," Thorfinn said as they made for the front door.

"I've been handling international cooperation between the Gringott's branch here and in Russia," he shrugged his shoulders. "Had a meeting with a client there and some business my mother asked me to handle with the family on my father's behalf."
Hermione got the feeling he didn't want to talk about it when he strode inside the Tower and headed for the stairs towards his usual room.

"No one's awake yet," Thorfinn murmured, holding her hand as they climbed the stairs. "I need to get to training, too. Or I'll be in the shit. I'm already in it, I imagine, after cutting practice yesterday."

"I know the way, Finn. You don't have to walk me if you've got places to be," Hermione told him.

"I don't want to let you out of my sight," he admitted, glancing down at her as they climbed the final stretch of stairs to his door. He opened it quietly and waited for her to walk in ahead of him.

"You'll have to eventually, and I'm sure I'll be safer here than I would be at the pitch while you train," Hermione argued with him. He suspected she was putting on a brave face about being left alone when she held his hand a little tighter.

Thorfinn nodded and Hermione watched him fish her trunk from his pocket and resize it once more so she could use it. He stood it in the corner.

"Make yourself at home, Baby-girl," he told her, waving a hand to his space invitingly.

"You say that now, but I'll bet you get huffy if I leave my books in the bed."

"You'll get huffy if I bend the covers when I throw you down on top of them," he shrugged.

Hermione smirked even as she blushed. Quincey popped in with the tea, setting it out for them and beginning to tidy the room. Hermione watched the elf snap her fingers, causing the bed sheets to strip themselves before fresh ones soared into the room from somewhere.

"I have some things for you, now that we're home," Hermione told him, not catching the way Thorfinn smirked to hear her calling the Tower home. She dug into her trunk for the souvenirs she'd been saving for him while he poured them both a cup of tea.

"You didn't have to buy me anything, Princess," Thorfinn said, frowning at her slightly when Hermione rummaged around to find the things she'd gotten for him.

She handed over the trinkets she'd found for him, including one small figurine of him that she'd found in a Quidditch shop in France. He laughed as he watched the figurine strut across the bed and back again.

"Thanks, Kitten," he murmured, filching through the key-chains and other trinkets appreciatively before setting them aside and reaching for her.

Hermione went into his embrace willingly, letting him pull her down on top of him when he stretched out atop the freshly made bed.

"You alright?" he asked her.

"I'm fine, Finn," Hermione nodded, melting into him and cuddling him in return. "My shoulder still hurts from the bite, but I'm alright. Do you think my family is safe by now?"

Thorfinn smoothed a hand over her hair and down her back.

"Probably. They'll be on their way home by now. You could probably use a sleep, Princess. We've been up all night and you were badly hurt and attacked yesterday."
Hermione nodded, her eyelids already drooping.

"Will you stay with me?" she whispered.

"I can't," he said. "I've got to get to training. But if you're still in bed when I get back, I'll crawl in with you."

Hermione sighed softly.

"You're sure I won't be in your way, Finn?" she worried.

"Positive, Baby-girl. I wouldn't want you anywhere else when I've finally got you right here, in my bed with me. Come, let's get you into bed properly before I go," he murmured, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead and rolling her off his chest before pulling back the covers on what she supposed would be her side of the bed.

"You don't have to tuck me in as though I'm a child, Finn," Hermione protested sleepily.

"Hush and let me," he replied. "Out of those, jeans, come on."

Hermione was too sleepy to even mind when he unbuttoned her jeans and lifted her enough to peel her out of them before tossing them aside. He slotted her between the blankets, curling the covers over her and pulling them up to her chin. Hermione smiled sleepily as he leaned over and pressed a chaste kiss to her lips, smoothing his hand through her wild curls.

"I'll try not to wake you when I get home, Princess," he murmured softly. "Sweet dreams."

Hermione was asleep before he'd finished easing the door closed to leave.

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Thorfinn was tired and sore, and just about dead on his feet when he returned from practice after lunch. His team had given him hell for missing yesterday's session, but when he'd explained that Hermione had been injured, they were a little less hard on him that they might otherwise have been.

"Where've you been?" his father asked, frowning at him when he entered the Tower.

"Practice," Thorfinn replied.

"You were gone yesterday," his father noted suspiciously.

"I was collecting Hermione. She ran into a spot of trouble in Russia and I might've been forced to intervene," he replied.

"Got anything to do with this?" his father handed him a copy of the Daily Prophet, where a small story mentioned the desecration of the street he'd burned.

"Might do," Thorfinn admitted. "Are you sure you'd want to know if it did?"

"Is your witch alright?" Talon asked him and Thorfinn raised one eyebrow.

"She will be. We got to her in time."

"Antonin was involved in this as well?" his father confirmed.

"He rescued her moments before she would've been raped in the street like a common whore in that
place," Thorfinn said quietly, looking around the Tower to make sure no one would overhear them. "She was badly wounded – punctured lungs, abdomen ripped open, a nasty bite on her shoulder."

"A bite?" Talon frowned. "She was attacked by a werewolf?"

Thorfinn nodded his head seriously. "It wasn't a full moon, so she'd not infected, but yes. She was attacked, Dad. If Toshka hadn't been there when he was….

Talon nodded gravely.

"She's here?" he confirmed.

"In my room. Asleep. It took us a while to get her healed up and calmed down. And then we had to hunt the fucker down and handle things. Toshka saw to it to get her muggle family – all of it – out of Russia. Her extended family will shift over to France along with those already there. Her parents were Imperiused to head for home as quickly as possible and I brought Hermione home here with me."

"Good," Talon nodded. "Did you sleep last night?"

Thorfinn shook his head. "No. Neither did she."

"Rest this evening, then. I'll keep the others away from you. If anyone asks, you had to stop in to Dublin for something for your training program in the lead up to the Cup and stopped to collect Hermione when she owled you early," Talon spun them a cover story.

Thorfinn eyed him carefully.

"You've changed your opinion of her and about the idea of me being betrothed?" he asked carefully.

Talon eyed him in return.

"I've seen the effect she has on you, Thorfinn," Talon said softly. "I might be a right arse most of the time, but I do actually want you to be happy. And this witch makes you happy. Or she will, if you stop fucking around on your bond and actually tell her you're betrothed."

"You're not going to try to tell her for me, are you?" he asked.

"That's your job, son. But you should tell her soon. That feisty little witch won't be so forgiving if she finds out about it all when she's seventeen. Especially when you've been shagging other witches this whole time."

"I'll tell her when the time is right," he shrugged.

Talon's eye twitched but he made no further comment on the matter. "Get to bed before you fall down, Thorfinn."

Thorfinn didn't wait to be told twice. Nodding his head, he climbed the stairs to his bedroom and eased the door openly carefully. His witch was inside, fast asleep and sprawled across the middle of the bed. Thorfinn chuckled to himself softly, setting down his broom and making for the shower so he wouldn't soil the sheets by climbing in sweaty and smelly from the hard training session.

Hoping the sound of the water wouldn't wake her, he bathed as quickly as he could before towelling off half-heartedly. His feet felt heavy and his arm was aching from the amount of batting
he'd been doing. Dragging a pair of boxers up his legs, Thorfinn sighed heavily before peeling back to covers and crawling into bed beside Hermione. She was taking up most of the space, but she was light enough that he simply scooped her against himself, spooning around her and holding her snugly. She made a little sound of disquiet at being disturbed, but when he pressed a kiss to the side of her neck, she smiled in her sleep and burrowed down against him more securely.

His heart gave a squeeze inside his chest as he watched her sleep for a moment, resisting the call of the Sand Man in order to admire her. He was reminded how young she still was as he watched, the innocence upon her face reminding him that she was just a few months off turning fifteen. He'd been right to deny her sex when she'd been asking for it the other day, and he worried as he laid his head down on the pillow, burrowing his face into her hair, that she was going to get stroppy with him if he told her she'd have to wait another year.

The idea bothered him because he suspected the little brat would give up her virginity, with or without him. Toshka was right. She needed to complete the Rites and the sooner she managed it, the better. The question became, how many of them could she get away with completing with him, and how unhinged might he become while she handled those he wouldn't be able to assist her with? Sighing again, he pulled her even closer, curling around her protectively and wishing more than anything that things would simply get better for them, rather than worse. He got the feeling he wasn't going to get his wish.

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Everyone was shocked at breakfast the following morning when Hermione accompanied Throfinn downstairs. He was about to leave for training when Reina looked up, spotting her and grinning widely.

"HERMIONE!" the girl shouted, leaping to her feet with such vigor that her chair toppled over as she raced around the table and threw herself at Hermione.

Hermione hated herself a little for the way she cringed into Thorfinn's side ever so slightly, apparently more skittish after the attack than she'd realised. Thorfinn let her lean into him, bracing her to catch Reina when the girl flung herself into Hermione's arms, heedless of the slight reluctance Hermione showed.

"You're here! You're finally here. And you're early! Oh, why didn't anyone tell me you were coming early? I've missed you so much! How are you? Why are you early? Oh, who even cares, because you're here!" Reina chattered a mile a minute, causing many of her family members - most of whom were also present at the dining table - to laugh at her enthusiasm.

"Finn picked me up yesterday," Hermione lied smoothly, having been coached by Thorfinn through the night on the story they would be telling people. Talon Rowle knew the truth, but everyone else would hear the cover story, lest they all begin to fear that she'd been infected with lycanthropy. "Mum and Dad cut our trip short when they realised they needed to get back to their practice. There was some sort of emergency."

"Well, I'm sorry your holiday was shortened, but I'm so pleased to see you that I could scream," Reina declared, cuddling her close and bouncing with her excitement. Hermione winced at the way the movement twinged her freshly healed ribs and punctured lung. Indeed, when Reina let Hermione go long enough to pull back and stare into her face, the girl did emit a soft shriek of excitement before flinging herself at Hermione once more.

"Let the girl breathe, Reina," Thorfinn chided his little sister. "You've got weeks to catch up with her. Try not to make a complete fool of yourself in the first five minutes, yeah?"
"Oh, bite me, Thorfinn," Reina retorted. "And go away to training. Hermione's mine for the whole day and if you try to steal her, there will be war."

"She's always mine, little sister," Thorfinn retorted, smirking.

"I'm not a prized toy to be passed about, you know?" Hermione deadpanned, trying to regain her equilibrium.

"Hush, Princess. You're our favourite toy and you will be squabbled over accordingly," Thorfinn said.

"Oh, I see. I've been demoted. I'd prefer to think of myself as a favoured pet, rather than a toy," Hermione pretended to sniff.

"You're my favourite everything," Reina assured her, still cuddling her.

Hermione grinned before looking up at Thorfinn.

"What do you want me to say?" he smirked at her. "If I say the same thing, you'll start to blush thinking I'll confess undying love."

"Or you could just pull your head out of your arse and confess the undying love you undoubtedly have for Hermione," Reina ribbed in reply.

Hermione's cheeks turned pink and Thorfinn flicked his little sister in the middle of the forehead.

"Cheeky shit," he accused. "I'm going to training. If Hermione's not returned to me in her same condition upon my return, I'll take it out of your hide, little sister."

Reina stuck her tongue out at Thorfinn in reply, blowing a loud raspberry before she released Hermione to dance out of Thorfinn's reach when he made to give her a noogie.

"That's what I thought," Thorfinn sneered at the girl before turning his bright blue gaze on Hermione. "Bye Princess. You know where to find me if you need me."

Hermione nodded, blushing at the way the rest of his family were all looking on curiously. When he tunneled one hand into sleep-mussed curls and leaned down towards her, still smirking, Hermione realized that he meant to kiss her in front of everyone. Her cheeks flushed crimson and her heart skipped several beats in a row at the reaction she anticipated from Reina and the rest of his family, but Hermione couldn't resist stretching up on her toes to kiss him back. He brushed his lips over her once, twice, and then a third time, before pulling back without deepening it any further.

"Have a good day," Hermione whispered, smiling stupidly at him as he pulled away and began to make for the door.

"You too, beautiful," he smiled as he went. "I'll see you soon."

Hermione nodded, still blushing as he left the room and then the Tower. When she turned to meet Reina's eyes, the girl was grinning from ear to ear and Hermione blushed all over again when Reina started 'wooing' at her and making kissing noises as she teased her. Realising that her best friend was pleased, rather than annoyed that Hermione was snogging Thorfinn, Hermione grinned a little wider as she joined the breakfast, thinking that maybe the rest of her summer wouldn't be ruined, after all.
Thorfinn groaned as he hauled his sorry arse home from practice, knowing he'd have to spend the evening getting ready for and then attending the Lughnasadh Ball the Malfoys were hosting. Why the sods were holding a Ball for Lughnasadh so close to the World Cup, when there hadn't been one held in the past three years, was beyond Thorfinn, but did anyone listen to him when he tried to point out that it was unnecessary this year?

Of course not.

They hadn't listened to him at training either, when he mentioned that maybe burning themselves out with enough training to literally kill a dragon was going to tank their chances for the match, either. In fact, Thorfinn was beginning to think that his fellow wizards were all bloody barmy and that none of them were showing him the proper respect.

Even Hermione hadn't been listening to him lately.

Of course, that probably had to do with the fact that he'd informed her last week - when they'd revisited the idea of sex with a little distance from her attack - he wouldn't sleep with her until at least the following summer. She'd glared at him in silence for several long moments, despite the fact that she'd been standing in his shower, butt-naked and sexy as the devil even if she was getting shampoo in her eye, before she'd simply turned away from him, continued to wash her hair, and hadn't actually spoke to him in any decent sort of manner since then.

He knew he'd probably hurt her feelings, since he'd followed the declaration about not shagging her for another year by stripping out of his training gear, climbing into the shower behind her, and cuddling her close. She was stroppy with him and he knew it, but blast it all, the witch was too young! Fourteen was too young for sex at the best of times – let alone when one partner was twenty-one. He already felt like a bloody pervert and he was sick of feeling that way. He might still snog her silly and grind himself against her when things got out of hand and tended to make him late for training, but that was beside the point.

The point was that Thorfinn didn't think he would actually survive shagging her. Not yet. Giving her up again to let her complete the Rites would kill him and he may or may not have been using what little free time he had to research how to get a person out of a Blood Oath. He couldn't do it. Having her in his bed every night, being able to pull her close and hold her tight made him happier than he could admit to out loud. Every touch made the Betrothal bond between them stronger and linked them together deeper. The idea of giving her back to let her even return to Hogwarts at the end of the summer made a part of his soul ache with unhappiness.

The notion of giving her back in the sense of letting her crawl into bed with the likes of Theodore Nott – or really anyone who wasn't Thorfinn Rowle – made him see red. He knew that if he shagged her now, he'd never be able to let her go. But he couldn't tell her all of that. Hell, even if he did tell her, she wasn't going to remember because of the trap Toshka had put in her mind.

He told himself it was for the best; that he'd wait on telling her the truth until he could have her forever. He was staring down the barrel of sharing the rest of his life with the little witch and he didn't want anyone else getting their grubby mitts anywhere near her. But it was either that, or go to prison. He didn't even bother to entertain the idea that he might not get caught with her. Already a few of his cousins were teasing him and saying that she was jail-bait.

"Thorfinn, dear?" his mother called as he dragged his sorry carcass across the entrance hall of the
Tower, heading for his bedroom and in desperate need of a shower. It was the hottest bloody summer on record and even flying at break-neck speed with the wind ripping through his blond locks hadn't cooled him down much. He was looking forward to an icy shower, a nap – preferably with a certain curly-haired mess of a witch sleeping in his arms – and then he would resign himself to going to this bloody ball.

"What, Mum?" Thorfinn asked.

"What are you wearing to the Ball this evening?" she wanted to know.

"What sort of a question is that?" Thorfinn asked, tired and cranky from the long training session. "It's a Lughnasadh Ball, right? I'll wear the bloody Lughnasadh robes that every other bloke will likely be wearing tonight."

"Well, have you looked at yours since the last Lughnasadh festival?" Rhonwen wanted to know. "If we're about to walk out the door and you discover a stain or a rip or something, I'll throttle you."

"I'll check them before my nap," Thorfinn sighed. "Where's Hermione?"

"Frantically searching Reina's wardrobe for something to wear tonight. She thought it would merely require a ball-gown," Rhonwen smiled.

"That'd be a sight," Thorfinn grinned crookedly at the idea of his favourite little witch arriving at Malfoy Manor dressed in a fancy silk ball gown while everyone else was dressed for the Lughnasadh Ceremony.

"Indeed. She was most baffled until Pandora gave her a book about the rituals so she'd have an idea of what to expect tonight. We, of course, made sure to warn her against wearing white. I'd hate to see her mistakenly included in the Match-Making when she has already been claimed. Of course, Reina has little to offer that might be suitable, but I'm sure they'll make something work."

"What's Reina wearing? Her last outfit won't fit," Thorfinn frowned.

"Oh," Rhonwen smiled a secretive smile. "Your sister has decided that this Lughnasadh she's going to be a part of the Matching. She'll be wearing white."

Thorfinn's blood ran cold.

"Mum, she's only thirteen!" Thorfinn protested.

"She's old enough," Rhonwen shrugged. "This is her decision, love, and I'll not have you talking her out of it. I think we both know that she was a little devastated to learn that Antonin had been betrothed once before. If she wants to let the magic of the festival tonight find her a more suitable match, I'm not going to stop her."

"And if she's paired with someone wretched?" Thorfinn demanded.

"It's not forever, darling," his mother smiled gently. "I participated when I turned thirteen and was matched with Lucius Malfoy, but you don't see me married to him, do you?"

"No, because Narcissa Black wheedled her way between the two of you," Thorfinn said. "What are you going to do if Reina is paired with some wretched fool from the Goyle or Crabbe line?"

"She won't be, love," Rhonwen waved away his concerns. "Now, I suggest you do something about Hermione, dear. When she read about the Matching, she looked like she might just try to
find something white to wear, just for spite. I don't know what you've done to her, but she's
determined to annoy you, love."

"Yeah, because I told her fourteen is too young for sex," Thorfinn grumbled. "She's put out with
me because I won't shag her yet."

Rhonwen smiled wickedly. "Well, dear, that's your prerogative. But be aware that
it's her prerogative to seek carnal knowledge elsewhere, no matter her age or your bond, if you
refuse."

"You're encouraging the idea of me shagging her? Despite her age and the likelihood that I'd be
convicted for statutory rape if we got caught?" Thorfinn lifted one eyebrow at his mother.

"She already sleeps in your bed, darling. And you're already betrothed. The Ministry can't arrest
anyone for that if they've a betrothal bond, and you know it. The only fallout would be in the face
of your Quidditch career if the press got wind of it and I'm hardly going to tell them. Are you?"

Thorfinn sighed, knowing she was only saying such things because she didn't like the idea of the
two of them messing with their bond by sleeping with other people. But she didn't know about the
Rites. Perhaps he should tell her, just to see what she'd make of it all then.

"I'm going to shower and then to nap," Thorfinn grumbled.

"You'll have to tell her eventually, Thor," his mother called after him. "You and I both know that
you are not the only wizard interested in that little witch."

Thorfinn stomped all the way up the stairs, ignoring the giggling he could hear coming from
Reina's room, where Hermione undoubtedly was. When he reached his bedroom, he slammed the
door and thought about all the reasons that he was a fucking idiot for initiating her into the Rites in
the first place.

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Hermione sighed as she raided Reina's closet, looking for something suitable to wear to the ball.

"Maybe we should ask Mum if we can go to Diagon Alley to get something," Reina suggested
when Hermione held up a skirt and midriff-top set that would undoubtedly be too small on her. Not
to mention it would show off the claw marks scarred across her stomach and Hermione didn't fancy
the idea of explaining how she'd gotten them all night long. She'd been all set to wear the pretty
ball gown she'd purchased in France before finding out that it wouldn't be acceptable and would
likely get ruined.

"Do you think she'd allow it?" Hermione asked, glancing at Reina, who was absently trailing her
fingers over the pixie skirt of her white silk dress that she planned to wear.

"Of course she would," Reina rolled her eyes.

Just as they were preparing to run off and ask Rhonwen, the doorbell chimed and Reina frowned.

"I don't think we're expecting company today," Reina commented. "And Luna never rings the bell,
she just wanders in."

They both hurried out of the room in time to see Rhonwen opening the door. Hermione's breath
cought when she spied who stood there. Adella Malfoy might be old, but she cut an imposing
figure in the doorway of Rowle Tower.
"Mistress Malfoy," Rhonwen gasped, dropping into a deferential curtsy.

"Rhonwen Rosier," Adella smiled in greeting, speaking English rather than her native French. "As beautiful as ever, girl. I do so lament that our Lucius didn't manage to snag you, dear."

"Had he done, I'm sure I'd never have enjoyed the luxury of two children," Rhonwen replied, though she smiled too.

"Oh, yes," Adella laughed. "The smug little sod and his brainwashing about a single heir to the line. Ridiculous, in my opinion."

"Can we offer you some tea, Matriarch?" Rhonwen asked, laughing at the way Adella rolled her eyes.

"Oh, no, dear. I'm here for my granddaughter."

"Who...?"

"Matriarch?" Hermione said breathlessly, having run down the steps in time to greet the old woman as she stepped across the threshold, a cane in one hand and a box tucked under the other arm.

"Hermione Granger," Adella smiled toothily at her, looking pleased to see her. "How are you, my girl?"

"I'm well, Adella," Hermione said, taking the woman's arm and leading her inside. "I wasn't expecting you. Are you here for the Ball?"

Rhonwen eyed her with surprise, apparently shocked to discover that Hermione had been claimed by the French Malfoys. She stood there in open mouthed shock and Hermione shot the woman a small smile and a faint shrug, hoping she'd be able to explain later.

"Of course we are, child," Adella smirked. "A Malfoy gathering is not an affair to be missed, my sweet. Now, come. Let us take a private tea, you and I. We've much to discuss."

Hermione looked over at Rhonwen again, hoping the woman wouldn't mind.

"The parlour should be free," Rhonwen smiled kindly, obviously wanting to know more but knowing better than to ask for more information when Adella had indicated that she wanted privacy. "I'll have Quincey bring you some tea and cakes."

"Excellent," said Adella, letting Hermione escort her into the Parlour down the end of a long corridor on the ground floor.

"I didn't know you'd be coming to the ball, Matriarch," Hermione said when they were settled, holding her tongue until after Quincey had served them both tea and cakes, and after she'd poured Adella her tea. The time she'd spent in France had taught her many things about her Great-Great-Grandmother, and one of them was that the woman was a stickler for certain traditions. She'd waved off silly notions about corsets and court-heels and silly little pinafores, but she absolutely refused to engage in any sort of discussion without first having a nice fresh pot of tea served and she would not speak on anything until the tea was made.

"Of course you didn't," Adella said, sipping her tea and watching Hermione over the rim of the cup as she did the same. "I very rarely leave Paris anymore. My health, you know. I'm not as young as I used to be, and I confess to no small amount of snobbery as my age increases."
Hermione laughed, knowing the woman might indeed be one of the oldest people on record, but also knowing that the woman was abundantly snobby in what she referred to as 'impatience with youth and the stupidity of those less wise than herself'.

"That, and the ball was something of a last minute affair. I'll honestly be surprised if anyone turns up." Adella clucked her tongue disapprovingly, obviously judging Lucius for waiting so long before deciding to host the ball. "Not sending invitations out until the beginning of June for a ball in August. The cheek!"

Hermione couldn't help the way she smiled. Adella Malfoy was more likely to go in to bat for any single member of her family than to ever take the side of anyone not a Malfoy over a family member, but it was no secret that within the family, she very much played favourites. Lucius Malfoy, for all that he oozed charm and old money, was not among her favourite relatives. It had, in no small part, to do with his being a part of the British Malfoy line, rather than the French line, but it also revolved very much around Lucius's penchant for what Adella called 'playing at pomp'.

To the less educated masses within Britain's wizarding society, the Malfoys were gods because of their long and pure magical bloodline, and because they were the wealthiest people around. More than once while she'd been in France with her family, Hermione had listened to Adella clucking her tongue at Lucius – the three British Malfoys having decided to stay awhile in France, overlapping Hermione's visit. Adella often took Lucius to task when he was a snobby git about things he didn't understand, often going out of his way to remind people of his importance. Adella claimed it to be in poor taste, stating that the truly superior felt no need to peacock about for attention, they simply looked down their noses and waited for others to do their bidding.

She'd seen it in action enough when she'd spent time with Drystan to notice several differences between the ways he behaved compared to the way Draco behaved, and it had amused her to no end while she'd been gallivanting about the streets of Paris with her cousin.

"Indeed," Hermione agreed. "One would think that such an event ought to be planned a year in advance."

"Not that the wretches in this dismal country won't still flock, of course," Adella sighed. "They are so very much like sheep, my dear. Were it not for the fact that it is a Malfoy hosted event and that a descendant of my sweet Lamar will be attending, I assure you, I'd have stayed put in Paris and let Lucius sweat. But none of the families in this part of the world would dare turn down an invitation from the Malfoys."

"Well, imagine Lucius's disappointment were he to fan out his tail feathers for no one," Hermione smiled slyly.

Adella laughed.

"Indeed."

They sipped their tea in silence for several long minutes and Hermione suspected that Adella was waiting for her to ask questions, like why she'd come and what was in the box she carried. Hermione knew better than to rush the old woman. It would only end in her sniffing with disdain.

"I enjoy you immensely, my girl," Adelle informed her, smiling fondly as she set down her tea cup. "Now, on your first day in France, I asked you a very important question that you never got around to answering. Do you recall what it was?"

Hermione cast her mind back, trying to think of what it might be.
"You asked me what Thorfinn Rowle was to me," Hermione said finally, meeting her great-great-grandmother's eye. "After plucking at some part of me that made me very uncomfortable – a soul bond, you said."

"Indeed, I did," Adella smiled. "Might you have an answer for me yet?"

"I'm… not sure I understand the capacity in which you are asking, Matriarch," Hermione said, frowning slightly. "Thorfinn is my friend. He's… well, I…."

"You're in love with him," Adella said quietly, her eyes scanning Hermione carefully. "You have been for some time. The soul-bond certainly suggested it, but when you seemed not to understand what I meant by it, I wondered."

"Wondered?" Hermione asked.

"Do you know what a soul bond is, Hermione?"

Hermione nodded. "You said it was a bond of the heart signifying that I belonged to and had every intention of tying myself to whomever I shared that bond with."

"Thorfinn," Adella nodded. "Yet, you seem… surprised by the idea."

"I was under the impression that bonds like that required intent, as all magic does, in order for the bond to be created," Hermione said. "And while I certainly have confessed my feelings for Thorfinn, if only to myself, I certainly don't think I've done anything to instigate a soul-bond. I…."

Adella Malfoy watched the way the girl's eyes suddenly grew unfocused and she trailed off mid-conversation as though she'd become distracted and forgotten what they were speaking about. She'd done it often in Paris too, when Adella had discussed notions of betrothal with the young witch and she'd begun to suspect some foul play. Leaning forward slightly, Adella slipped into the girl's mind with ease.

Her eyes were narrowed as she scanned through Hermione's thoughts, the images all in a jumble and chaotic, despite the girl's ability to easily pluck thoughts and ideas from the abstract and knit them together in a way that made complete logical sense. That was where she found it. The trap inside her mind. Some prodding showed that the magic bore a Dolohov signature, which concerned and intrigued her in equal measure. It hadn't been self-inflicted, that was certain, yet it seemed that all thoughts about soul-bonds, betrothal bonds, marriage, and the exchange of jewellery for the sake of creating and maintaining such bonds all siphoned into the trap, stored up and waiting to be remembered just as soon as the trap was lifted.

"Hermione?" Adella asked quietly. "Tell me about Thorfinn. You are in love with him, no?"

Hermione blushed faintly.

"I suppose so, even if I am rather put out with him at the moment."

"Oh?"

Hermione sighed, and Adella watched emotions dance across the girl's face, almost too fast to decipher. Annoyance, exasperation, frustration, love, understanding.

"As I'm sure you know, Thorfinn is six years older than me, Matriarch. He… well, he's confessed that he certainly feels something for me and has even said that he'd have asked to be with me in a romantic sense as early as last year, except for two things. My age relative to his, given that in this
country there are laws governing underage witches and wizards. Were he and I to be romantically involved, and should that involvement lead to fornication, he could be prosecuted because of how much older than me he is. That, combined with his Quidditch career in the spotlight certainly lends itself to caution.

"On top of that, there is a tradition at Hogwarts, a Rite of Passage, that most male students are sworn into. Each first year boy is sworn into it by a graduating seventh year, passing down the tradition. It's a list of tasks – silly things really, that revolve around pushing the limits and breaking the rules without getting caught. During my first year and Thorfinn's seventh, he initiated me into them by means of a Blood Oath. I've got to complete them all before I graduate – which would be fine, except for the fact that a number of the tasks are sexual in nature."

"Ah," Adella smiled, and Hermione felt no embarrassment discussing things of a sexual nature with Adella, despite her propriety. Within wizarding society and French society, such things as the pursuit of pleasure in all its forms were not frowned upon. That, and Adella often scoffed over notions of awkwardness about sex, reminding her family that if not for the fact that she'd been shagged three ways from Sunday, none of them would exist. The woman often giggled about it whenever many of the family were all gathered together. "Yes, I've heard of the Rites – a custom instigated by Phineas Nigellus Black, I believe, during his time as a trouble making student."

"Yes," Hermione sighed. "Anyway, with many of the tasks having to be completed on school grounds, any sort of exclusive relationship with Thorfinn would be despoiled by my completion of the Rites. If I don't uphold the oath, I could lose my magic. But, if I'm dating Thorfinn, I'll hardly be able to engage in sexual intercourse on top of the Astronomy Tower with a fellow student, will I? And he can't sneak in to help me with them, because he'd get caught, leading us back to the relative age issue and honestly it's a tangled and frustrating mess."

Adella smiled fondly at the young witch's frustrations. She was in something of a pickle.

"I see. Yet, you are bonded to Thorfinn, just the same. Dear, you do realise that completing those Rites will cause a great deal of strain upon your betrothal bond, don't you?"

Again, Hermione's eyes unfocused and she looked like she was lost in thought for a moment before blinking and looking mildly confused. Adella sighed, knowing there was little to be done. The mind-trap was in place for a reason, and now Adella knew what it was. Hermione couldn't court Thorfinn, despite their bond, without violating the Blood Oath. And since Hermione had a conscience, it seemed someone had done her a favour to ensure that the young witch would uphold the oath without worrying about hurting Thorfinn or herself in the process.

"Well then," Adella said, deciding a subject change was in order. "Shall we get on with the reason for my visit?"

She opened the box she'd set on the couch, turning it toward Hermione and watching the young witch's eyes light up.

"It's a dress," she said. "Is it... for me?"

"It is," Adella said. "I came to find out whether you might prefer to wear white and participate in the Match-Making this evening, but your feelings for Thorfinn are obviously strong and you are deeply connected with that young man. As white is out, this will be more appropriate, I think."

"Matriarch, it's beautiful," Hermione breathed, reaching forward and lifting the dress from the confines of the box.
"Never forget, my dear, you bear the Malfoy signature upon your magic and you belong to my family. You must always uphold our values and ensure to look your best," Adella said, watching the girl stand and hold the dress before herself.

"It's perfect," Hermione sighed, smiling widely. "Thank you, grandmother. Thank you ever so much."

"Yes, well," Adella waved her fingers dismissively. "I want you to look you best tonight. Put it back in the box now, dear, and we'll discuss how you ought to wear it, and how to style your hair and such things later. Before we go any further, I think you'd best tell me about what happened in Russia."

Hermione's head snapped up, her eyes wide with concern that the woman would know about that. "Don't be surprised, dear," Adella said gently. "I know everything. Legilimency, you see? Couldn't turn it off if I tried. I know without you saying so that you were attacked, and that the wolf might still be hunting you. Tell me, do you have any suspicions as to who was behind the attack or why it was targeted at you?"

"I'm not certain it was targeted," Hermione admitted, putting the dress back in the back and scratching at her shoulder where she'd been bitten. "I... I mean, it could have been, but it felt more like it was simply a matter of my being in the wrong place at the wrong time. He said he'd orders to hunt the young, and the alone – those unlikely to be missed. Despite the Dolohov signature upon my magic, they were not as forthcoming with their welcome as you and the Malfoy's have been, Matriarch. Perhaps it was one of them paying the wolf off, though I doubt it, since he mentioned the orders of his Alpha. It could have been anyone, if I'm being honest, but it didn't feel targeted specifically to me."

"Never be too trusting, my dear. There are all things we would kill over, no?" Adella asked softly. Hermione nodded her head, knowing there were a number of things she might kill over, should the need arise.

"Drystan speaks very highly of you, Hermione Granger," Adella told her quietly in the silence that followed. "And I myself have found that despite the dilution of the magical blood within your heritage, you are a singularly gifted witch. Never doubt that should you have need of the family, we will be there, dear. All of us."

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After Adella left, assuring her they would see each other at the ball, Hermione hurried back up the stairs in search of Reina. The girl was showering, Hermione discovered, sighing before supposing she ought to do the same. She'd heard Finn arrive home earlier and she'd pretended not to, despite knowing he'd likely shower and then nap.

She'd been put out with him all week over his refusal to divest her of her virginity, her feelings hurt despite the logic behind his reasoning. She knew that it would do them both no good, and that should she sleep with him, she'd likely never be able to complete the Rites without him. She loved him, curse it all! She loved him and she would miss him terribly when term resumed. She was painfully aware that if he gave in and shagged her, she wouldn't be able to complete the Rites without anyone else, and he'd made clear all the reasons she couldn't complete them with him.

The idea of sleeping with him without dating him didn't sit well and she knew she was being unfair in her avoidance of him, but she desperately wished he would reconsider, even though it might
spell disaster for her in the end.

Climbing the stairs to the room she'd been sharing with him since her arrival, Hermione slipped inside, finding her hulking Viking of a wizard sprawled out upon the bed, the sheets strewn over his hips, leaving his chest bare to her gaze. She couldn't help the way her heart skipped a beat or the way her eyes lingered upon his fine, muscled form as she watched him for a long moment.

Merlin, she loved him. It would be her undoing, she was sure of it, but nonetheless, she knew it was the truth. She loved him and she wanted to keep him for herself and she hated the idea that she would have to wait, and to be with another, before she could finally have him. Sighing, Hermione decided that a shower could wait. Crossing the room, she slipped beneath the covers upon the bed, shuffling over until she could reach Thorfinn.

He stirred, one eye slitting open slightly when she smoothed her fingertips through the blond hair dusting his chest.

"Princess?" he asked, his voice rough with sleep in a way that made her tingle.

"It's just me, Finn," Hermione murmured. "You can sleep awhile longer if you want to."

He hummed happily at the idea, looping one arm around her and pulling her to him like she was his favourite teddy bear. His scent engulfed her; citrus and smoke; home.

"Missed you, Baby-girl," he said into her ear, tracing a line of kisses across her cheek before tracing the shell of her ear with the tip of his tongue.

"I haven't left the house," Hermione laughed softly.

He shrugged without releasing her.

"I miss you the minute you leave my arms, Hermione," he said softly. Hermione was relatively sure her heart melted inside her chest. Were it not already his, it surely would be now.

"I miss you too, Finn," she replied softly, the words almost catching in her throat as emotion surged within her. Pure, elated happiness raced through her and she couldn't resist the urge to burrow into him, wanting to be closer.

She sighed contentedly when he shifted slightly, bringing his lips to hers and kissing her lightly. Like the very first time he'd kissed her, he traced the shape of her lips with his tongue, politely asking entrance. Hermione granted it, smiling against his lips when her tongue touched his and a zing of happiness and magic and something else shot through her, making her crazy. Hermione knew he felt it too when he rolled them both until she was pinned beneath him on the bed, their bodies pressed intimately close, tongues gliding against one another and making her see stars.

She tangled her fingers into his hair – still damp from the shower – and she kissed him hotly. Hunggrily. She wanted him and she knew she couldn't have him, but Merlin, that just made her want him even more. Hermione lost herself in him; in the feel of his hands tracing her shape through her clothes; in the taste of his tongue; in the heat that engulfed her, filling her with need and desire and happiness and love all at once, making her crazy.

She lost herself until she wasn't sure they were even two separate beings, rather than two parts that made one whole.

"Promise me something, Princess," Thorfinn said, his voice husky and tortured and urgent all at once, pulling back just far enough to stare deeply into her eyes. "Promise me that even though
things are going to be complicated and a mess while you finish the Rites, you'll still be mine. Promise me you won't go falling for anyone else. Promise… promise me you'll always be mine; my witch; my girl; my Princess."

Hermione opened her mouth, ready to promise him anything he wanted if he'd just let her keep kissing him for the rest of time. He kissed her once more, claiming her lips for his own, claiming her heart as his alone, and all of her promises slipped from her tongue to his, sealed but unspoken.
Thorfinn's breath caught in his chest when his little witch stepped from the bathroom all dressed and ready for the ball. He'd never seen her look so beautiful, and he thought so even though he'd seen her naked. She practically glowed as she self-consciously smoothed her hands over the ruffled skirt of her pixie-dress and there was a strange, ethereal quality to the cascading swirl of coffee-curls tumbling down her back and about her face. She had a wreath of red, gold, brown and orange leaves and vines woven into her hair like she was some wild, fairy queen who'd just wandered out of the forest to mingle with the commoners.

The dress she wore showed off her slim shoulders, strapless and hugging her petite feminine figure. The skirt was short, falling a few inches above the knee and revealing her long, smooth legs and dainty ankles. Thorfinn smirked at the sight of the anklet glittering around her left leg, one of the gifts that had strengthened their betrothal bond.

"Do I look alright?" she asked, pulling at the puffed hem of the skirt as though wishing it were longer.

Thorfinn raked his eyes over her from head to foot and back again, meeting her gaze with what he expected must be an extremely hungry gleam in his eyes.

"You look amazing, Princess," Thorfinn assured her, stalking closer, intent on stealing one more kiss from her sweet lips. "I may not let you out of this room."

She rolled her eyes even as she blushed, but Thorfinn could tell she was as pleased with his compliments as she was nervous. She let him tip her head up, his fingers caressing her cheek before he bent and stole a kiss from her lips. Thorfinn thought seriously about telling his parents to forget the ball while he and Hermione stayed home, exploring all the ways one could engage in scandalous acts without committing intercourse.

"Are you wearing… a helmet?" she asked a moment later, distracting his lecherous thoughts as she pulled back from his lips.

Thorfinn grinned.

"It's a Viking head-dress," he informed her.

"Why do you look like you just stepped off a history page?" she teased. "What is that? A sleeveless leather jerkin? Gods, Finn, you don't actually have to try to look like a Viking, you big idiot. I assure you that you give off the impression without dressing like some romance-novel reject."

"Reject?" Thorfinn scoffed. "Witch, I'll have you know that I was approached last year and asked to pose for shots to be used on trashy romance novel covers, thank you very much. They sure as hell weren't rejecting me."

"Tell me you didn't actually agree, Thorfinn," she said, her eyes widening in shock. "I swear, if I stumble into the romance section at Flourish and Blotts and find a book with your ugly mug on it, I might vomit."

"Out of jealousy at the idea of other witches drooling over my fine Viking form." Thorfinn smirked.

"Oh, gods, you actually did it, didn't you?" she asked, shaking her head sadly, her eyes full of
"Got a good pile of Galleons for it, too."

"You weren't... naked... were you?" Hermione frowned.

Thorfinn laughed. "Nope. They asked me to be, but I told them I wasn't sure they had cameras big enough to capture me in all my glory and might've made the photographer squeal when I did strip, briefly, before he agreed with me."

"The photographer was male?" Hermione snorted.

"Oh, yeah." Thorfinn nodded. "But that didn't stop him licking his lips like he couldn't wait to wrap his mouth around my..."

Hermione cut him off by clapping a hand over his mouth.

"Let's not think about that, shall we?" she suggested.

Thorfinn grinned, licking her palm until she moved her hands. "What's the matter, Princess? You don't like thinking about anyone giving me a blowjob? Or you just can't resist fantasizing about doing it yourself whenever it's mentioned?"

Hermione swatted him and Thorfinn laughed when her cheeks flushed pink. He almost groaned when she burrowed herself into his arms, pressing her body intimately against him before nosing aside the part in his jerkin and nipping his right nipple.

"Oi! I mean it, Princess. If you keep that up I won't let you out of this room. We'll just miss the stupid bloody festival and stay here revelling in each other."

"If only that were so," she replied quietly before very deliberately nipping him again. Thorfinn wrapped his arms around her, scooping his hands under the backs of her bare thighs and hiking her up his body until she had her ankles locked at the small of his back and her hands tangled in his hair.

"You're still in a strop with me, then?" he confirmed, holding her gaze seriously.

She sighed, looking toward the open bedroom door when a number of his relatives hurried by, talking and laughing.

"I'm not in a strop," she said finally, looking back and meeting his gaze. "I get it. I'm too young. You're too famous. The Rites will be impossible if we shag now. It wouldn't be right to shag now without being committed to each other. Blah, blah, blah. It annoys me and I'm angry that you ever initiated me into those stupid bloody Rites to begin with. But I get it."

"But you're still annoyed about it."

"Of course, I'm annoyed about it," she snapped. "Aren't you?"

"Furious." He nodded. His searched her face, trying to figure out what to say and how to proceed. They were at a crossroads, and he suspected they both knew it. He could either take a step back and let her go, or he could throw caution to the wind, give in, and wear the consequences all the harder when she went back to school.

He got the feeling that the minute they shagged, the bond between them would seal forever,
marriage ceremony or not, and that there would be no going back after that. If he fucked her and then had to let her fuck someone else, he was going to go mad.

"So… where does that leave us?" he asked quietly, wondering what was going on inside her brilliant mind.

"I…" Hermione frowned. "I don't know, Thorfinn. I suppose it leaves us at an impasse. We can't be together, but we've been living and certainly acting like we're already a couple. When school resumes and I must complete the Rites, I don't doubt you'll go back to whoring your way through whichever groupies fall into your lap."

He loved and hated the jealousy spiking her tone in equal measure.

"Don't pretend that I won't be just as put out over all those things you'll be having to do with the likes of Nott or whoever else strikes your fancy to finish the Rites, Hermione," he said. "Just… I guess we'll have to figure it out, yeah? How many tasks do you still have to complete?"

Hermione blinked.

"Let me down," she said. "I'll get my list."

He did as she asked, having been brought her trunk and all her things when Quincey had fetched them after they'd returned from Russia. Thorfinn put her down, watching her ferret through her trunk until she found the scroll of parchment with the Rites on it. She handed it to him and Thorfinn sat on the end of his bed, unfurling it and scanning it with his eyes.

"You've still got to snog a Gryffindor, a Ravenclaw, and a Hufflepuff," he said.

"I know," she sighed. "I've been trying to think of who might be a decent candidate from each, since I don't fancy the idea of just snogging some random idiot and I don't want to get a name for myself."

Thorfinn nodded. "Who do you have in mind?"

He didn't much fancy the idea of discussing the idea of her being with anyone else, but he hoped that if they could be rational and mature about this, they might not end up loathing one another before the Rites were complete. He refused to lose his favourite witch just because he'd fucked up by initiating her to begin with.

"From Gryffindor, I've been thinking about snogging one of the Weasley twins," Hermione admitted, frowning thoughtfully as she sat down beside him. "I was thinking I might be able to trick one of them into getting stuck under some mistletoe with me or something. They won't think twice about it and they won't make a huge deal about it. They might tease me, or laugh over it, but they won't think it means anything more than a random snog."

Thorfinn nodded. As choices went, the twins weren't a bad option. They were good for a laugh, and they'd been right terrors as Beaters for the Gryffindor team whenever he'd played them in the past.

"And the others?" he asked, trying to control the spark of anger the very thought of her snogging someone else inspired.

"I have no idea. I don't really know many people from the other houses, if I'm being honest. I don't much fancy the idea of snogging anyone in my year, since I'd have to look them in the eye in every class for the rest of time, which would be awkward. Someone older than me, certainly."
"If it helps, I'm pretty sure that most of the houses have a variation of the Rites passed down among them," Thorfinn said. "I'm not positive, what with being a Slytherin and hardly interacting with the lads from other houses while I was at school. But I'd reckon they'd have a variation of the Rites. Ask Potter or Weasley about it, maybe?"

"I've spotted Fred and George a few times with a scroll of parchment that looks similar, I'm fairly certain Gryffindor have a version of it," Hermione nodded. "But does that mean I should just pick someone, grab them and snog them?"

Thorfinn shrugged. "Why not? Unless they're likely to hex you for it, you could give it a go. Pick someone and snog them. If it's awful, well, it's only a snog and you can pretend it never happened."

Hermione nodded.

"You've ticked off a few of these other sexual ones," Thorfinn commented, knowing that he sounded jealous but unable to help it. He knew about most of them already, given that Quincey reported what she was up to every time she ticked off another one.

"Yes, well." Hermione blushed. Thorfinn sighed. "You're angry with me?"

"No," he sighed. "You know I ticked them all off before I graduated. Can't be mad without being a bloody hypocrite. But I'm annoyed that they're all with Nott. What's the deal with you and him?"

Hermione's cheeks darkened.

"He… well, I approached him about the idea of ticking off the lists together since I knew he'd been initiated too, after you told me about it. At the time, I thought it was just the Slytherins who were sworn to silence by the Oath, and he's the least repugnant of the Slytherin boys in my year," Hermione explained. "Essentially, we've got it down to just a look when we decide another task is due to be checked off. It's a bit of a friends with benefits deal, I suppose, only no one else knows about it. Except you and Reina, and probably Antonin."

Thorfinn sighed, trying to bite his tongue on the urge to tell her that Nott was up to no good.

"He did ask that… erm… well last year I had some issues with my temper and my wandless magic. When the flames start to dance, he asked me to come and get him… they… they leave these marks on him. I think it hurts him, but he always pushes it until he looks like he might faint before he pulls away."

"They're from rips in your magic," Thorfinn explained carefully. "It happens to me too, sometimes. Be careful with it, Baby-girl. If the marks go black, you've taken too much and depleted his magic. That's what they do. The rips in your magic are slotted full of his magic, drawing on his magical core to replenish the rips in yours. Take too much and you could kill him."

Hermione's eyes were wide when she looked up at him.

"It happens to you, too?" she asked in a whisper.

Thorfinn nodded, knowing he was in danger of telling her about their betrothal bond.

"They're because of… a soul-bond," he said carefully.

"Like the one you and I have," she whispered. "This… this happens to me because of you?"

Thorfinn raised his eyebrows, wondering how she hadn't already lost her train of thought.
"Yes. And when it happens to me, it's because of you."

"Why?"

Thorfinn shrugged. "That type of… connection… dislikes what can be perceived as infidelity. It sparks when one of us is hooking up with someone else. When we both do, the marks form."

Hermione stared at him for a long moment in silence.

"But…" she was frowning, looking almost like she was having trouble hanging onto her thoughts. "But the flames have been happening since the end of my first year."

Thorfinn nodded, wondering if she would put it all together when her hand subconsciously moved to the bracelet on her wrist – the reciprocation of the bond she'd instigated with him. Before he could comment or explain, Reina burst through his bedroom door, all dressed in her white gown and grinning widely.

"Hermione, you look amazing!" the girl gushed. "That dress is wonderful. Much better than anything I had, and certainly better than you wearing white. Are you two ready to go? Mum is waiting for us downstairs."

Thorfinn sighed, rolling Hermione's Rites scroll back up carefully and tossing it aside. He offered his hand to the confused little witch and helped her to her feet. Reina kept her distracted all the way down to the entrance hall of the Tower and Hermione didn't ask about their bond again before they all Disapparated to Malfoy Manor.

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Hermione gulped as she looked up at the looming Manor from the end of the drive. The gates alone were terrifying, but the Malfoys' home was positively sinister in appearance. Worse, it was beautiful despite the way it made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. Glancing up at Thorfinn when he looped her arm through his to properly escort her up the drive – offering to carry her since her feet were bare and the stones on the drive were sharp – Hermione wondered how he could look so at home amid such a setting.

She knew she ought not to fear it given that she carried the signature of the Malfoy clan up on her magic – allowing her to pass right through the doors and into the entrance hall despite the way everyone else was being personally invited across the threshold by Lucius Malfoy. She breezed by him, her arm slipping free of Thorfinn's when he stopped to make conversation with Lucius for a moment before spotting some of his friends from Hogwarts.

Hermione turned in circles, admiring the lavish décor no matter the cold and unfeeling sort of vibe it gave off. She was so busy looking around, in fact, that she wasn't paying attention to where she was going and she bumped right into someone.

"Oh, no, I'm so sorry…" Hermione began apologising immediately before the brush of the person's magic against her own made her shiver with recognition. "Oh… It's you, Malfoy."

Draco Malfoy raised one condescending eyebrow despite the way his hands had lifted to lightly grip her arms, steadying her to keep her from falling.

"When you display such a lack of manners, you reiterate that despite the Malfoy and Dolohov signatures upon your magic, you are still just uneducated riff-raff, Granger," Draco said coolly.

Hermione narrowed her eyes on the boy, doubting that there would ever come a day when she
could look at him and not consider him an enemy, or at the very least, an evil little cockroach. Refusing to rise to the bait and incite an argument, Hermione instead offered him the type of greeting befitting magical exchanges. She curtsied, though she could imagine Harry and Ron choking with indignant rage at the very idea of her being polite to Malfoy.

"My gratitude for being allowed into your home, Draco," Hermione said politely. "It was certainly something of a shock to have received an invitation to tonight's activities."

"You imagine that the Matriarch wasn't the one behind your inclusion?" he asked dryly, bowing to her in turn, on his best behaviour for the sake of the ball and indeed, for the reputation of the Malfoy family.

"I imagine it was a sour taste upon your father's tongue to be ordered to invite me," Hermione smiled widely, hoping it were so.

"Father is… not so easily soured, I'm afraid," Draco muttered, eyeing her strangely for a moment. Hermione flushed when he very pointedly looked her up and down, his eyes lingering on the cleavage line of her dress and on the amount of thigh she had showing thanks to the short skirt of her dress.

"You look… beautiful," he said and Hermione thought she might keel over in shock at the compliment.

"Erm… thanks, Malfoy," Hermione blushed crimson, glancing down and tugging on the skirt of her dress once more, wanting more than anything for it to be longer. "You… um… You look nice, too."

He smirked wickedly for a moment, looking amused by how uncomfortable she seemed but when Hermione met his stare challengingly the smirk slipped slowly toward a bit more of a real smile.

"I thought you'd be wearing white," he commented before Hermione could move off and be on her way.

"Why?" Hermione frowned.

Draco shrugged. "Figured that with what a know-it-all you are, you wouldn't want to pass up the opportunity to see how a Matching ceremony works."

"Reina is wearing white," Hermione informed him. "I'd rather observe than participate. I shudder to think the type of person I might be matched with were I to open myself to such."

Draco's mouth twitched a little.

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Draco's mouth twitched a little.

"Funny, I thought Gryffindors were supposed to be brave," he commented.

"Brave, not stupid," Hermione retorted.

"Same thing, aren't they?" he sneered and Hermione opened her mouth to correct him but before she could get the words out, someone else interrupted them.

Taller than Draco by only a few inches, and looking almost identical but for the blue of his eyes where Draco's were grey, Drystan Malfoy was a welcome sight.

"Chère!" He greeted her, taking up her hand and bowing over it before dropping a kiss to the back
of it. "It's good to see you."

"Drystan!" Hermione grinned, almost completely forgetting about Draco as she curtsied to the other boy.

She squeaked when he hauled her into his embrace cuddling her tightly and dropping a kiss to the top of her head.

"I've missed you," Hermione informed him, smiling all the more when she noticed the way Draco eyed them with annoyance.

"And I you, Chère. " Drystan said.

Hermione made a noise of shocked protest when the blond suddenly tangled a hand into her nest of curls, pulled her closer and snogged her. She began swatting him immediately no matter the way her body insisted she melt into the snog. Drystan was laughing when he pulled away, licking his lips and smirking wickedly.

"Why?" Hermione demanded, also laughing when she recognised with one look that he'd had a purpose in mind for snogging her when he knew she found the idea of kissing her cousin squicky – no matter the removals and the separation of generations of breeding.

"Proper French greeting, Chère." He winked at her, tucking her arm through his as he began leading her away. "Got to keep on top of these things, you know. National pride, and all that. And, you know, I thoroughly enjoy watching Draco squirm. Did you see his face? The little sod was positively vibrating with rage because I'll bet you every Galleon I've got that he wanted to snog you like I did when he saw you, he just doesn't have the guts."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"He called me beautiful," Hermione commented.

"And rightly so. C'est manifique!" he complimented, holding her at arm's length and looking her up and down before hauling her close and stealing another kiss from her lips.

"You're going to get me in trouble," Hermione hissed, swatting him and laughing as she wiped at her mouth.

"I'd never," Drystan smirked.

"Liar!" Hermione laughed, realising that she really had missed him, no matter the terrible tease he happened to be.

"So, where's this boyfriend of yours. Thorfinn, right? I didn't see him warning Draco away. I'd really make a better choice, you know? I'm undoubtedly more handsome and obviously richer and..."

Drystan trailed off when Hermione glanced over his shoulder before gripping Drystan's shoulders and turning him, tilting his head back slightly. Thorfinn stood directly in front of him, close enough to intimidate.

"Sacré bleu!" Drystan muttered, having to tip his head back further to meet Thorfinn's gaze.

Hermione noted that Thorfinn didn't look happy, though he did seem just the faintest bit wickedly amused.
"Drystan Malfoy, I'd like you to meet Thorfinn Rowle," Hermione introduced them. "Finn, this is my third cousin, Drystan Malfoy. Of the French Malfoys, obviously."

"You didn't tell me he was enormous, Hermione," Drystan muttered over his shoulder, shooting her a look that was more than a little terrified.

"Malfoy," Thorfinn smirked, offering his hand for the younger wizard to shake. Dyrstan hesitated, obviously fearing Thorfinn would hurt him. He shook it just the same and Hermione giggled when she noted the way Thorfinn did squeeze his hand tightly, but not so tight as to crush the appendage.

"You kiss all of your cousins, Princess?" Thorfinn asked, slanting a glance in her direction when Drystan gulped audibly and seemed to lose all his bluster in the face of someone as imposing in size as Thorfinn.

"Just the ones who have the most effect at keeping everyone else at bay," Hermione smirked at Thorfinn in return, finding that she actually rather enjoyed the possessive and jealous gleam in his eyes when he looked at her. "Proper French etiquette, you know?"

"Should I snog him too, then?" Thorfinn smirked. "French etiquette and all?"

"Oh, please do," Hermione replied. "That is something I'd very much like to see."

"Granger!" Drystan protested, his eyes wide and alarmed now.

"What?" Hermione asked, smiling sweetly. "He's a good kisser, I promise."

"He's a bloke," Drystan protested.

"Like that's ever stopped you before," Hermione scoffed, pointedly winking at him so he'd know she was referring to his admission that he'd once snogged another boy for the sake of a ménage au trois.

"That was one time!" Drystan protested. "And a ménage au trois. Now unless you're offering your services and Rowle is willing to share you…"

Hermione suspected trouble was on the horizon when Drystan's smirk suddenly reappeared and he stared up at Thorfinn challengingly, obviously thinking he'd found a way to regain equal footing.

"You want to shag your own cousin?" Thorfinn asked, raising one eyebrow.

"She's gorgeous, powerful and brilliant. Who wouldn't want to shag her?" Drystan drawled. "I'm up for sharing, if you're game, Rowle? What do you say?"

Hermione wasn't laughing anymore when Thorfinn looked over at her, raising one eyebrow as he looked her up and down. Her cheeks flushed crimson and Thorfinn smirked.

"Depends, mate," Thorfinn grinned. "How do the French kiss?"

Drystan lost his cocky smirk when Thorfinn settled a big hand on the back of Dystan's neck, pulling the younger wizard closer and ducking his head like he really might snog him right there in front of everyone. It was a game of Chicken, she realised, Thorfinn pushing Drystan to see who might crack first, obviously thinking that Drystan would wimp out rather than seeing it through.

"Fair warning Rowle, you snog me and she is fair game," Drystan said, resisting slightly. "I mean it. I snog her for the amusement it brings me to watch Draco pout, but if you're game I will insist on
"She's your cousin."

"Third cousin, once removed," Drystan corrected. "Perfectly legal and even encouraged in most wizarding families, no? And I think any prior claim you might have to her could be corrupted, eh? After all, you've so much more to lose than I do should the world get wind of who's fucking her."

Thorfinn seemed to realise that he wasn't going to crack Drystan so easily and Hermione didn't like the way things had suddenly turned so serious.

"Erm, maybe you've both forgotten, but just *who* gets to shag me is *my* decision," she said before Thorfinn could either snog Drystan to prove his point, or punch him for the insinuation that doing so would mean he was willing to relinquish any claim to her.

Thorfinn and Drystan broke their staring competition to glance over at her when they caught the sharp edge to her tone that suggested she'd lost her temper.

"Oh, by all means," she sniffed. "Continue your pissing contest. But be aware that I will *not* be the prize."

With that said Hermione flicked her hair over her shoulder and stomped away from both of them, her blood boiling that Drystan had actually been serious about his intent to try and take her from Thorfinn and furious that Thorfinn had hesitated to warn the other boy away from her. She knew they weren't technically a couple and she knew that with the Rites to complete things wouldn't only get more complicated, but it bothered her that before leaving Rowle Tower she'd been snogging Thorfinn and now he didn't care enough to fight for her.

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Thorfinn looked down at the blond little git who'd challenged him, narrowing his eyes hatefully on the kid of Malfoy. Even though he knew that Hermione's feelings for the git were familial, despite the snogging, Thorfinn could tell that this little French bastard had been serious about trying to take Hermione from him. It was true that in wizarding society cousins as close as second cousins could and did often legally marry and reproduce. This one wanted Hermione, Thorfinn could tell.

"You know what these are, kid?" Thorfinn asked, releasing the back of the boy's neck to pluck at some of the beads fixed in his own golden hair.

"Beads?" Drystan frowned, raising one eyebrow.

"Hermione put them there," Thorfinn smirked. "And you see that bracelet that looks like little snowberries on a chain hanging from her wrist?"

He turned the younger wizard to stare after Hermione as she stomped over to where Reina was looking uncomfortable as a number of sixth and seventh year pureblood boys all tried to get her attention – a witch dressed in white for the Matching always drawing a crowd.

"That's the reciprocation jewellery I put on my little witch to seal the bond she initiated," Thorfinn told the lad of Malfoy. "So keep your grubby hands to yourself, Frenchie."

With that said he abandoned the kid to his annoyance and his arrogance, following after his witch before thinking better of it when she levelled him an angry glare. Diverting his feet toward the nearest refreshment table, Thorfinn picked up a goblet of elf-wine and threw it back, his blood simmering with possessive rage, and green flames dancing over his fingers. He watched Hermione
as she was engaged in discussion with a pair of gits that Thorfinn recognised as Ravenclaws a few years above her. She lit up as she engaged in conversation with them, one of them apparently smart enough to ask her an academic question to hold her attention, and Thorfinn couldn't help thinking that maybe he'd fucked up in more ways than one.
"May I have this dance?" Theodore Nott offered primly much later in the evening after everyone had been welcomed and the festival had officially begun. Hermione was tired, if she was honest. She'd been dancing and running around, the ball not at all what she'd been expecting. She'd come thinking it would be a fancy do with stuffy dancing, stiff outfits and social posturing.

She couldn't have been more wrong. In the fashion of a true festival they had all taken to the grounds, the traditions of the festival calling for much dancing and merriment. Everyone was barefoot, magic flowed freely, and the traditions of Lughnasadh were observed.

She'd been a little squeamish when one of the traditions had involved the sacrifice of an Abraxan stallion, the first fruits of the harvest soaked in its blood and devoured by the gathered guests. She'd accepted her own piece of fruit with a twist in her stomach, but it hadn't tasted as bad as she'd feared.

"Hello, Theodore," Hermione smiled at the boy she'd been doing inappropriate things with in broom cupboards for the past two years.

He smirked at her, holding out his hand and waiting for her to accept it. The Matching was due to begin shortly, Hermione knew, but there had been much dancing around a sacred spring on the grounds of Malfoy Manor, which Hermione had been informed by Drystan was a place of extreme magical power and that tapping into its powerful for Lughnasadh would bring them luck all year long.

Hermione took Theo's hand, letting him pull her away from a discussion between Drystan and Reina that she'd been mostly translating for the two.

"You want to dance around the spring?" Theo asked, holding both of her hands and tugging her in the direction of the music and dancers where they all merrily skipped and jumped and danced around the spring in what Hermione's parents would've referred to as pagan ritual.

"Will it bring me good luck?" Hermione grinned at the boy.

He tugged her closer to whisper in her ear. "You'll always get lucky with me, Granger."

Hermione laughed, skipping into the beat and clutching one of Theo's hands. Someone else took up the one on the other side and Hermione looked over curiously as they joined the merriment of people dancing in circles around the fire. On the other side was a witch Hermione didn't know. She had long dark hair and she was dressed in white, perhaps in her mid-twenties. She smiled at Hermione as they skipped and danced and Hermione smiled back, not recognising her, but pleased to have been included in the ritual nonetheless.

"There'll be feasting soon," Theo told her between the chanting of rituals and spells that was taking place all around them, other magical beings beginning to gather as they celebrate Lughnasadh.

Hermione nodded, having too much fun to care about the dirt on her feet or the way people were watching her. As she danced she let go of all her worries for a little while. Forgetting about the pressure to complete the Rites and letting go of her residual fear and bad feelings after her traumatic summer. She simply let her inhibitions all fall away, swaying her hips, leaping, dancing, kicking her feet and feeling her magic rush through her body, free and uncontrolled. It felt good, she realised, blinking open her eyes as the tempo of the song changed and she found Theo watching...
"You're beautiful when you do that, sweetheart," he informed her, his little half-smirk in place.

Hermione blushed.

"Thank you," she smiled.

"Pity you're here with Rowle," Theo muttered, pulling her closer for one of the moves as the dancing shifted toward a traditional one she'd watched some of the others doing earlier. "If I could sneak you away, I'd have my wicked way with you."

"Been missing me all summer, have you?" Hermione teased.

Theo didn't answer, though he did offer her a quick nip on the shoulder in punishment. A shiver of desire washed through her and Theo laughed triumphantly.

"You should've worn white, sweetheart," he said. "You need to be well ravished, I reckon."

"What do you think your job will be when term resumes," Hermione said without thinking and Theo laughed even more, lifting her right off her feet and into the air under the pretense of a dance move that somehow had him pressing his face into her cleavage.

"What are you doing here with Rowle, then?" He challenged when she was back on her feet.

"Thorfinn and I are complicated," Hermione offered, shrugging her shoulders helplessly.

Theo regarded her with that familiar half smirk of his as she danced in a circle around him, in accordance with the steps, and when she moved in toward him once more, he looked almost rueful.

"You've fallen in love with him," he said, sounding disappointed.

"I have to complete the Rites, same as you," Hermione said by way of objection.

"Doesn't negate the truth," he replied. "More power for me, I suppose."

Hermione frowned at him, but he didn't elaborate further and before she could press the matter the song ended and someone called out that it was time for the Matching to begin. Reina sprang away from her discussion with Drystan, hurrying forward alongside the other witches dressed in white. Wanting to locate someone who might talk her through all that was going on as the ceremony took place, Hermione scanned her eyes over the crowd carefully. Thorfinn could likely tell her, but when she spotted him, he was drinking elvish wine and chatting to some of his old school friends.

She was angry with him, anyway.

Drystan could tell her too, no doubt, but he was carefully eyeing the witches as they lined up, all dressed in white, and she'd begun to think that the boy might've been intrigued by Reina. She was angry at him, too, for what he'd said to Thorfinn, and she didn't know what to do with the idea that he'd apparently been serious enough about things like snogging her that he'd challenged Thorfinn for her. She didn't want to deal with the idea that he might fancy her.

Not tonight.

Theo was also an option, but she doubted that would go over well with Thorfinn either. Especially when another glance in Thorfinn's direction showed him watching her with an unfathomable expression on his face, as though he might be annoyed with her for having danced with Theo in the
Hermione wanted to huff and stamp her foot in annoyance and tell him that he could shove his jealousy up his arse since he hadn't even had the decency to fight for her today. She bit her lip, looking down at her feet when, at that moment, the wind kissed the back of her neck and her shoulders, recalling to mind the scarred bite that Romanov had left upon her flesh. The bite and that attack flashed through her mind and she had to remind herself that though he hadn't made a scene and warned Drystan away today, Thorfinn had done things that no man should ever do for the sake of defending her. He'd killed for her, and she couldn't forget that.

Sighing, Hermione scanned her eyes over the crowd once more, wondering if there wasn't someone else that she might perhaps rely on to tell her about the Matching. Several of her cousins, and many of Reina and Thorfinn's family were present, but they were all engaged in discussions of their own and likely wouldn't appreciate having to explain the ritual to her.

Before she could take a single step in search of someone else who might talk her through it, she felt the softest puff of someone's breath at the back of her neck and Hermione tensed, recalling too vividly what Romanov had done to her. Her wand was in her hand before she could think better of it and she spun on the person at her back, her wand digging into his neck hatefully.

Unamused and unsurprised dark eyes stared back at her and Hermione blinked when she recognised Antonin Dolohov.

"Easy, Mishka," he murmured, his hand going to her wand and aiming it away from his throat.

"Sorry," Hermione whispered shamefully, lowering her wand and tucking it back into her pocket.

Antonin didn't answer, though his dark eyes scanned over her face slowly for a long moment in silence. When Hermione met his gaze steadily, he held out a goblet of elvish wine to her and Hermione took it without a word. She made a face at the strong flavour, despite its pleasing taste, before handing it back after only a mouthful.

"You are right to be cautious," Antonin told her softly, turning her by her shoulders to ensure she watched the Matching as the ceremony began. "Dark times are upon us, Mishka, and no matter the claims upon your magical soul, you are of an origin that will not always be treated fairly, or justly. Too soon things will take a turn you are not ready for and the friendships you keep will brand you a target for more than just the wolf from the Mother Country."

Hermione stiffened slowly, suspecting he didn't want her to interrupt him; suspecting that this was a warning. She knew that Antonin was well connected through his job and she got the feeling from his dire tone that he was imparting to her a terrible secret.

"Soon, little mouse, there will come a time when you will be forced to choose a side, and it will be better for you, and perhaps better for the world, that you choose the right one," he said. "But when you do, you must know the cost. The Rites, as you know, must be completed by you. Your connection to Thorfinn means their completion might drive you both mad and before the end, he will not be the man you currently love."

Hermione opened her mouth, her eyes straying from the scene of the girls all in white before her as they began some ritualistic and sexually charged dance. They strayed to Thorfinn, where he stood across the crowd watching the girls dance and drinking his wine.

"Now, he is playful, reckless and naïve," Antonin murmured, one of his hands looping around her middle and pressing to the very spot where Romanov had torn her open. "Soon he will lose control."
He already has done so once, for you. You will drive him to it and every effort to prevent it will only drive him further away. We both might lose him, before the end, Granger. No matter my warnings and my efforts, you are bonded and you are doomed. Be merciful with him, little mouse. Soon, he will be changed and you will scream and cry for the man he might otherwise have been. Don't waste what little time you have left."

Before she could shrug him off or ask him what he meant, his grip on her tightened and Hermione felt the tip of his wand at her temple. Before she could think on it or fear his intent, he bit her.

Biting down on the scar Romanov had left behind and triggering a terrible fear and pain, her mind clouding with memories of the monster, Hermione almost forgot every word he'd just said.

Before she could cry out he released her, but not before Thorfinn's eyes snapped away from the dancing young women to fix upon her. Hermione would swear she saw anger and betrayal in his gaze but she was too lost to her own traitorous memory and crippling fear to do anything for it.

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Thorfinn's eyes snapped to Hermione when he felt the flare of anger and betrayal flitter through his blood, the bond between them alerting him to the feel of someone else's hands upon his witch. He narrowed his eyes to slits when he spied her across the crowd, Toshka standing directly behind her and tormenting her.

Toshka's fingers dug into her midriff where she'd been clawed and he was biting her shoulder in the same spot the wolf had bitten her. The terror and pain on his witch's face almost made Thorfinn lose control of his magic right there in front of everyone and he realised that was exactly what Toshka wanted.

It was a reminder. A reminder that someone had already tried to take her from him, and that the coming year would test him beyond measure. He could see from the gleam in Toshka's eyes - fixed as they were upon Thorfinn's face, gauging his reaction – that it was his intent to remind him of what he was about to lose.

And he would lose her. She might be his betrothed, bonded to him in magic and soul for the rest of her days, but he was going to lose her.

To some little shit like Drystan Malfoy, or Theodore Nott, or that muggle neighbour of hers. Someone, somewhere, was going to take his witch from him and he'd have to impotently allow it because of the Rites. Thorfinn loathed himself for initiating the Rites for her. He loathed himself for reciprocating the betrothal bond with Hermione to begin with and he wondered if there was any way that he could be free.

He didn't want to. Not really. He was well and truly besotted with the brilliant little witch, but his love for her was going to cost him his sanity and maybe even his life. It'd already taken some of his humanity and he was certain more would be flayed from him, bit by bit, over the coming year as she completed the Rites and made her choices.

He knew Toshka had been trying to warn him that there were whispers among the old guard that their Lord would return. Dmitri's mark had begun darkening once more, and the brief conversation he'd had with Lucius Malfoy while Hermione had been dancing with Nott had confirmed that Dark things were stirring.

There were whispers that the Dark Lord's power was growing once more, and Lucius had hinted at the idea that the sons and daughters of the Old Guard would be the ones who fleshed out the Death Eater ranks when He rose once more. Toshka's warning was clear. All too soon he would lose
Hermione, because a girl like his favourite little bookworm might be naughtier than anyone else knew, but she was no Death Eater in the making and she was certainly not going to forgive anyone else who joined up with the Dark Lord when he rose.

No matter the lack of say those joining might have in the choice.

Thorfinn narrowed his eyes on his best mate, fighting the urge to interrupt the Matching for the sake of his witch, even as Reina's name was called and the spells were performed, pairing her with a man all wrong for her. Toshka's hold on Hermione dropped when his name was called in association with Reina's and though Thorfinn had seen it coming, Toshka clearly hadn't.

His brow furrowed into a frown and his cheeks darkened slightly. Up on the dais, Reina's cheeks flushed crimson, too, obviously aware of her crush on the older wizard, and horrified to have him and the rest of the world know it. But like the Gryffindor she was, Reina held her head high, squared her shoulders and walked down off the dais as Toshka stepped around Hermione, doing his duty and coming forward when called to keep from embarrassing Reina by refusing the Match for the season.

Hermione looked to be in a daze and Thorfinn shook his head, realising as he took another drink that his life really was taking a turn for the worse. If he wanted to prevent it worsening, he was going to have to grab onto the things that made him happy with both hands, and when his little witch visibly shook even as she stumbled back a step before turning and dashing away into the darkness, Thorfinn knew that his happiness and his sanity rested squarely in her pockets. If he wanted to claim them, he was going to have to go after her and hope she might fall for him hard enough to overlook the shit times he knew were coming.

As he slipped through the crowd, ignoring the sound of his name being called in conjunction with that of Becky Selwyn's for the Matching, Thorfinn hoped that when they all came out the other side of this, Hermione might still be the same sweet witch who would crawl into his lap and read her book or play with his hair. When he followed her into Malfoy Manor, he hoped against hope that there wouldn't come a day when he would look upon her, not as the only girl he'd ever fallen for, but as an enemy responsible for his pain and his cruelty and his insanity. He wondered how tight he'd have to hold to make sure that through it all, she might still want to be his witch at all.

Hurrying inside and trying to keep her in sight as she fled, Thorfinn had a terrible churning sense of dread building in his gut that said he was going to lose her, lose his mind, and lose it all before his life was done.
Hermione was nearing hysteria as she stumbled through the halls of Malfoy Manor, seeking somewhere to hide, somewhere to recover. She didn't know what Dolohov had done to her, but she didn't feel right. Something was wrong. Something more than the trigger of memories and horrors she'd sooner forget. His wand at her temple had set something off inside of her, though she hadn't heard him utter a spell, and Hermione felt strange.

She felt jittery and like she had a thousand ants crawling under her skin. Tears trickled slowly down her face, the effect of the memories she endured, but she made no effort to wipe at them. Everyone else was mercifully outside watching the Matching Ceremony she'd stumbled away from and Hermione couldn't be more grateful as she stumbled into a room and found herself, finally, alone.

The décor barely registered with her as she stumbled over to drop down onto a daybed in the corner of the room by the fire, and though it wasn't cold out, she was grateful for the heat. She didn't notice the pair of eyes that tracked her movements across the room and she didn't register the presence of anyone else in the room for several long minutes as she scratched at her skin, trying to pull herself back together and to make sense of why she felt so strange.

"He spurned her, you know?" a low, drawling voice intruded on her thoughts when she'd taken several deep breaths and begun to put herself back together.

Hermione screamed.

"Bloody hell, Granger!" Draco Malfoy hissed, eyeing her like she'd gone mad when she leapt to her feet, her wand drawn and a hex ready upon her lips. "It's just me. There's really no call for screaming."

Hermione frowned, her eyes scanning the darkened room before coming to rest on the wizard in question. He was standing in the doorway that led onto a small balcony that overlooked the festival beyond where the Matching was still taking place.

"What did you say, Malfoy?" she asked, frowning at him.

"I said that Rowle spurned her," he repeated. "Selwyn. When her name was matched with his, he walked away rather than going up. That's the height of rudeness in our world, you know? Spurning someone for a Matching season is the equivalent of declaring a Blood Feud with the family of the person being Matched. Rowle basically just picked a fight with the Selwyn family for you."

Hermione frowned in confusion, blinking stupidly at him and trying to process what he was telling her.

"What are you talking about?" she asked thickly.

Malfoy blinked at her in return, his brow furrowing in confusion.

"I'm talking about the Matching," he jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the party beyond. "Becky Selwyn was Matched to Thorfinn Rowle, and rather than going up and accepting the honour of escorting her for the season, he shoved his way through the crowd to follow you into the house. So, I don't know why you're crying. He spurned her."

"Oh," Hermione said. "I didn't even hear his name called…"
Malfoy frowned further.

"Then why are you crying?" he asked, confused.

Hermione shook her head. "Nothing. It's none of your business."

"If it was bad enough to drive you crying from the party and all the through the Manor up to my bedroom, Granger, then I wouldn't call it nothing."

"This is your bedroom?" Hermione squeaked, blanching when she glanced around the room and noticed that there was, indeed, a collection of things strewn about the place that she recognised as belonging to Draco. His Nimbus Two Thousand and One leaned in one corner, and his school bag hung haphazardly from the back of the chair at the desk across the room.

"Are you drunk or something?" Malfoy asked, his frown deepening even more as he pushed away from the doorframe and crossed the room toward her. "You seem a little out of it, Granger. Did someone hex you?"

"I think so," Hermione admitted, her wand arm lowering once more before she reached for her head with her free hand. "I'm really itchy. And I feel dizzy."

"Have you been drinking?" Malfoy asked, coming closer still.

"Only a mouthful of wine," Hermione shook her head. "Dolohov did something to me…"

"Something to do with this?" Malfoy asked, brushing her hair away from her neck and eyeing the bite mark scarred into her shoulder.

"Don't touch it," Hermione hissed.

"When were you bitten by a werewolf, Granger?" Malfoy asked quietly, standing uncomfortably close to her. "What did you do? Spend too much time with Lupin over the holidays or something?"

"Professor Lupin would never attack anyone!" Hermione defended vehemently.

"I didn't think you were spending the holiday with Potter, anyway," Malfoy narrowed his eyes. "Weren't you supposed to be going to Russia after you left France?"

Hermione nodded, biting her lip and looking away. "I did."

Malfoy narrowed his eyes on her.

"Who bit you, Granger?" he asked in a low voice. "Was it a full moon?"

Hermione shook her head.

"No," she whispered. "He was in human form. A Russian werewolf I made the mistake of getting too close to one day while I was there."

She didn't know why she was telling Malfoy any of this. She didn't know why he hadn't recoiled from her in horror but he hadn't and she was frazzled and more than a little distraught.

"How bad was it?" Malfoy asked, frowning at her and moving closer still, invading her space.

Hermione's whole body trembled as she relived the memory of being chased and caught. The pain of the wounds felt fresh as she brought her hand to her midriff, her nails digging in just as Antonin's..."
had done; just as Romanov's had done.

"If it weren't for Antonin, I'd be dead," Hermione whispered.

When she lifted her gaze, she found Malfoy standing less than a foot away from her, his eyes fixed on her carefully. He regarded her coolly, holding her gaze for several long moments before he nodded.

"The world is becoming a darker place, you know?" he said quietly. "It seems you've tasted a little of it since we parted ways in France."

Hermione nodded, too.

"And Rowle?" he asked.

"What about him?" Hermione asked.

"Are you betrothed to him?" Draco asked quietly, tipping his head to one side, eyeing her intensely.

Hermione opened her mouth to answer, but before she could speak, the thought she'd had slipped away.

"Thorfinn brought me home after what happened in Russia."

"Home? To London?" Malfoy frowned.

"Home to Rowle Tower," Hermione shook her head, barely registering that she'd referred to his place as home. "I've been staying there since I was attacked."

"He'll be in some trouble for spurning Selwyn tonight, you know?" Malfoy asked quietly. "If the two of you aren't betrothed, that might as well have been a declaration of love."

Hermione blinked at him, scratching at her stomach where her scars were.

"Why are you hiding out in your bedroom with the lights off, Malfoy?" Hermione asked, changing the subject with her thoughts went fuzzy for a moment, making her dizzier.

"I wasn't about to risk getting myself Matched to anyone by being in attendance in the circle down there for the ceremony," Draco rolled his eyes. "If you're not there, you can't be Matched. And since the witch I want didn't wear white, I excused myself. Like any proper gentleman would."

The sneer in his tone gave away what he thought of Thorfinn being there if he was intent on being with Hermione and she frowned at him for a moment, recalling suddenly what Theo maintained about Draco's crush on her. Wiping at her eyes, Hermione looked up, meeting and holding his gaze.

"I wasn't aware there was an etiquette to it," she said, tipping her head to one side and grateful for the distracting conversation that took her mind off her trauma.

"We're wizards, Granger," Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Of course, there's etiquette. Not that I'm surprised you don't know what it is. If you're not bred into the knowledge, you can't be expected to grasp the magic of a night like tonight."

"Can I ask you something, Malfoy?" Hermione said, her lips twitching.

He looked wary.
"Why do you constantly seek to remind me of my muggle parentage after spending so long tracing my magical lineage?" Hermione asked him. "Why do you always have to remind me I'm muggleborn – as though I might forget – when I bear the signature of both the Dolohov and Malfoy bloodlines upon my magic?"

"Who said anything about me tracing your lineage?" Draco asked, his eyes narrowing.

Hermione smirked. "You did."

"No I didn't," he said stubbornly.

Hermione almost laughed, feeling slightly better and more sure of herself as whatever Dolohov had done to her wore off just a bit and the distraction of tormenting Malfoy took her mind off her memories.

"You walk around Hogwarts going on and on about my muggle parents and how I'm such a know-it-all and yet, we both know you spent the better part of a year trying to prove to your father than I had magical blood," Hermione said, her fingers toying with the bracelet on her wrist. She couldn't quiet recall why the bracelet was something that meant he'd turned his attention to being rude to her at every turn, but she knew when his eyes dropped to it and narrowed hatefully that whatever the reason, his hatred for it was deep and abiding.

"If you're done sobbing like a pathetic twit, get the hell out of my room, mudblood," Draco hissed nastily and Hermione didn't know why, but it made her smirk all the more.

"You spit venomous words, Malfoy, but I think we both know you don't mean them," Hermione whispered, enjoying the way he jumped when she lifted one hand to pat his chest patronizingly before she turned away.

"You don't know anything, Granger," he snapped at her retreating form.

Hermione laughed gently as she reached the door and turned to look back over her shoulder.

"Don't be foolish, Draco," she said. "I'm a know-it-all. I know everything."

With a sly little smile, Hermione shot him a wink before sauntering back the way she'd come and leaving him to hide out in his room all by himself, pouting because she hadn't worn white.

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When he found her, she was wandering across the ballroom of Malfoy Manor, nibbling on an orange and looking around the room and the portraits lining the high walls with interest. Everyone else was outside for the Matching and so she was alone in the vast hall, uncaring for her bare feet, her slightly smudged make-up that revealed recent tears, or the sticky juices from the orange that were dripping on the floor.

Thorfinn frowned at the sight of his little witch. She looked fine. Evidence of crying aside, she seemed completely alright and Thorfinn wondered how that could be. He knew that what Toshka had done to her meant that she'd relived the terrible wounds she'd endured at the hands of that cutting werewolf in Russia and he'd been sure she would be curled in a corner somewhere, sobbing.

But she wasn't.

She looked fine. Thorfinn shook his head slowly, crossing into the ballroom and converging on her
while she faced away from him, peering at a portrait of one of the Malfoy ancestresses.

"Princess?" Thorfinn asked softly when he was a few feet away, not wanting to startle her.

She turned toward him slowly, her eyes a little unfocused before she blinked. When her gaze settled upon him, Thorfinn would swear there was something in her eyes he'd never seen before.

"You shouldn't have done that, Finn," Hermione said softly, tipping her head to one side as she regarded him before eating the last segment of her orange and licking her fingers in a way that made his cock twitch.

"Shouldn't have done what?" he asked.

"You spurned the Selwyn girl," Hermione said. "You all but declared a Blood Feud with them."

Thorfinn frowned before recalling the sound of his name being called out in the yard, during the ceremony. He blanched slightly, expecting his father would have a few things to say about him spurning the witch and declaring war with the Selwyn family, especially with the second rise of the Dark Lord looming in the distance.

"You were upset about something. I had to come after you," Thorfinn shrugged sheepishly.

"You didn't even hear them call your name, did you?" she asked him quietly, looking intrigued, as though he were some kind of puzzle she was trying to figure out.

Thorfinn shook his head. "Not really," he admitted. "I was a bit preoccupied that my best mate was upsetting my witch."

She smiled slowly, the lustful gleam in her eyes making his cock twitch when she raked her gaze over him from head to foot. She looked like she wanted to climb him like a tree, and Circe's cunt, Thorfinn wanted that. She looked ethereally beautiful in her pretty dress and the cut of the cleavage revealed that, youth aside, she was a desirable young woman.

"I like it when you call me your witch, Rowle," she said quietly.

Thorfinn smirked charmingly in return, his hands itching to bury in those wild curls of hers and his lips tingling with the need to kiss her sweet mouth until he couldn't think straight. She hadn't called him by his surname in a long time, now that he thought about it, but Thorfinn kind of liked it. She always called him Finn. Or Superstar. The sound of his surname on her lips reminded him of the old days, before he had to worry about being so bound to her; before he had to endure the rage and the jealousy and the wretched pain of their soul bond tearing every time anyone else laid a hand on her. He almost missed the easy, cutting banter they'd traded. He also found that he very much liked the sound of his name coming out of her mouth when his mind zipped with the thought that one day, if he played his cards right, it might be her name, too.

"Good," he said, holding a hand out toward her and hungrily watching her close the distance between the two of them to take it. "Are you alright, baby-girl?"

She nodded, sighing as she stepped into his embrace and Thorfinn curled his arms around her protectively, holding her close and lowering his head to breathe in the sweet scent of her hair. She trembled in his grip and Thorfinn held her tightly. She'd had a rough summer, and the year ahead was only going to get worse. Thorfinn just wanted to hold her and to promise her that it was all going to be okay, but he knew it would be a lie. It wasn't going to be okay, and he was going to lose her all too soon. The thought alone was like a crushing weight pressing on his heart and making it hard to breathe.
He pulled her even tighter, wondering how she'd react if he confessed his feelings for her and if there was some way they could undo the blood oath she'd take for the fucking Rites.

"Finn?" she murmured into his chest, her arms looped around his waist as she huddled in his embrace, all too eager to be held and to hold him as surely as he held her.

"Mmm?" he hummed softly, dropping a kiss to the top of her head.

"Take me home?" she whispered, and Thorfinn felt a smile pull at his lips, pleased by the sound of her calling Rowle Tower 'home'.

Salazar's sack, but he prayed that it would be her home until they were both old and crotchety and too senile to remember who was who when they could both just be Rowles. What he wouldn't give to spend his days with her, raising children and grandchildren, and showing her every day how much she meant to him. He couldn't even bring himself to care about the Blood Feud he'd likely invoked with the Selwyns because he'd rather die a thousand fiery deaths than to ever stand with a witch who wasn't Hermione Granger and Thorfinn realised he was well and truly fucked.

"Hold on, Princess," he said, pulling her tighter into his embrace. She burrowed deeper into his hold, clinging to him so tightly that it was almost hard to breathe and Thorfinn closed his eyes, savouring the feel of her in his embrace, knowing that all too soon, she'd be gone. He dropped another soft kiss to the top of her head and took a deep breath before disapparating them both with a sharp crack.
Chapter 35

Hermione stepped out of the shower and squeaked to find Thorfinn leaning in the bathroom doorway, his arms folded over his bare chest. He wore a wicked grin and he was very obviously enjoying the sight of her dripping wet, and naked as the day she'd been born.

She should've been used to having him see her naked, by now. Since the night of the ball at Malfoy Manor, he'd been peeling her out of her clothes and tracing his hands over her skin in the most sinful of ways and she was sure she would go crazy with wanting him if he didn't throw caution to the wind and shag her soon.

"I thought you were at practice," she said, reaching for her towel and clutching it to her chest to hide from his lustful gaze, unable to bear the heat in his eyes when he wouldn't let her climb him like a tree and have her way with him until she couldn't tell where he ended, and she began.

"Practice ended," he shrugged. "You were lost in your books all afternoon, weren't you, Princess?"

Hermione smiled widely. Yes, she had been. She'd spent the whole afternoon buried in her latest school books after a morning excursion to Diagon Alley with Reina and Rhonwen. She was far more excited about her return to Hogwarts to further her education than she was for tomorrow night's World Cup, even if she would get to see Harry, Ron and Ginny for the first time all summer.

"You're such a nerd, Baby-girl," Thorfinn chuckled when he saw her grin. "What did you dive into first?"

"My Transfiguration textbooks," she said, smiling widely.

"I'm going to be hurt if you bring a book to tomorrow night's game," he told her. "Just so you know."

"As though I'd be able to focus with millions of screaming wizards arguing over who's more likely to catch the snitch and the morality of you knocking everyone off their brooms at every turn?" she challenged, rolling her eyes at the very idea of trying to read at the Quidditch World Cup. She'd gone with Thorfinn to training at the pitch yesterday and already people were camped for miles and miles around the stadium, little tents set up all over the place to secure a spot to watch the game and spend the night afterward celebrating in style.

"If anyone could manage it, it'd be you," he told her, pushing away from the wall when Hermione began towelling her hair, unable to keep her eyes from straying down to his bare chest and chiselled abs.

"You know I'm excited to watch you play, Finn," she smiled.

"Not as excited as you are to come home afterward and bury your nose back in a book whilst ignoring my attempts to seduce you."

"It's hardly my fault your seduction skills are rubbish, Rowle," she taunted. "Honestly, I'm sure there must've been love potion involved to ever get all those witches at Hogwarts into your arms."

"Love potion, eh?" he asked before lunging for her and snatching away her towel.

Hermione squealed, attempting to clap her hands over her private parts, her cheeks flushing pink.
when he smirked evilly.

"Probably Confundus charms, too," she said, not about to let him win just because he'd snatched away her shield.

"You'll feel like you've been confounded when I clobber you with my cock, Princess," he told her.

"I'm so scared," Hermione sneered, making a face at him even as he corralled her against the bathroom sink.

"You should be," he smirked. "It rears up when you're around."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "And yet I continue on, attack free. I'd be more fearful if I was your right hand."

His eyes widened in surprise before he burst out laughing, reaching for her and scooping her against his chest. He was sweaty from Quidditch practice, but when he lowered his lips to hers, claiming a hot kiss, Hermione found that she really didn't care. Tangling her hands into his long hair, she snogged him hotly, her arms looping around the back of his neck and her legs locking around his waist when he lifted her right off her feet and pressed her back against the wall of the bathroom.

His tongue danced with hers and Hermione kissed him hungrily, her body thrumming with the urge to get him naked and pull him inside of herself. She didn't think she'd ever wanted anything more in her life than she wanted to have sex with him. She knew he wouldn't do it. Fourteen was too young, he said. Maybe he was right, Hermione didn't know. She supposed that, were they both fourteen, it might be more acceptable, but for all that they tormented one another, and snogged, and petted and touched and played, he was a grown man and she was still just a teenager.

He was right; society – even wizarding society – would frown on their age gap and call it something it wasn't, if they knew. His family didn't seem to mind, but Hermione believed that had more to do with the fact that they'd gotten to know her as being mature and level headed, and that they knew Thorfinn was still somewhat immature, despite his age.

He ground himself against the junction of her thighs and Hermine whimpered against his lips, distracted from her thoughts as her mind was overcome with daydreams of what it might be like should he do that when there wasn't a layer of cloth separating their bodies.

"Fucking hell, Princess," Thorfinn groaned into her neck when he broke the kiss to trail a burning line of desire down the side of her throat, nipping and licking her hotly.

Hermione tipped her head back, letting him do as he wished even as she tightened her legs around him, rolling her hips and grinding against him in return. Merlin's little green apples, she wanted him. He was right; society – even wizarding society – would frown on their age gap and call it something it wasn't, if they knew. His family didn't seem to mind, but Hermione believed that had more to do with the fact that they'd gotten to know her as being mature and level headed, and that they knew Thorfinn was still somewhat immature, despite his age.

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"Fuck, it's hard when you beg, Baby-Girl," he muttered.

Hermione kissed his neck, nuzzling into him and tormenting his skin with her teeth and her tongue, feeling the way he ground against her a little harder, obviously fighting the urge to take her right
"I'm not shagging you yet," he bit out hoarsely when he suddenly shoved away from the bathroom wall and carried her into the bedroom.

"What are you going to do to me?" Hermione asked breathlessly when he set her down in the middle of the bed, still naked, and arranged his body over hers.

"Fucking hell, Princess. Try not to sound so bloody keen, would you?" he laughed, though it was a pained sound. "I can't fucking focus when you're naked. How far have you gone with a bloke?"

"You really want to know?" Hermione asked, frowning at him, thinking it was probably a bad idea to tell him that she and Theo had gotten to second base.

He nodded, holding her gaze intently.

"Second base… so… um… hand-jobs," she said quietly, her cheeks turning pink. Thorfinn's left eye twitched and she knew it bothered him that she'd done so with Theo, but that he couldn't say anything because it was his fault she had to complete the Rites to begin with.

He didn't say anything in response and Hermione feared she'd angered him, effectively dousing the mood. He surprised her when he leaned in and snogged her again, harder this time. His hands fisted in her curls and he bucked his hips against her body, only his training pants keeping her from carnal knowledge. Hermione melted into the kiss, snogging him eagerly and arching into him, craving the friction that built between them, the desire fizzing through her blood and making her crazy.

He snogged her until she was breathless, and Hermione whimpered in delight when he broke from her lips to trail a burning line of kisses along the length of her jaw and down her neck before he traced her clavicles with his tongue. Hermione shivered, writhing under his attentions and pressing her chest up, her breasts tingling with the need for attention that she sorely hoped he might be planning to bestow. She trailed her hands over his broad shoulders, running them through his hair and touching every inch of him that she could reach when he had her pinned to the bed.

"Oh, gods," she moaned breathlessly when Thorfinn trailed kisses over the bare expanse of her chest, his beard tickling her skin and his hot breath making her writhe with anticipation. When he traced the very tip of his tongue in a circle around her left nipple, she wondered if it was possible to orgasm without any vaginal stimulation, because she was surely in danger of it.

Thorfinn groaned when she cradled his head, pressing up into the caress and moaning softly as he engulfed her small breast in his hot mouth. He sucked at her hungrily, his free hand pinching her right nipple. Hermione writhed, glorying in the touch, her heart racing in her chest and her stomach full of butterflies. She clenched her legs where they were still wrapped around him, feeling the hard bulge of his desire grinding against her centre and making her crazy. Merlin, she didn't think she'd ever wanted anything so much in all of her life and Hermione arched into him against, needing more.

He gave it. Switching to her other breast, Hermione felt his fingers trace over her stomach and then further south. The neatly trimmed curls at her centre pricked when he smoothed his hands over her mound hesitantly. Hermione knew he was fighting himself, wrestling with his own morals, and she hoped with all her might that he would give in to the glorious feelings coursing through the two of them.

"Please, Finn," she begged, tossing her head from side to side as he nipped the tight bud of her
"Fuck," she heard him curse before his fingers slipped between her folds, finding her damp and needy, ready for him.

He groaned against her breasts when Hermione parted her legs further, rolling her hips, arching, trying to get him to give her what she wanted. He darted a look at her then, his eyes worried even as his expression was wrought with hunger like she'd never seen. Hermione looked at him imploringly, desperately begging him to give in but knowing that pushing too hard would make him back off.

When he carefully slipped one calloused finger inside her, Hermione thought she might sob with happiness. Her breath caught in her chest and her pulse roared in her ears as he carefully sank that single digit to the knuckle before curling it against the front wall of her pussy, brushing the special spot deep inside her guaranteed to detonate her.

"More," she begged. "Gods, Thorfinn, please more."

He closed his eyes as though she was torturing him, and Hermione supposed that she was. She knew why she couldn't go all the way with him yet, but the knowledge did nothing to lessen her desire.

When he carefully worked another finger inside of her, Hermione groaned, rocking herself on his clever fingers and closing her eyes, surrendering to the sensations and savouring them while they lasted.

"Fuck, Baby-girl," she heard him whisper as he pumped his fingers in and out of her, winding her tighter and tighter until she was sure she would explode. "You're beautiful when you're moaning for me. Gods, I want to taste you."

Hermione whimpered. She hadn't tried oral sex yet, though it was certainly on her to-do list. She loathed herself for how badly she wanted Finn to be the one she tried it with first.

"Please, Finn," she begged. "Please? You know I'm yours. You know you can do anything to me."

Thorfinn groaned like he was in agony, trailing his lips over her ribcage and then over her taut stomach. Hermione watched through half-lidded eyes when he pulled his fingers from between her legs and sucked the two digits into his mouth, tasting her for the first time.

"Ah, fuck," he moaned, closing his eyes as he savoured the flavour.

Hermione's body clenched with need watching him, and though her cheeks were crimson at the thought of him tasting her juices, her pussy throbbed as she watched his tongue dart over his fingers. Merlin, she wanted to feel that clever tongue spearing inside of her.

She would get her wish.

Thorfinn crawled between her legs, peeling her thighs apart further and pinning them to the bed. She squirmed as he spent a few moments simply looking at her, as though he were drinking in the sight of something he'd desperately longed to see. When he leaned in, breathing her in before dragging his tongue across her slick folds, Hermione thought she might die of happiness. It was strange and intimate, and it made her tingle like she never had before. Hermione squirmed as he took his time, lapping at her flesh, devouring her slowly.

The torturous lick, lick, lick, of his tongue over and over again relaxed her into it and Hermione
hummed in delight, nervous about it all, but reassured that he must at least like the taste or he'd surely stop. She squealed in surprise when he broke rhythm, closing his lips and his teeth over her clit, and sucking hard. Her eyes rolled back into her head and her whole body jerked, a guttural groan escaping her as she was suddenly thrust into orgasm.

Thorfinn laughed when she trembled and writhed her way through the glorious waves of sensation he'd unleashed, giving her a last affectionate lick before crawling back up the length of her body.

Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him to her and clinging to him needily. He burrowed his arms under her back, holding her close and kissing her neck. Determined to repay the favour Hermione squirmed under him until she had enough leverage to roll the two of them until he was stretched on his back.

He caught her before she could even kiss her way across his chest, chuckling huskily.

"Trust me, Princess," he said. "You don't want to go down there until I've showered. Not after a training session like today."

Hermione paused, wrinkling her nose at him.

"You do smell kind of funky," she admitted, lowering her nose to his chest.

Thorfinn laughed. "And I'll taste worse. You want to shower with me, beautiful?"

Hermione grinned, levering herself up even as she nodded enthusiastically. Thorfinn shook his head at how eager she was when she bounced back into the bathroom and ran the taps.

Hermione didn't care if she seemed too eager. She'd gone and fallen for him and she wanted him like she'd never wanted anyone. She was all too aware that when she returned to Hogwarts, she'd have to complete the Rites and as such, wouldn't be able to date him or even hold out for him and she doubted he would hold out for her. Hermione knew that after the holidays, nothing would be the same and she wanted to savour it as much as she could.

Tugging on his hand when he'd stripped out of his training pants, Hermione pulled him into the shower under the hot spray along with her, curling her arms around his waist and pressing herself to him, unable to keep the wide smile off her face. His erection prodded her stomach when he wrapped his arms around her, holding her close and dropping a kiss to the top of her head.

He held her like that for a long time and Hermione closed her eyes, listening to the steady beat of his heart inside his chest. When he shifted slightly, wetting his hair, Hermione pulled back, smiling up at him even as she picked up the sponge, dousing it in soap and beginning to work it over his skin.

"Going to bathe me, now?" He chuckled.

"The sooner you're clean, the sooner I can taste you," Hermione informed him, smirking wickedly.

His blue eyes flashed with desire and Hermione laughed when he reached for the shampoo, letting her return to scrubbing him down. She took her time about it, enjoying the chance to learn his body so intimately. He didn't stop her when she worked the sponge over his chest, under his arms, and across the tops of his shoulders. He let her trail it down the length of his arms and Hermione smiled, setting down the sponge when she reached his hands, recalling that there was one thing guaranteed to make him groan with desire. Turning to press her back against his chest, Hermione dug her hands into his forearm, dragging them across his skin and working the tightness and the knots out of his muscles.
"Ah, fuck," Thorfinn groaned, sounding like he was being tortured. He ground his cock against her bum while Hermione worked her hands down the length of his fingers before doing it again.

She massaged the tension from the taut muscles, knowing it would help him play better in the match the following evening and knowing that it would make him want her that much more. If it just so happened to turn him on so much he couldn't think straight, well, all the better. Smirking to herself, she did it again and again, canting her hips a little when he kept grinding himself against her, his cock sliding between the cheeks of her bum to nestle in the crevice.

"Fuck, Baby-girl," she heard him whisper, bucking his hips harder and holding her to him with one arm while she worked the tight muscles of his forearm and his hand until she was sure he'd never have had it feel better.

"Merlin, Hermione," he groaned, clutching her tighter, bucking against her harder.

When she dragged her thumbs viciously over the fleshy part of his thumb, digging into the muscle there hard enough to sting, he grunted, and Hermione felt a smile of triumph curl across her lips at the way his whole body jerked before hot liquid coated her thighs.

"Fuck," Thorfinn whispered, sounding guilty, and content, and wickedly exhausted all at once.

Hermione grinned, enjoying the way he held her so close, and revelling in the feelings of happiness and delight dancing across her sense and her magic, making her giddy.

"Merlin's beard, Princess," he muttered into her hair, dropping a kiss to the top of her head before he reached up to cup her jaw, turning her head so that he could meet her gaze.

"Got you," Hermione grinned at him, unsure of what else to say, but feeling extremely pleased with herself.

Thorfinn laughed softly. "You did," he agreed. "Blimey, witch. What am I going to do with you?"

Hermione smiled.

"Cuddle me in bed all night long?" she suggested.

He snorted. "I think I could manage that," he conceded before leaning down and capturing her lips once more, his kiss soft and so sweetly adoring that Hermione was sure if she hadn't already been in love with him, she would be now.
Chapter 36

Thorfinn Rowle woke to the feel of someone smoothing their hands over his bare torso while lips trailed over his abdomen. Cracking one eye open and staring down the length of his body, his gaze met with a headful of unruly brunette curls and a wicked gleam in cinnamon brown eyes.

Hermione.

He twitched when she smoothed her hands lower, carding her fingers through the blond curls between his legs before curling enthusiastically around his already rigid cock. He fought the urge to groan, recognising the hot glint in her eyes. She wanted to finish what she'd started last night, determined to taste him.

Thorfinn wasn't about to stop her. She grinned when he smirked at her, curling his arms behind his head and waiting to see what she'd do. She returned the wicked expression, making his cock twitch even as she began working her hands up and down the length of him, clearly not afraid of the appendage. She lowered her lips back to his abs, trailing her tongue in little circles across his skin, dancing it around his belly-button and heading lower.

"I've never done this before," she warned him when she'd kissed to his hairline, looking up at him again, her worried expression belying her nervousness, despite her determination.

"You won't be able to say that again," Thorfinn smirked at her, rocking his hips a little, thrusting into her hands and enjoying the sensation and the view entirely too much for words.

Taking that for all the encouragement she needed, she lowered her eyes to the snake he usually kept restrained inside his jeans, eyeing the appendage curiously and looking like she didn't quite know how to fit the whole thing in her mouth. Thorfinn bit his lip, hard, to keep from laughing when she opened her mouth and turned her head a little before closing her mouth again without touching him, frowning fiercely at his cock as though it were at fault for her lack of experience. He supposed it kind of was, though not for lack of willingness on its part.

He really didn't want to discourage or embarrass her, but Merlin it was hard not to laugh when she opened her mouth again, clearly trying to figure out the best angle to take him inside her mouth. He couldn't quite hold back his amusement when she settled for very chastely pressing her lips to the tip of his cock in a soft kiss. He hoped he managed to disguise his snort of amusement as a little groan of encouragement because Merlin knew, the last thing he wanted was to make her feel foolish and as adorably inept as she currently was.

Indeed, it was a pleasant experience for him simply to witness his know-it-all little witch looking so utterly perplexed. He could almost see the cogs turning in her head as she tried to remember everything she'd read in her raunchy novels about how to give good head, and clearly lecturing herself that no matter how impossible it seemed, she must be able to fit the giant thing inside her mouth, else people wouldn't do it or write about it.

"Princess?" he asked quietly when she pressed another little kiss to his tip, slowly smoothing her hands up and down the length of him but seeming at a loss as to how to proceed.

"I'm sorry," she blurted. "I… how do I… This would be easier if you weren't so well endowed."

Thorfinn smirked at the compliment disguised as a complaint.

"Try swirling your tongue around the tip, Baby-girl," he instructed softly. "When it goes in – and it
will go in, if you stop thinking so hard – you need a little moisture to smooth the way, yeah?"

"I…" the girl frowned before doing as he instructed and Thorfinn couldn't hide his laugh when she twisted her head back and forth, manipulating him and licking him like she would a rapidly melting ice-cream. Despite the adorable and rather brisk way she did so, it felt like fucking magic and Thorfinn hummed with delight.

"I'm doing it wrong," she complained when she tried to figure out how to get him into her mouth again and Thorfinn chuckled.

"Just open your mouth, Princess. Wide as you can," he told her, and she frowned up at him before doing so. "Now, straight in. Like a lollipop."

She closed her mouth.

"Won't my teeth hurt you?" she asked.

"A bit unless you're careful. Just don't bite down and it'll be fine, baby-girl," he grinned at her.

"I'm sorry I'm rubbish at this," she said, blushing and looking a little dejected.

"I'd prefer you to be rubbish rather than proficient at this point, Princess," he said, unable to help the possessive growl in his voice when he reached to cup her chin, forcing her head up to make her meet his gaze once more. "Don't be embarrassed, yeah? You're new at this. If you were an expert, I think I'd be a bit jealous, beautiful."

Her cheeks turned pink, but she smiled, nodding her head.

"Right. I can do this," she said determinedly and Thorfinn hissed in a breath of surprise when she did exactly as he'd instructed, opening her lips wide and sucking his cock into her mouth before beginning to trace the tip with her tongue, tasting him and suckling at him like a lollipop she was thoroughly enjoying.

"Fucking hell, Hermione," Thorfinn growled, both of his hands tunnelling into her riotous curls and tangling in them.

"Did I hurt you?" she asked, releasing him and looking worried.

"No. Fuck, no. Gods, baby, do it again," he groaned, not even caring that she'd rendered him to begging in a matter of minutes. Not because she had any finesse or any real idea of what to do, but because the bond between them lit up like a fucking Christmas tree and his whole body roared to life at the feel of her pleasuring him so enthusiastically.

She grinned, doing it again and Thorfinn hissed, dropping his head back to the bed, a litany of curses and promises dropping from his lips as she took to her newest lesson with vigour, intent on proving that she was the best at everything. She swirled her tongue around and around the head of his cock, slowly working more and more of him into her mouth, pulling back slowly with suction he was sure might kill him before bobbing her head down onto him once more.

"Sweet fucking Circe, Princess," Thorfinn muttered.

He could feel the way her lips twitched as she tried to smile, even with her mouth full and Thorfinn felt an answering grin curl across his face. She tried to bob her head lower when it drew more curses from him.
"Blimey, love, not too far, you'll…"

She gagged.

Thorfinn hissed as her throat clamped around his cock, choking her before she tried to pull away, scraping him with her teeth in the process, before pulling back and coughing in surprise, trying to get her breath back. Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes and Thorfinn winced at her sympathetically.

"You alright?" he asked huskily, his hand curling around hers and continuing to work up and down his cock, keeping up the friction.

She nodded, coughing again and Thorfinn reached with his free hand to brush a tear from her cheek comfortingly, torn between needing to make sure she was alright, and wanting to come. She took a few deep breaths without saying anything, seeming intent on bringing him off and all the more determined. Thorfinn could tell she was worried she'd messed it up and when she had her coughing under control, she wrapped her mouth around him once more.

Merlin, he was close.

He should warn her. She might gag again, or actually vomit if he surprised her with it when he lost control.

His hips twitched with the urge to take control and fuck her hot little mouth, but he fought the need. He couldn't do it to her. Not his witch. Not on her first try at giving head.

"I'm so close, Princess," he murmured to her, tunnelling his hands back into her hair, scraping his nails against her skin lovingly.

Sweet fucking Salazar, Thorfinn knew he was in danger of being in love with her when she sucked his dick like that, her hands and her mouth working in tandem. Glancing down the length of his body, Thorfinn watched her mouth working up and down his cock, inches of it disappearing into that hot cavern. As though she could feel his gaze, she slanted her eyes up at him, their cinnamon sparkling with lust and determination and Thorfinn's body twitched.

He was so fucking screwed with this witch.

"Gods, you're beautiful," he whispered to her, shuddering with the power of impending release when the heat began to fizz up from his toes.

Thorfinn groaned when she drew back on him, sucking hard, pushing him over the edge.

"Fuck!" he whispered, his eyes widening before they dropped closed as his hips jerked, heat fizzing from the end of his dick and spreading across her tongue.

She made a noise of alarm, and Thorfinn couldn't help but laugh when she went to pull away before realising that come would go everywhere if she did, and so she squeaked, obviously unsure what to do about the come filling her mouth.

"You can spit if you want, Princess," he said, laughing breathlessly.

She looked like she couldn't bare the walk to the bathroom with his come swooshing around in her mouth and Thorfinn laughed all the more when she swallowed instead, making a face of disgust and crawling across the bed to reach for the drink bottle of the nightstand to rinse her mouth. Thorfinn watched her, drinking in the sight she made as she knelt on all fours, naked, rinsing her
Unable to resist, he rolled, reaching for her and she squealed in surprise, choking on her mouthful of water when he dragged his tongue up the length of her pussy.

"Finn!" she gasped, obviously surprised and embarrassed. "You're not supposed to… today is supposed to be about you," she protested weakly.

"It's not my birthday, baby-girl," he chuckled.

"No," she agreed, her voice husky when he lapped at her again, reaching for her with one arm and tugging backward, trying to pull her down until she was sitting on his face. "But it's the biggest day of you career…. Gods, Finn, let go."

"What's wrong?" he asked, frowning but releasing her. She immediately crawled off him, her cheeks crimson and Thorfinn realised she was self-conscious and too new to the art of cunnilingus to willingly sit on his face and let him feast on her when his nose was so close to her bum.

"I wanted to make today special for you," she said, frowning at him and stretching out beside him once more.

"You think it wouldn't be special if I get to eat you out?" he asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

"Not like that," she said wrinkling her nose.

"Don't like the position?" Thorfinn asked, rolling toward her and smoothing his hand over her stomach. "Or don't like it when I lick you?"

She blushed at the bluntness of his question, fidgeting with the quilt.

"The position," she admitted.

"So, you don't object to me having you for breakfast?" he confirmed, already rolling toward her, intent on tasting her again.

"Well… no. Not if you really want to," she said. "I just wanted to… make you happy… today."

"Believe me, baby-girl. Watching you writhe and listening to those sweet sounds you make will make me very happy," he assured her, trailing a line of kisses over her stomach and down to her pussy.

She parted her legs willingly, and Thorfinn dove between them eagerly, latching onto her clit immediately and humming in amusement when she whined and mewed a soft sound of delighted torture. Gods, he could eat her pussy all fucking day. Dipping his tongue inside her, Thorfinn smirked at the salty sweet flavour of her first thing in the morning, lapping at her hungrily, intent on bringing her undone.

She threaded her fingers into his hair and Thorfinn hummed contentedly when she dug her nails against his scalp, arching into the caress of his lips and his tongue on her sensitive flesh.

"Merlin, that feels good," she whispered and Thorfinn was glad he'd gone first, else he'd be in danger of blowing his load all over the sheets as he watched her wind tighter and tighter, the coil of her pleasure poised to snap free.

Determined to bring her off with just his mouth, Thorfinn dipped his tongue inside her again before
swirling it over her skin and flicking the tip repeatedly across her clit.

"Oh, Finn," Hermione breathed, arching again, her hands tightening in his hair. "I'm... I'm gonna..."

Her breath came faster and Thorfinn smirked against her skin, renewing his vigour and increasing his pace despite the growing ache in his jaw.

"Ungh," she mewled, a low moan escaping her as she tried to snap her thighs closed around his ears, her body quivering beneath his as the wave of pleasure crested and broke over her.

Thorfinn smirked, meeting her gaze over the rim of her pubic bone when she slanted a contented, pink-cheeked smile of happiness at him. Fuck, she was beautiful. Gods, he was so screwed, feeling the way his heart pounded just looking at her when she looked so sated.

So fucking screwed.

"Thank you," she whispered politely as he gave her one last lick before crawling up the length of her body.

"Thank you, Princess," Thorfinn drawled.

She smiled at him and Thorfinn smiled back, tempted to kiss her, but knowing she wouldn't be thrilled at the taste of herself, any more than he wanted to taste his own come on her tongue.

"Want to share the shower?" she offered.

"We should get to breakfast," he said, though he very much wished he had time to shower with her. "Big day today. I think the captain might kill me if I'm too tired to play tonight after shagging you all day."

She laughed.

"I suppose he would be," she said, before sighing. "Git."

Thorfinn laughed at her pouting expression. Merlin, he'd give almost anything to tell the team to fuck off for the night just to spend the day revelling in teaching her all the carnal delights he could think of.

"Well, come on," she said. "Let's get you dressed and ready for the day. You've got a big night ahead of you. You'll need your strength."

Thorfinn shook his head when she tried to roll out from under him as he reached for the drink bottle of the side table to rinse his mouth out. She squeaked when he didn't let her go and Thorfinn grinned before he leaned down and captured her lips for a dizzying kiss.

He was thinking it was going to be a very good day when he felt the zing of magic through their betrothal bond when she kissed him back enthusiastically, her hands tangling in his hair as she snogged him until he was giddy.

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Hermione watched Thorfinn as the day wore on, having been dragged along to the Quidditch pitch when the big Viking of a wizard had refused to let go of her all day, insisting that she was his good luck charm, and that he wasn't about to lose her now. He was getting nervous, Hermione could tell.
He'd begun pacing the dressing sheds, even though the game was still hours from beginning. O'Malley had insisted that they couldn't get into the air for a warm up until two hours before the match, lest they use up all their energy running last minute drills and end up tanking the match as a result. They were all nervous, not that Hermione blamed them. Beyond the stadium, the fields were overflowing with tents and the muted roar of so many people gathered together could be heard in the bowels of the stadium where the dressing sheds were located.

"Finn?" Hermione asked softly as she watched him pace, knowing he needed something to take his mind off things.

"Yeah?" He asked, looking over and raising one eyebrow even as he viciously pinched the nerves in his batting hand.

"Take...take me flying?" She asked quietly, still terrified of flying but willing to endure the fright if it might take his mind off his nerves.

"You hate flying," he pointed out.

"Take me anyway," Hermione said. "I trust you not to let me fall."

"Really?" He asked, a grin spreading across his face even as he crossed the dressing shed and scooped up his broom.

Screwing her courage to the sticking place, Hermione reached for his hand, letting him lead her down the corridor that led to the pitch.

O'Malley didn't comment that they shouldn't be flying yet, and Hermione glanced over her shoulder when the rest of the team followed them, intent on getting a little stress-free flying in before the match.

"You sure about this?" Thorfinn asked when they reached the pitch, all of them looking up to see that the Bulgarian team were already running drills.

"I'm sure," Hermione said, though she wasn't.

Thorfinn grinned at her, tugging her by the hand until she was pressed in close to his chest. He moulded his much larger frame around hers before swinging the broom between both of their legs.

"Hold on tight, Princess," he whispered in her ear before he kicked off from the ground, rocketing into the air.

Hermione screamed. She couldn't help it, and she felt some of the tension melt out of Thorfinn as he began to laugh, delighting in her terror even though she'd agreed to fly with him. She clung tight to the broom, grateful that he was going slower than he had the last time she'd flown with him.

"So much for trusting me, eh?" He said, his lips by her ear.

Hermione pressed herself back against him more securely, still clinging tight to the broom, but forcing herself to relax as much as she could manage.

"I don't know how you do this every day," she replied.

"Well, I'm not a chicken," he teased, and if she weren't hanging on for dear life, Hermione would've swatted him. "Do you want me to let you down?"
Hermione shook her head. She would very much like to be back on solid ground, but she knew he was still tense, worried about the upcoming game and if she could help him relax, she would.

He flew at a tame pace, flying up high above the stadium and cruising along. Hermione kept her eyes open, no matter how badly she wanted to close them in terror, and when she caught sight of the field of tents and excited wizards all waiting for the game to begin her breath caught in her throat.

"Wow!" She said. "Finn, look at them all."

She would swear she heard him gulp.

"Just a million people to watch me fail...no big deal..." he muttered, and Hermione smiled.

"You're not going to fail, Finn," she said. "I've see you play. You're amazing. The only thing all those people are going to see tonight is you kicking butt and knocking Bulgarians from their brooms with a viciousness that might very well outlaw Quidditch for good. The Bulgarians will go home licking their wounds and knowing better than to take on the Irish ever again."

"What if I drop my bat?" He fretted, and if he weren't sounding so sincerely worried, Hermione might've laughed.

"You won't," she said. "But you could use a mild sticking charm to keep it in your hand, if need be. They're not illegal, except for the Seekers."

"You've memorized international Quidditch league laws, Princess?" He asked, sounding amused even as he nuzzled her cheek.

Hermione turned to peer at him over her shoulder, meeting his brilliant blue eyes and drinking in the sight of him, so young and so handsome and so carefree.

"Of course, I have," she said softly. "It's important to you."

He grinned at her and Hermione would swear his cheeks grew the faintest bit pink.

"You're important to me, Hermione," he said quietly.

Hermione smiled widely, her cheeks turning pink, too. She couldn't quite hold in her sigh of contentment when Thorfinn leaned in and captured her lips for a soft kiss. Kissing him back, Hermione felt butterflies stirring in her tummy and without thinking, she took one hand off the broomstick to reach for him, twisting as far as she dared and tangling a hand into his loose mane of thick blond hair.

Warm delight suffused her at the feel of his tongue smoothing along the length of hers as he pulled her more snugly into his fierce embrace and Hermione melted into him willingly.

Neither of them noticed the sharp eyed Bulgarian Seeker when he drifted by a few meters above them, looking on with wickedly keen interest.
Chapter 37

The roar of the crowd from the top box where she and the rest of Finn's supporters had been seated was almost deafening. Beside her, Harry and Ron were cheering wildly alongside the rest of the crowd, and Hermione couldn't help but shake her head and grin as she waited anxiously for the teams to make their appearances.

"You're fidgeting," Reina informed her, leaning over and prying the Shamrock out of Hermione's hands when she noticed the other witch had begun twisting it and looking on anxiously, waiting for the game to begin.

"Sorry," Hermione apologised.

"You're nervous for him?" Reina asked, smiling at her sideways.

Hermione nodded. "I know he'll be brilliant, but… he was so nervous when O'Malley insisted I had to leave the dressing sheds, Reina."

"He'll be fine," Reina told her. "He'll be amazing. He's Thor. He'll do great and we'll have to spend the rest of the summer hearing all about how bloody brilliant he is."

Hermione laughed, nodding as she felt some of her concerns melt away. Before she could open her mouth in response, suddenly the announcers began shouting about the arrival of the teams and Hermione's head jerked up, her eyes tracing the skies for some sign of Thorfinn.

It wasn't hard to spot him. His hulking form was hard to miss as he rocketed through the air, his thick mane of golden hair glinting in the flashing lights of the stadium as the Irish mascots performed and the entire crowd went wild, millions of wizards screaming and shouting with excitement and encouragement. Thorfinn looked the epitome of smug talent, one arm raised over his head and clutching his bat while the crowd cheered, the Irish all introduced by name. They flashed up a picture of him on the big-screen for everyone to see and Hermione aimed her camera, taking a photo of the man she'd fallen in love with as he winked cockily for the crowds, no trace of nervousness in sight.

"Merlin, the things I'm going to do to that man," Hermione muttered to herself as she shook her head, her smile so big she felt certain it was going to break her face.

Reina mimed gagging beside her, with sound effects, and Hermione blushed, batting at her best friend and shaking her head.

"Silencing charms at the Tower tonight will be vital, thank you," Reina informed her.

"Oh, stop," Hermione rolled her eyes.

"I'm just saying, I don't want to heart that," Reina informed her.

Hermione laughed, shaking her head. "I'm sure he'll be far too busy celebrating with the team to even make it home tonight," she said.

"And he'll have to fight Mum and Dad about taking you with him," Reina replied. "Just watch out for the paparazzi, yeah? The last thing we need is them getting wind of you and Thorfinn when you're not yet of age."
Hermione nodded in agreement, lifting her eyes back to the skies as the Bulgarians arrived on the pitch. They had Veela with them, and she had to intercede when both Harry and Ron looked ready to pitch themselves from the top-box for a chance to have the pretty creatures speak to them.

"Oh, bloody hell," Reina said when Ron struggled against Hermione's grip on him.

Hermione raised her eyebrows in shock when the little blonde witch leapt in front of the red-haired wizard and wrapped herself around his front, sufficiently distracting him when she planted her lips on Ron's and kissed him. Shocked, Hermione looked on in amused kind of horror as Ron struggled for a moment before one of his arms looped around Reina's middle, pressing her to him and kissing her. She got the feeling that Ron – addled by the Veela magic – thought he was snogging one of the pretty women down on the pitch, but Reina didn't seem to mind behind manhandled by the redhead.

Looking over at Ginny, who was making a face of disgust at the pair and looking sympathetically horrified on Reina's behalf, Hermione caught Ginny's eyes.

"Now's your chance to snog Harry," Hermione whispered to the other girl and Ginny looked at Harry where he was still enthralled by the Veela.

She grinned before copying what Reina had done, slotting herself in front of Harry despite the proximity of her brothers, and she curled her arms around Harry's neck. Hermione giggled, shaking her head as Ginny went up on her toes and stole a kiss from Harry lips, seeming to instantly break the hold of the Veela over the dark-haired wizard. Shaking her head, Hermione looked around the rest of the box, noticing that Fred and George were still watching the Veela too, but looked largely unaffected.

She caught Dolohov's eye when he looked in her direction, raising one eyebrow and Antonin shook his head before pointing at something in the sky. Hermione moved toward him, following his finger to see that Thorfinn was watching the Veela with a look of confused boredom as they danced.

"What?" she asked when she slotted herself into the small space next to him.

"What've you done to him?" Dolohov wanted to know, looking down at her for a long moment.

"Nothing," Hermione frowned.

Dolohov looked doubtful.

"The Thorfinn I know would've been plotting the fuck one of those Veela after the match," Dolohov told her, eyeing her like he wanted to pitch her over the railing of the top-box and watch her plummet all the way to the bottom. "Yet there he is, bored by the sight of them. So, what've you bloody done to him, Granger, that he's more interested in trying to fuck you that those beauties?"

"I haven't done anything to him," Hermione protested. "I don't know what you're attempting to insinuate, Dolohov, but I believe you're mistaken."

"You fucked him, didn't you?" Antonin asked, levelling a searching look at his best friend before looking back at Hermione scrutinisingly, his eyes narrowed.

Hermione suspected from the way he was eyeing her, he was coming at this with every trick he knew from his work as a curse breaker, looking for wavelengths in the magic that seemed to connect her and Thorfinn.
"No," Hermione shook her head.

"You did something," Antonin insisted, eyes narrowed. "There's no way he's not thinking about Veela pussy unless he's too busy daydreaming about yours. Let him have you, did you?" Antonin sneered, looking rather judgemental about the whole thing.

"I didn't shag him," Hermione protested hotly.

"Yeah, but I'll wager you did everything else," Antonin said darkly. "For fuck's sake. You're going to wreck him, Granger."

"I will do no such thing," Hermione protested, stomping her foot and crossing her arms over her chest in annoyance. "And besides, it was you pushing me to value the time with him now before the Rites drive us apart. Do try to keep from being so wishy-washy, Toshka. It's tiresome."

Dolohov's wand arm twitched like he wanted to smack her for her rudeness and for her continued use of the nickname he'd warned her not to use. Hermione stood her ground.

"Figured it all out then, have you?" he asked, narrowing his eyes before looking away.

"Figured all what out?" she asked.

Dolohov shot her a look and Hermione narrowed her eyes, supposing he was referring to his insistence that she and Finn would have a rough go of things during the Rites.

"There's nothing for it," Hermione sighed. "I still have to complete them, thanks to that ridiculous blood oath. And since he's already graduated, I can hardly finish them with his assistance."

"Yeah, well, every time another bloke is touching you, you should know that he burns with rage," Dolohov muttered as the quaffle was released and the match began.

Hermione noticed that Reina, Ron, Harry and Ginny all looked sheepish and embarrassed while the adults with them looked somewhat disapproving of their behaviour. Talon, in particular, looked like he planned to have a very stern and uncomfortable chat with his daughter just as soon as they were away from the public eye.

"There's nothing I can do about it," Hermione informed Antonin, looking up at him. "Short of smuggling him into the school – which will undoubtedly get me caught – there's nothing I can do except complete them with someone else."

"Theo, right?" Antonin asked, frowning at her.

Hermione narrowed her eyes and made a gesture with her hand, hoping he would keep it down lest Harry and Ron get wind that she'd been snogging Theo Nott in broom cupboards all over the school.

"We made a deal," Hermione nodded. "What's it to you, anyway?"

"I'm the one who has to deal with it when he loses control of his jealousy and wants to storm the school to kill the little bastard," Dolohov said. "Just... don't strain the bond more than necessary, Granger. If you've got to shag the little shit for these bloody Rites, do it, but get it over and done with and keep your hands off him when you're not completing one of the tasks, yeah?"

"I hardly think Thorfinn will be chaste and a saint while I'm shagging around for this bloody ritual," Hermione argued. "Don't you dare stand there and tell me to hurry up and shag someone,
but only as much as strictly necessary. How is this any of your business? If Thorfinn can't control his temper, that's his problem."

"It's my problem when he fucking kills people," Dolohov hissed, narrowing his eyes and looking down at her like he thought her beyond stupid. "Who the fuck do you think helps him dump the bodies of the witches he fucks in that jealous rage when he takes too much of their magic? He's a bloody celebrity. He can hardly be seen dropping unconscious and magically drained witches to the bloody hospital when they're sticky with his come, now can he?"

"What are you talking about?" Hermione asked feeling sick at the question. Dolohov looked down at her sharply, tracing his eyes over her face before his left eyebrow twitched and he suddenly looked like he knew something she didn't and like he wasn't about to tell her.

"Nothing," he muttered, looking away. "Just… get the Rites done with and don't be a bloody tart about it, alright?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes. If he were anyone else, she'd hold him at wand point until she got her answers out of him, but she knew that Antonin Dolohov was far meaner, far ruder, and far more dangerous that she could ever hope to be. Before she could push the issue, Ron and Harry sidled over to get a better view and probably to be nosey and make sure that Dolohov wasn't harassing her since they didn't really know that he was something of an ally to her, these days. Turning her attention back to the game, Hermione watched as the man she loved flogged Bludgers left and right, clobbering many of the Bulgarian players and making it clear just why he'd been selected to play for the international league.

She looked on with a wince when he managed to fling one at Krum just as he was going for the snitch, breaking Krum's arm if the wince of pain and the way he clutched the appendage to his chest was any indication. She wondered what a horrid person she must be that, along with all the other Ireland supporters, Hermione cheered over Finn's treatment of the opposing Seeker as he was forced to abandon his dive after the Snitch and to use his wand to try and heal his arm on his broom high above the stadium. Indeed, she was still cheering when the Bulgarian looked right at her, but Hermione couldn't find it in her to care.

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They'd won!

They'd fucking won and Thorfinn Rowle was crowing it from the rooftops alongside the rest of his team. Swooping toward the top-box where his friends and family waited, Thorfinn landed, his eyes on his witch, and he scooped the curly haired little muggle-born into his embrace, laughing and jumping with glee.

All around him, people patted him on the back and Reina appeared, latching onto his arm and clinging to him, screaming her happiness and victory over the outcome of the match. Thorfinn laughed, turning in a circle with Hermione in his arms before he set her down to interact with everyone else. He wanted desperately to snog the witch, but he was uncomfortably aware of the press flocking the top-boxes, intent on getting interviews from the players. The last thing he needed was their victory tarnished by some plucky reporter writing a puff piece on his fascination with an underage witch.

Scooping up his sister and lifting her to balance her on his shoulders where she could cheer all the louder, Thorfinn was drawn into a back-slapping embrace from his grandfather before his
grandmother pulled him down, kissing both of his cheeks and pronouncing him to be the brilliant young man she'd always known he could be. Potter was looking on and cheering – something a few reporters were avidly documenting – even if the git was wearing Bulgarian memorabilia, and the ginger kid Hermione associated was looking somewhat awed by his presence.

When O'Malley swooped over to hover above the box, his young son sitting on the broom in front of him and nodding to him that it was time for a victory lap, Thorfinn leaned toward Toshka – who was looking on with a small grin while he shook his head at all the excitement. His best friend, realising he wanted help getting Reina off his shoulders, lifted the small witch down, curling her into his embrace – which made Reina blush red as a tomato, no matter the two of them being Matched for the season.

"Princess?" Thorfinn asked, pushing through the crowd to his witch, noticing that she'd been jostled back and was standing beside his Gran shaking her head as she laughed.

"Don't even think about it," she warned him, spotting his intent to pull her onto his broom for their victory lap.

"Wouldn't have even been here without you, baby-girl," he grinned at her, reaching for her hand and pulling her into his embrace again, not caring if the reporters caught it all on tape.

"Thorfinn," she warned, looking alarmed.

Thorfinn laughed, twisting her into his embrace and guiding his broom between their legs before rocketing into the air to the sound of her scream. He could hear his family and friends all cheering, and he laughed as Hermione hung on for dear life.

"I'm going to get you for this!" she threatened over the roar of the crowd, but Thorfinn didn't heed the warning, joining with the rest of the team and looping around and around the stadium to the sound of the crowd roaring and cheering, the Irish national anthem being belted out over the wireless, the leprechauns all dancing and cheering. Moran was cheering, flying no-handed while he passed Thorfinn a bottle of fire-whiskey, his witch on the broom in front of him and clearly doing the steering.

Thorfinn accepted the bottle, making Hermione scream again when he swerved a bit to reach it before he took a long pull on the bottle.

"You want some, Princess?" he offered it to her and Hermione shook her head, clinging to the broom in a white-knuckled grip thanks to their speed.

Laughing, Thorfinn curled his arms around her, hooking his chin over her shoulder so he could see past her wild curls when the team put on a burst of speed and began flying loop-de-loops. He couldn't help but laugh all the more when Hermione screamed through every single one, never once relinquishing her hold on the broom.

"You're a bloody bastard, Thorfinn Rowle," she cursed when they stopped looping and began spiralling toward the ground where the team would undoubtedly all be interviewed, and the fans would all want autographs.

"Oi, O'Malley?" Thorfinn called. "You sure you want to take your kid down there? Bit hectic?"

O'Malley looked down, before shrugging his shoulders. "Once in a lifetime, eh?"

Thorfinn shrugged.
"Ready to be in the spotlight, Princess?" he asked of Hermione.

"I'm ready to get off this broom and beat you senseless with your bat, you bloody git!" Hermione retorted, making Moran's girl laugh out loud.

"Now, that's not very nice, baby-girl," Thorfinn laughed, amused by the little witch.

Before she could argue further they reached the ground and the flash on cameras snapping photos was blinding. Thorfinn kept a good grip on Hermione, refusing to let her be jostled aside or pushed out, refusing to let any of the reporters drag her away to interview her.

"Thorfinn Rowle, star of the hour. You've just played the match of your life. How do you feel?" a reporter asked, quill poised to take down his answers.

Knowing it was all part of being a celebrity and knowing it was good for Ireland and for the league, Thorfinn did his bit, answering the questions, posing for photos, letting them touch him when they had to. The sponsors were all there, handing out new brooms and Hermione looked alarmed when she was handed a Firebolt of her own, before someone plonked an Irish coloured top-hat her head, flicking her hair off her shoulders to let the world see that name ROWLE stamped across her chest thanks to her wearing one of his spare jerseys.

"What's your name, little lady? This will be on the front page of Quidditch Weekly. We love a super-fan and a free Firebolt is just the ticket, eh?" the sponsor said, the reporters poised for her name.

"Erm… my name is Hermione Granger," she said after glancing up at Thorfinn. He nodded at her, shooting her a wink and knowing she'd hate the publicity, but knowing it would only get worse if she didn't play along and answer their questions.

"A Rowle super-fan, by the looks, are you?" the sponsor asked, chuckling when he noticed her Irish-themed nail polish and rearranging her grip on the Firebolt to better catch the polish on her nails in the shot.

Hermione laughed. "I suppose I am," she admittedly blushing and looking up at Thorfinn. "His second biggest fan, I'd wager."

"Who's the biggest, eh Rowle?"

Thorfinn smirked.

"My kid sister, Reina," he said.

"Where's she?" the sponsor wanted to know.

Hermione looked up at him, panicked, and Thorfinn shrugged.

"Still cheering in the top-box with my folks," Thorfinn said. "She's a bit young for all this mess."

Hermione bit her lip, clearly aware that she wasn't much older, but Thorfinn didn't comment on it and the reporter didn't ask.

"Brilliant. And you, Miss Granger? Were you in the top-box supporting Rowle, too?" the interviewer asked.

"I was," Hermione nodded, looking nervous.
"Must be a great honour, taken on the victory flight along with the greatest Quidditch team in the world, eh?" the reported asked.

"Uh… yeah," Hermione nodded. "Um… delightful."

Thorfinn chuckled, leaning over to rescue her.

"I gave her a bit of a fright with the loop-de-loops," he told them. "Bit too fast for her, what with these brilliant Firebolt's. I think she might've left her tongue way up in the clouds, eh lads?"

The reporters all laughed, pleased with the endorsement on the speed of the brooms, and Hermione blushed appropriately, looking sheepish but pleased that he'd come to her rescue. The rest of the evening passed in much the same manner, people snapping photos, fans asking for autographs, reporters interviewing the entire team and the supporters. More than once, Thorfinn had to rescue his witch when the reporters got a little too pushy and she got tongue-tied, clearly not sure how much to give away when his career would be in jeopardy if they figured out how young she was. Thorfinn made sure to keep her tucked into his side as often as possible, caught somewhere between wanting the world to think he was a great sportsman looking out for a fan, and wanting them all to think she was his girlfriend and that she was older than she really was.

They just had to bluff their way through it and it seemed like hours before Hermione went up on her toes, pulling him down to whisper in his ear.

"I've got to go to the loo," she said. "And then I'll see if I can find the rest of your family, and Harry and Ron. They're probably getting worried."

"You want me to walk you, Princess?" Thorfinn asked frowning worriedly, on his umpteenth glass of whiskey thanks to the victory shots that Moran had begun passing around.

She shook her head. "You stay. You did so great, and you deserve all this hype, Finn."

Thorfinn grinned at her, wondering what they'd all make of things if he pulled her in and snogged her. Before he could think better of it, someone – Moran, he'd wager – bumped him from behind as he was stooping to keep eye contact with Hermione. She squeaked in surprise when his lips met hers, their noses bumping together before he laughed, going for it and kissing her no matter the flash of the cameras that went off over the idea of a winning player snogging a 'fan'.

When Hermione pulled away she was blushing crimson, though she was smiling widely, and the team began to cheer. Thorfinn knew they'd been trying to figure out what he and Hermione were to one another, and if any of them were aware of the age difference, they didn't comment on it, which he was thankful for.

"I'll see you later," Thorfinn promised Hermione when she began backing away, still intent on finding a loo.

She nodded, looking entirely too pleased despite the danger of people finding out what they were to one another. Thorfinn was too high on life to care right then. It never occurred to him as he watched his witch disappear into the crowd that she might soon be in more danger than she'd ever been before that moment, even with all her questionable choices where Potter was concerned. It didn't occur to him that there might be people in that crowd who hated muggles and thought muggleborns were scum enough that they would don masks, and stage an attack on the only muggles for miles around.

But there were, and they did.
Chapter Thirty-Eight

Hermione Granger couldn't quite hold in the scream of terror that tore from her throat when she found herself lost in the terrified crowd running for their lives as men in black cloaks and ghoulish masks blasted tents and set them alight while others levitated terrified muggles high above their heads. The boom of a tent being engulfed in an explosion of magic rung hollowly over the screams and cries of frightened witches and wizards, the celebrations interrupted by the acts of terrorism.

"Hermione!" Harry Potter shouted, fighting against the tide of people as they all tried to make a run for it.

"Harry?" Hermione called as she turned wildly, buoyed along by the crowds.

She tried to spot him, frowning when she couldn't see him anywhere and feeling the razor edge of panic beginning to cut at her psyche.

"Hermione! Over here!" Ronald Weasley called out and Hermione turned further, trying to spot her friends to little avail.

"Oi, Granger!" someone else shouted and Hermione looked around, spotting Antonin Dolohov across the sea of faces. He was clutching the hand of a young blonde witch and Hermione was relieved to see that Reina was safe. Or as safe as she could be in the stampeding crowd while dark wizards ran amuck.

"Go!" she shouted, waving to him when he began trying fruitlessly to fight his way over to her as though his presence alone might protect her. "I'll be okay!"

Dolohov opened his mouth and she saw his lips move in what was clearly a disagreement, but she couldn't hear him over the boom of another tent engulfed in Fiendfyre before she was swept away.

Hermione pushed futilely, calling out for her friends, trying to find a familiar face, trying to keep from being trampled. She couldn't see Harry or Ron anywhere, and Dolohov and Reina had disappeared from sight when she'd been unceremoniously shoved along with the waves of people running for the forest and trying to avoid the line of fire as spell after spell was fired, and tent after tent was engulfed in Fiendfyre.

"Get your head down," someone's low voice seemed loud in her ear and Hermione squealed, twisting wildly when she felt someone's hand pushing on the back of her head and trying to force her to bend forward.

Draco Malfoy wasn't even looking at her as he wrestled her under his arm and began dragging her in the direction of a thicket of trees, but Hermione glared at him and began to writhe in his grip, just the same.

"Hold still, you little bushy-haired fool," he growled. "Do you want to end up like those bloody muggles, bouncing twenty feet in the air and flashing everyone your knickers?"

He steered her roughly into the trees where they grew thick and heavy – too thick for many of the others amid the crowd to attempt penetrating. The pair of skinny teenagers slipped right between them, however, and Hermione was out of breath and swatting at Malfoy by the time he pulled her behind a tree and caged her body against it, concealing her from view.

"What do you think you're doing, Malfoy?" she snarled, stomping on his foot and shoving against...
his chest, trying to drive him back out of her personal space.

She wasn't particularly afraid of him. She had her wand in her hand, and she was sure that if she had to, she could hex him hard enough to make him leave her alone. Nevertheless, her experience with Romanov in Romania had left her tetchy and more than a little wary. Something he seemed to pick up on when she shoved him again, forcing him back a step.

"Quiet," he ordered, peering around the trees when another boom sounded, though he moved back a little way and held his hands up in front of her to show that he meant her no ill will. "Or they'll get you next, Granger. Just, for once, hold your tongue, alright?"

"How dare you?" Hermione growled. "What do you mean, they'll get me next?"

"They're targeting muggles," Malfoy said distractedly.

"I'm a witch!" Hermione hissed indignantly.

Malfoy frowned, twisting his head to meet her gaze.

"You're a muggleborn and in the eyes of those wizards out there, that's almost just as bad as being a muggle. They'll be after muggles and mudbloods, so you just stay here, stay quiet, and don't bloody move, got it?"

Hermione slapped her palms against his chest, noting that, like her, he was dressed in pyjamas, clearly having been abed before the screaming started. The partying had been going long into the night and after leaving Finn on the pitch to seek out a loo, Hermione had located Harry, Ron, Ginny and Reina. Knowing Finn likely wouldn't return before morning, and having cleared it with Rhonwen and Pandora, Hermione and Reina had bunked into the tent alongside Harry and the Weasleys. They'd been separated in the melee and now here she was, stuck with Malfoy. If that wouldn't teach her to just stay put, she didn't know what would.

"Don't you dare call me a mudblood, you foul little git!" Hermione snarled.

"It's what you are!" he retorted coldly. "No matter the signatures on your magic, and no matter your ancestral bloodlines, your mother and father were muggles. And to those chaps out there levitating and hexing the muggles, that makes you their prey. Now, unless you'd like to join them, shut your mouth and hold still."

Hermione glared at him, thinking very seriously about hexing him for spite.

"Why did you drag me away?" she asked, though based on what she'd learned about his apparent interest in her, she didn't really need to ask.

"You were going to get trampled," Malfoy said. "And one of them spotted you and was coming this way. I saved your life."

"You saved, at most, my dignity," Hermione argued. "Do I need to demonstrate that I am far from helpless like I did in France?"

"You need to realise that you're in danger, Granger," Malfoy said seriously, pulling his head back from peering around the tree where they hid as the terrorists began to move further away from their location. "Why don't you understand that? After what happened in Russia, I thought you understood that the Dark was beginning to rise again."

Hermione scowled at him, having forgotten that though she hadn't told Reina, Harry, or Ron, it just
so happened that Malfoy was aware of Romanov's attack on her in Russia.

"That was nothing like this," Hermione argued. "He acted alone and he wouldn't bother with setting tents alight and bouncing muggles about like beachballs at a concert. He'd just rip their throats out with his teeth and eat their hearts."

"Tell me something, Granger," Malfoy said quietly, the gleam of the firelight beyond the thicket catching on his face for a long moment when he leaned just so. "How much do you know about the first wizarding war before the Dark Lord's defeat at Godric's Hollow?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

"Enough," she admitted. "Enough to know that James and Lily Potter were targeted because of Harry's birth, and I've seen enough since then to know that though he might've been defeated, You-Know-Who was not destroyed."

"Then you know his return is imminent?" Draco confirmed. "You understand that, as a society, many among the Sacred Twenty-Eight believe in blood purity. We endure the awkwardness of inbreeding to avoid adding dirty muggle blood to our bloodlines."

"I'm aware," Hermione said, looking pointedly at him and feeling a sense of smug satisfaction when he bristled a little at the unspoken implication.

"Certain families were very deeply aligned with the Dark Lord before his fall, Granger," Malfoy said quietly, frowning a little bit the longer her looked at her. "There are those in my own acquaintance who would delight in seeing people like you destroyed."

"Yourself and your father among them," Hermione said quietly. "I haven't forgotten your antics during second year when Slytherin's monster was on the loose, Malfoy. I haven't forgotten the bigoted slurs you sling all about the school whenever the urge to posture like a puffed-up peacock takes you."

"My father is very much among them," Draco nodded his head solemnly. "In fact, given the lack of him in our tent before I ran for it, I'd be willing to wager my significant weekly allowance that he's out there right now wearing one of those masks and creating this little stir. There are many who are excited for the Dark Lord's return, Granger. Many more who might fear it but will go along without those more radical souls celebrating it, and even those who will sell out their neighbours, friends, even blood relatives for daring to disagree or displease the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters."

"What's your point, Malfoy?" Hermione demanded quietly, crossing her arms over her chest.

"My point is that having the Dolohov and Malfoy signatures on your magic won't save you. You are still the descendant of a pair of squibs – a more reviled being amid our race, we've yet to discover – and the result of several injections of muggle genetics into a once magical blood line. When you were attacked in Russia, there were doubtlessly a swath of Dolohovs in the area, and only Antonin came to save you. The same indifference will befall you here. The endorsement on your magic might allow you to marry into a half-blood or mostly-pure blood line like the Rowles, but it will not save you. Coupled with your close association with Potter and you are currently one of the witches in the world with the biggest of targets on her back."

"And that has what to do with you?" Hermione huffed, fear beginning to twist its way into her belly. Coupled with the scent of burning canvas from the fires, it was making her feel squeamish.
Malfy simply looked at her for a long moment, an almost derogatory and yet tortured expression on his face. Hermione knew then that he knew that she knew about his infatuation with her and he thought her a fool for ignoring it, and even more so for daring him to admit it.

"Keep you head down this year, Granger," he said seriously. "And if I were you, and your betrothal to Rowle really is in effect, you'd better get yourself hitched sooner rather than later."

Hermione stared at him in surprise, watching in confusion when he suddenly pushed away from her and strolled out of the thicket, leaving her to her strangely befuddled thoughts and a strange sense of impending doom.

When she followed after him, the crowds were beginning to disperse, many people locating loved ones and beginning to apparate away.

"Hermione, over here!" Harry called, spotting her.

Hermione went to him, hugging him tightly and pleased to see he was safe.

"Merlin, we were so worried," Ron told her, hugging her as well. "Where were you? Someone was shouting that muggleborns would be next. One chap was attacked."

Hermione's eyes were wide.

"Hey, what's that," Harry said, interrupting before she could offer explanation about where they'd been.

Stumbling, Hermione looked in the direction he indicated to see Winky the House Elf struggling to run away. Further on they encountered a gaggle of wizards shouting at Veela and Harry and Hermione were forced to drag Ron away when he began shouting about inventing a broom that could fly all the way to Jupiter.

They kept going, deep into the heart of the wood until there were no more sounds of people talking and shouting, no sounds of Aurors and other Ministry officials trying to restore order and capture those who'd been in the masks.

Just as they were discussing the madness of such a stunt at a fully guarded event like the Quidditch world cup, Hermione broke off abruptly in her tirade when the sound of someone staggering toward their clearing met her ears.

"Hello?" Harry called when the footsteps came to an abrupt halt.

It was much too dark to see very far, and Hermione squinted, the fear festering in her gut beginning to rapidly fizz, once more. She didn't at all like the idea of some unknown stranger out there in the woods, potentially watching them; maybe wishing them ill.

"Who's there?" Harry called when no one answered, and the silence began to creep.

"MOSMORDRE!" an unknown voice shouted, renting the air and making Hermione nearly jump clean out of her skin.

A glittering green spell erupted from the blackness, flying over the treetops and into the sky

"What the -?" Ron gasped, springing to his feet.

Hermione's stomach clenched in terror when she recognised the colossal skull with a snake
protruding from its mouth.

"Harry, come on, move!" she snarled, seizing her friend by the back of his jacket as all throughout the wood, people began to scream in their terror.

"What's the matter?" he asked, turning to her.

"It's the Dark Mark, Harry," Hermione moaned, pulling on his jacket as hard as she could. "You-Know-Who's sign!"

Before she could explain further, they were ambushed on all sides, wizards in pyjamas, and other in Auror robes coming at them from all directions.

"DUCK!" Harry shouted after a moment of stunned silence, seizing both her and Ron and dragging them to the ground just before a chorus of Stunning spells roared from the twenty gathered voices.

The light from the spells almost blinded Hermione as she hit the grass beside her friends.

"STOP!" yelled the voice of Arthur Weasley suddenly. "STOP! That's my son!"

In the melee that followed, Hermione realised the full and gripping horror of what had been done here tonight. As Harry was accused of casting the Dark Mark himself, his wand found at the scene despite it being in Winky's clutches. As the inquisition began and Mr Crouch seemed more defensive than surprised, but no one dared to call him on it. Not when he was so well known for his dark-wizard catching days and his tireless pursuit of the Death Eaters during the first war.

His dismissal of the elf incensed Hermione more than she dared to voice, but she had a sneaking suspicion his displeasure with the elf had nothing to do with her 'finding' Harry's wand and a lot more to do with her having disobeyed orders to leave the tent. Perhaps he was hiding something, but she didn't dare suggest it.

When they were free to go, Hermione walked solemnly alongside her friends, the pall over the evening and the seriousness of the actions that had taken place slamming into her full force and making her think that perhaps, Malfoy might've been right, after all.

Just as they were pushing their way through the frightened crowd, intent on returning to bed, Hermione heard someone calling her name.

"Oh, Hermione, darling, there you are," Pandora Rowle said, hurrying forward and gathering Hermione into a hug. "Oh, I've been so worried. Antonin got Reina back to the Tower, safe and sound, but he said he lost sight of you in the crowds. Arthur, you won't mind if I take her home, will you?"

Mr Weasley looked surprised to be addressed by Madam Rowle, but he sighed and nodded. "If Hermione's happy to go, I'm certain she'll be safe with you."

Hermione smiled a little, dodging the expressions Ron and Harry both shot her, obviously not wanting her to go. She didn't think she could face what would likely turn into a history lesson for Harry, who inexplicably had never bothered to learn everything he possibly could about the man who'd murdered his parents or the entire war that had come to a screeching halt when he had survived the Killing Curse as a baby. She couldn't face his ignorance tonight. Not when she was tired, and she had no idea where Thorfinn was, and she'd just been forced to swallow the rather bitter pill of discovering that Draco Malfoy had been right.

"Let's go home, dear," Pandora said, tucking Hermione's hand through her own and clearly
intending to apparate. Still no more used to it than she'd been when Thorfinn and Antonin had gotten her out of Russia, Hermione screwed up her eyes and waited for the dizzying squeeze to come to an end.

When they landed, all the lights were on inside the Tower, the many relatives who'd come to stay for the World Cup all having returned there for safety when the rioting started. Hermione blinked against the harsh light.

"Hermione, love, was Thorfinn with you at all?" Pandora asked quietly, stopping her before she could make her way inside, just wanting to crawl into bed.

"No," Hermione admitted. "I haven't seen him since we parted ways on the pitch after the match. Is he not here?"

Pandora's lips pinched together, and she looked up the Tower.

"Looks like his light is on. Maybe he was held up somewhere," Pandora offered, some of her tension leaving her frame. "Why don't we go inside, darling. It's been a long night."

Hermione nodded.

As soon as she crossed the threshold, she was ambushed by Reina, who raced over to her and pulled her into a bone-crushing hug.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're safe," the younger girl said, squeezing her tightly. "When we lost sight of you in the crowds, I feared you'd been trampled."

Hermione cuddled her back, not willing to elaborate about all that had occurred that night. Over Reina's shoulder, Hermione spied Dolohov watching her, his arms folded over his chest and a harsh frown lining his face. From the look in his eyes, she could tell that he had questions and that he wouldn't rest until they were answered. Hermione sighed.

"Let's get to bed," she suggested tiredly to her best friend.

Reina nodded, and the others all agreed, the adults looking very much like the intended to have a long discussion.

"I'll get them upstairs," Antonin offered to Talon and Rhonwen, who both looked torn between a serious discussion about the implications of tonight's events and needing to see the children to bed.

"Thank you, Antonin," Rhonwen said, squeezing his shoulder.

Hermione noticed that as he moved toward them, Reina reached out and took his hand. From the redness of her eyes and the way Antonin didn't resist the hold, she suspected Reina had been crying in her fear over what had become of Hermione.

"Are you alright, Hermione?" she asked. "You weren't hurt, were you?"

"I'm fine, Reina," Hermione said quietly.

Reina peered at her worriedly but seemed willing to believe her. When they reached her bedroom, she bid Hermione and Antonin goodnight before tucking herself.

Hermione kept climbing the stairs, aware of Antonin a step behind her.

"You weren't fine," he said quietly. "You were in more danger there than most, Granger."
"I know," Hermione said softly.

"What happened?" he asked, stopping her with a hand on her arm.

"Malfoy grabbed me," Hermione explained.

"Lucius?" Antonin asked, his eyes widening in surprise before narrowing dangerously.

"Draco," Hermione clarified. "He pulled me out of harms way and reminded me that as a muggleborn, and a close friend of Harry's, I'll likely be in a good deal more danger as You Know Who begins rising to power, once more."

Antonin didn't look surprised to hear it.

"That kid fancies you," he surmised quietly.

"I know," Hermione nodded again.

"You know?" Antonin scowled, looking like he thought she might be entertaining ideas of pursuing something with the Malfoy heir.

Hermione sighed.

"Theo told me he spent ages in first year tracing my bloodline and trying to prove to his father that I wasn't just a muggleborn witch," Hermione explained. "Theo believes Malfoy is such a git to me because he fancied me, and said something about my bracelet from Finn making him lash out, which is why he's always so rude to me."

Antonin nodded slowly.

"Did he hurt you?" he asked.

Hermione shook her head. "No, he pulled me into some trees where I wouldn't be seen, and warned me. He said he thought his father was amongst those in the masks."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Antonin nodded. "Lucius was in the thick of things with the Dark Lord during the first war."

"How do you know?" Hermione frowned.

"Because my father was, too," Antonin admitted. "Even Talon was being pulled in before the Dark Lord's defeat, Granger."

"But his own mother is muggleborn," Hermione protested.

"And that very fact was used to blackmail him, Granger. People will do terrible things to protect those they care about, you know?" Antonin said, nodding her up the stairs toward Finn's room.

"Even you?" she asked.

Antonin snorted.

"Especially me," Antonin said. "And so would Thorfinn. If you knew what he'd done in Russia after what that werewolf did to you..."

"I do know," Hermione told him.
'Then there you have it,' Antonin said, as Hermione reached' Thorfinn's room and turned the doorknob, pushing her way into the room.

She stopped in her tracks, Antonin walking right into her from behind thanks to the suddenness of her halt.

Thorfinn Rowle stood in only his Quidditch pants and his boots, his hands gripping his soot-stained blond hair while he stared in horror at something on the bed. Following his eyes, Hermione's stomach flipped, and her heart clenched and her whole body went tense all at once.

There, thrown haphazardly on top of the covers was a black Death Eater robe and the terrible skull-like mask worn by the terrorists at the match. Thorfinn's eyes tore from the apparel at the sound of Hermione's gasp of horror.

He looked scared.

And guilty.

"F-finn?" Hermione stammered, her heart in her throat as her hands began to tremble with fear over what she was seeing. It couldn't be. It just couldn't.

"Fucking hell, Thor," Antonin could be heard muttering from behind her before he shoved her hard into the room and quickly closed the door, locking the three of them inside before anyone else could appear and see the evidence of where Thorfinn had apparently been for the evening’s events.

Thorfinn's lowered lip trembled, his hands fisting handfuls of his thick blond hair, his eyes fixed on Hermione and his expression wrought with guilt.

"It's not what it looks like…"
"What the fuck did you do, Thor?" Antonin demanded tensely, his eyes fixed on Thorfinn while Thorfinn stared at Hermione in horror.

"It's not…" he tried weakly, his head still spinning and his tongue feeling thick in his mouth, the guilt choking him.

"What it looks like?" Toshka finished the sentence for him when he trailed off. "Because if fucking looks like you've got yourself a Death Eater mask and robe. It looks like you were one of the ones setting the fucking tents on fire. I should've known when I saw the Fiendfyre! Eto plokho. Eto deystvitel'no plokho. chto, chert voz'mi, ty sdelal? Blyad'!

Thorfinn knew it was never a good thing when his best friend started cursing in Russian and he cringed, unable to take his eyes off Hermione. She looked scared. No, worse. She looked terrified. She was afraid of him. She was trying to inch backward, trying to get away from him; obviously trying to make it back out the door. Antonin was in her way, barring it to prevent that very thing while he continued to rant in his mother tongue, evidently furious and worried.

"It's not what… I mean, I didn't… I mean… Princess…” Thorfinn stammered, trying to find something to say. Anything. Anything to make her stop looking at him like he was going to murder her right there on his bedroom floor with his bare bloody hands.

"What the fuck happened? Antonin demanded.

"I didn't…"

"Finn…” Hermione breathed, her eyes beginning to well up with tears and Merlin's saggy Y-fronts, he hated it when she cried. He felt so helpless when she cried. "What did you do?"

"I'm not… I mean, I wasn't… I mean, this wasn't…” he tried again, trying to find the words, trying to offer some excuse; some platitude; some way to erase what he'd done.

"Thor!" Antonin growled, shoving Hermione further forward into the room and out of his way. "What. Happened?"

"Um," Thorfinn said, tearing his eyes off Hermione to look back down at the apparel on the bed that he'd ripped off his body the minute he'd apparated home.

"Finn…” Hermione said weakly again, and the tears had begun to spill down her cheeks now and she was shaking; she was scared, he could feel it through the bond they shared – the same bond he'd been tending so carefully and stoking so lavishly.

"I didn't mean to," he breathed, his eyes wide and honest as he looked up at his best friend – the closest thing he had to a brother – and the girl he'd gone and fallen wand over broom in love with since the time he'd set out to destroy her back in her first year.

These were the two people in his life who mattered to him to most; and he'd failed them.

"How the fuck do you 'not mean to' set a shitload of tents on fire and attack muggles, Thor?" Antonin demanded, his temper obviously fully engaged.

"I didn't mean to…” Thorfinn whispered again, frowning and clutching fistfuls of his hair so hard
that it hurt and felt like he was going to rip clumps right out of his scalp. "I just… there was… and he… they… I…"

"Thor!" Antonin snarled, and suddenly he was stepping around Hermione and closing the distance between them before Toshska's hands joined Thorfinn's in his hair and his best friend held him firm, staring into his face from so close, their noses almost touched. "Tell me what happened. Now. From the beginning. Where did you go after we left you on the pitch with the team and the reporters and the fans? You disappeared at the after-party you and I attended."

"There was a party," Thorfinn muttered, trying to figure out what he'd done; trying to make sense of how he'd ended up with the group hexing people and setting shit on fire. "We were drinking."

"I know we were drinking," Antonin nodded. "What did you drink?"

"Whiskey," he answered. "But it tasted funny."

"You were drugged?" Antonin asked.

"I think Moran had drugs. Maybe a potion. Whiskey tasted off."

"Where did you go?" Tosha pushed.

"I had to piss," Thorfinn murmured, frowning as he tried to remember. "Couldn't find a loo. Then Selwyn was there."

"Which Selwyn?" Antonin asked. "Becky?"

Thorfinn shook his head.

"Argus," he said. "Argus Selwyn. Held his wand on me. Said I disrespected his daughter. Said I'd shat on the Selwyn name. Said we had a blood-feud."

"You did spark a blood-feud when you ran after her," Tosha pointed out, nodding in Hermione's direction when she'd moved as far away from him as possible, having retreated across the room and slid down the wall in the corner, her face dirty with smoke from the fires he'd started at the pitch, her pyjamas muddy at the hems and grass-stains marring the knees of her pants.

"He said he'd kill me," Thorfinn said. "Said he'd slaughter Reina, and Gran, and Mum and Dad… Said he'd kill Hermione. Said he'd torture them in front of me and when I begged for their lives, he'd butcher them and fuck their corpses."

In the corner, Hermione whimpered.

"He attacked you?" Tosha answered. "You got angry?"

"I blasted him," Thorfinn said. "I think he's dead…"

"Chertovski ad!" Tosha growled.

"Someone saw. Someone… Ennis?"

"Ennis Selwyn? Argus's son?" Antonin guessed, still fisting handfuls of his hair, never once breaking eye contact even when he swore.

"He held his wand on me. Said he'd make me pay for what I'd done. Said he'd tell everyone what I'd done if I didn't… if I didn't…"
"He blackmailed you to don a mask and robe and join the others?" Antonin finished for him.

Thorfinn nodded, choking on the urge he had to scream.

"I panicked," Thorfinn said. "I tried to blast him, too. Tried to… but I wasn't quick enough. He… he cursed me."

"What curse?"

"Imperius," Thorfinn breathed. "And I couldn't… I couldn't… I didn't…"

"You had no control over you body," Antonin finished for him. "When did he let up?"

"When everyone scattered. When the Dark Mark appeared in the sky," Thorfinn said. "I blasted and blasted and blasted… tent after tent and I couldn't… everyone knows that I have a gift for Fiendfyre. And Ennis was laughing. He thought it was funny. He had those muggles… he was… he was… they…"

"We saw," Toshka nodded.

"No, Toshka, you didn't see," Thorfinn breathed, his eyes cutting to Hermione in the corner briefly as bile rose in his stomach. "You didn't…. the mother, and the little girl… they… Toshka they…"  

"Merlin, they didn't make you…"

"No!" Thorfinn said. "Not me. Ennis wasn't strong enough to make me do that. But the others…. Goyle, I think. Maybe Malfoy. Macnair, definitely. He had his mask off for that. Said he wanted them to remember his face. Said he wanted them to have nightmares of his face…"

"Fucking hell," Toshka muttered, his eyes wide with horror at the things Thorfinn was describing.

"People were screaming. They were bouncing. Upside-down. Tents on fire. Couldn't stop. Couldn't move. Couldn't run. He… Toshka, he…"

"He mind controlled you," Antonin finished for him. "When did he let you go?"

"When the Aurors showed up. Everyone scattered. He must've dropped the spell. Or gotten too far away to control me from a distance. Might've apparated. I didn't see. I just panicked. I apparated straight here and I… I…"

Thorfinn turned and ripped himself away from Antonin quickly, running for the bathroom adjoined to his bedroom and he hurled into the toilet, emptying his stomach of the food he'd ingested and the liquor he'd imbibed at the party. He kept heaving, coughing and coughing, spitting up more and more bile until his stomach cramped and nothing but white foam came out.

"Fucking hell," Antonin was saying. "We need to burn these. Now. We need to destroy them."

"Do it," Thorfinn whispered against the porcelain, his forehead resting on the seat.

Antonin grabbed the cloak and mask before he turned on the spot, disapparating and leaving Thorfinn alone with Hermione for the first time all night. Hell, the last thing he remembered of her, he'd kissed her after winning the cup in front of everyone, including the reporters. Not that they'd report on him snogging a 'fan' now. Not after what had happened tonight. His celebratory smooch with a minor wouldn't even be a blip in tomorrow morning's paper. Not after some fuckhead had cast the Dark Mark.
"Princess?" Thorfinn called weakly, pulling himself to his feet and stumbling back to the door.

She was still sitting in the corner, tears running down her cheeks. She was filthy and scared and he didn't blame her. Hell, he didn't know what to do.

"Princess?" he asked again, but Hermione didn't even look at him.

He wasn't sure she could even hear him. Maybe she'd gone into shock. Maybe she was too scared. Maybe he needed to just leave her the hell alone while he showered off the effects of the game and the booze and the magic, and the terrible stink of smoke clinging to his skin and the soot staining his hair. There wasn't anything else to do. Turning back, he numbly reached for the knobs to get the water running before stripping out of his quidditch pants and stepping under the scalding stream. He scrubbed hard at his skin, vomiting into the bottom of the shower a few more times though it twisted his guts like he was dying and it make him feel like he was trying to cough up his spleen.

He stood there under the spray for a long time even after he scrubbed his skin raw and shampooed his hair four times. He didn't think he could face Hermione. He didn't know what to say. Sure, okay, he'd been drinking and he might've been drugged and he'd been put under the Imperius curse, but... he was pretty sure he'd killed a man. Argus Selwyn was most likely dead. There was no way a man his age would recover from the blast of Fiendfyre that had spewed from his mouth like he was a dragon, engulfing the wretched fucker until he was nothing but a pile of ash.

At least they wouldn't find the body.

Hell, would they find the body? Was there even a body left to find? Had stampeding and terrified magic folk trampled what remained of the ashes after Thorfinn's burst of fury and magic?

This wasn't like what he and Toshka had done in Russia. Sure, that had been cold-blooded and planned out, but it'd been revenge against a bunch of cunts who'd stood idly by while his witch fought for her life and her virtue. This wasn't like that. This was worse than that, even if it hadn't entirely been intentional. The rage had simply welled up inside him and spewed forth until the object of his fury was no more. He'd lashed out a man who had simply threatened his family. He hadn't harmed them. Hadn't acted against them yet. He'd only threatened it, and yet Thorfinn had lost his temper and burned him alive.

The thought scared Thorfinn. He shouldn't have power like this. He shouldn't be so out of control like this. He had grown used to irrational bursts of anger when Hermione was with another man – it was a side-effect of the bond they shared – but this was different. This was a complete lack of control. This was... dangerous.

"C'mon, Granger," Toshka's voice sounded from the doorway and Thorfinn turned from where he leaned against the wall of the shower under the scalding spray to watch his best friend lead his betrothed into the room by the hand.

She was still crying, and seemingly in shock, but at least she was on her feet.

"Thor, you're going to have to help her," Antonin told him quietly, moving around behind Hermione before unceremoniously yanking down her pyjama pants.

Hermione didn't react – didn't gasp, or try to pull the back up, or try to stop him. She just stood there with tears trickling down her sooty face and Thorfinn's heart squeezed.

"She's filthy. You need to wash off all traces of this mess," Antonin said. "Both of you."
Thorfinn nodded, stepping out of the shower and unconcerned to have his best friend getting an eyeful of his naked arse as he reached for Hermione carefully, worried she might flinch back from him in shock.

"Is it gone?" Thorfinn asked.

"Yes," Antonin said quietly. "Where did you leave Selwyn?"

"I've got no idea," Thorfinn admitted. "Outside, somewhere. Near the clubhouse where the party was. I was in a garden, I think."

"I'll find him," Toshka promised.

"I'm not so sure there's anything to find, Toshka," Thorfinn. "I think I… um… incinerated him."

"I'll check," Antonin said. "You're sure it was Ennis who used the Imperius on you?"

Thorfinn nodded. "I think so."

"Think?" he asked. "Or you're sure?"

"He was definitely there," Thorfinn said. "Toshka… he'll try again… what if he uses this to…to…"

Antonin didn't answer before he nodded sharply, once, his eyes cold as he met Thorfinn's gaze and Thorfinn just knew he was going to do something bad. Something he shouldn't do. Something illegal. Something that would get them both thrown in Azkaban for the rest of their lives if they were ever caught. But then, after Russia and after tonight, things could only get worse, really. There was no taking back what they'd done. No taking back what he'd done.

Thorfinn held his best friend's gaze for a long moment while he helped Hermione out of her pyjama shirt, the small witch still softly crying but not moving or speaking or seeming to be aware of where she was or who was touching her. An eternity passed between them in that moment, and Thorfinn had a sick feeling in his stomach that Antonin was going to do whatever he felt was necessary to protect the Rowle family – the family he'd all but adopted as his own.

Without a word, Antonin turned on the spot and disapparated with a soft pop, leaving Thorfinn alone with Hermione again. Hermione, and all the terrible thoughts running through his head.

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