Kiss Kiss Bang Bang

by LovelyVillain

Summary

Hermione hasn’t seen Tom since he disappeared from Wool’s Orphanage eight years ago, taking a piece of her heart and soul with him. Until the day he returns, the bloody corpse of Lucius Malfoy at his feet and honey dripping from his lips. British Intelligence Officer Harry Potter leads the investigation to catch a highly skilled killer wreaking havoc across Europe, and Hermione is caught between her heart and conscience.

*Killing Eve inspired AU*
**A/N:** Hello awesome readers! Thanks for stopping by, here’s a quick summary of what’s in store: All Human, Non-Magical AU Tomione with other pairings you’ll have to read to find out! Tom disappeared from Hermione’s life when she was sixteen, only to resurface eight years later in a rather spectacular fashion that puts her entire world into upheaval.

This tale is inspired by the brilliant BBC crime thriller Killing Eve, if you are a fan of that genre I highly recommend watching! If you have been following the series you’ll recognize a few early plot points in the first few chapters, though I put my own spin on things.

Also worth noting, a few canon character relations are out the window here. For example, in this story Regulus and Sirius are not brothers and Bella is not Lucius’s sister in law. Don’t worry, it will make sense as you read.

I don’t put trigger warnings before each chapter so please avoid reading if the following is not to your taste: Graphic Violence, Language, Explicit Sex, Illegal Drug Use, Organized Crime, Major Character Death, and Slash Pairing.

Lastly, the present day is set in 2005, I’ll include dates to distinguish flashbacks and backstory.

Without further ado, here we go!

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**Saturday September 20, 1999**

“They’re throwing you out the day after your birthday. Christ, they don’t waste anytime.”

Hermione pulled the zipper closed on her backpack carefully, mindful of the stitching along either side from years of thread and needle repairs. She nodded in the speaker’s direction.

“Mrs. Cole is terribly efficient as always.”

The other girl pulled away from the doorframe she leaned against, watching Hermione collect the few belongings she could call her own and neatly pack them away as though they were priceless collectibles.

“Do you need money?”

Hermione shook her head. “I’ve been saving all summer, Ms. Pince gave me extra hours at the library to help. But thank you, Carmen.”

Carmen sat at the edge of the perfectly made cot and studied her friend. “You seem… remarkably calm, all things considered.”

Hermione sighed, unconsciously grasping the small gold pendant hanging around her neck between her thumb and index finger, a force of habit that didn’t go unnoticed by the room’s other occupant.

“Should I not be?” Hermione finally looked up, hazel eyes meeting blue. “I was well aware of the date of my eighteenth birthday. The rules have been the same for every resident that came before me. I’ve had ample time to prepare myself.”

Carmen leaned back on her elbows. “Half your life.”
“Exactly. Today is no surprise. And please don’t wrinkle the bedding, I don’t want Mrs. Cole thinking I left behind a messy room.”

Carmen rolled her eyes but leaned forward all the same, running a hand over the dent she left to erase any signs of disorder. “Who will remind me to make my bed everyday?”

“You mean who will force you to make your bed every morning, as well as all your other chores?”

Carmen smiled but Hermione could see the glint of tears forming in her eyes.

“Please, don’t. Not today.”

Carmen swallowed heavily, wiping quickly at her eyes. “If not today then when?”

Hermione looked away, focusing on the empty dresser top. “I just… I can’t today, Car. Please, for me, don’t make this any harder than it needs to be.”

The girls sat in silence for a several moments as they reigned in their emotions. Finally Carmen cleared her throat. “Well, if I’m not allowed to say goodbye, then I’m certainly not allowed to ask you about-”

“No, you aren’t.”

Carmen sighed and shook her head. “Fine, we’ll sit here in silence until Mrs. Cole comes to get you.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Entered a third voice, high and nasally, causing both girls to cringe instinctively before masking their faces with blank indifference.

“Hello, Amy.”

“Hello, Hermione. Or I suppose I should say goodbye. Finally.”

Hermione’s hand curled into a fist, her nails pricking the skin of her palms and distracting her from the sudden overwhelming urge to tear a chunk of Amy’s mousy brown hair from her head. The violent notion took her off guard in its swiftness and vivid detail. She attempted a calming breath but Amy destroyed any chance of a reprieve by speaking her next words as she stepped casually into the small bedroom.

“So, is your psycho boyfriend going to be waiting for you, or is he already in prison?”

Carmen leapt to her feet. “Fuck off, Amy.”

“Why don’t you fuck off? You should leave with your freak friend. Or are the two of you lesbians now?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. Amy was painfully predictable in her attacks, always aiming for low hanging fruit. But Amy caught the movement and her face twisted into an unattractive sneer.

“Well, what of it, Hermione? Are we going to be graced with the presence of that twisted psychopath or will you have to visit him at the HMP? Hopefully they allow for conjugal visits, assuming he’d still have you. I can’t imagine you’re a more appealing option than what he can find behind bars.”

Carmen reacted more so than Hermione, who found the entire speech lacking any real creativity since the old stand by joke when he was at Wool’s was that he’d be the first minor tried as an adult
before leaving the orphanage.

Instead Amy’s comment filled Hermione’s chest with that old, familiar ache. She tightened her fist, puncturing the skin beneath her blunt nails in an effort to maintain her air of indifference. Amy wasn’t pleased with her target’s lack of response so she dug deeper.

“Then again, maybe he’s dead, yeah? You haven’t seen hide nor hair of the miscreant since he left. Pretty strange, considering you were his little puppet all those years. Or did he just lose interest once he wasn’t forced to share the same address?”

Hermione inhaled sharply through her nose, looking away to avoid giving Amy the satisfaction of seeing her face flush. Carmen stepped between them.

“Funny you should mention boys losing interest. Tell us, when’s the last time Billy stopped by for a visit?”

Amy blinked, taken off guard by the change in subject. She opened and closed her mouth a few times before glaring.

“Not that it’s any of your business but Billy got an amazing apprenticeship on the continent, he writes to me all the time and wants me to join him after I leave.”

Carmen threw her head back and laughed. “Oh that’s a riot! You expect us to believe Billy Stubbs got offered some posh job? He’s the biggest idiot I’ve ever met! Couldn’t even tie his shoes by himself until secondary.”

Amy looked deeply affronted and was clearly scrambling for a response when Hermione regained her bearing and cut her off.

“It’s been a pleasure as always, Benson. But unfortunately Carmen and I are expecting Mrs. Cole any moment, do you really want her to catch you down here when you’re supposed to be cleaning the kitchens?”

Amy darted her scornful look between the two girls before her before smirking wickedly and backing away towards the door. “Whatever, why should I waste any more time on you? It’s going to be so much cleaner without your mangy hair shedding about the place like some feral cat.”

Carmen chased Amy to the door, Amy laughed and ran ahead down the hall. Carmen leaned forward on the frame and called after the fleeing girl. “I know you stuff your bra with napkins, you filthy cow!”

“Carmen! Are you crazy? Half the neighborhood would have heard that!”

“Good.”

“Including Mrs. Cole.”

“Oh whatever, if I get extra cleaning duties it’ll be well worth it.”

Hermione shook her head in exasperation but Carmen knew it wasn’t due to her outburst. She leaned forward and grasped her friend’s arm.

“Mione, look at me. He’ll find you.”

Hermione blinked. “What?”
Carmen knew the girl heard her but repeated it for comfort’s sake. “Even if he’s not waiting outside the gates, he will find you. I know he will.”

Hermione worried her bottom lip between her teeth. “What if something’s happened to him? Amy wasn’t wrong, I haven’t heard from him since he left.”

Carmen shook her head. “That boy’s a survivor, Mione. He isn’t dead. There’s no way.”

Hermione nodded, believing Carmen’s words as gospel. He was skilled at overcoming impossible odds. But still… what reason could he possibly have for disappearing entirely for the last two years?

Then again, he hadn’t broken a promise to her yet. He never promised to visit, but he did promise to find her after she got out. She didn’t push for specifics at the time, but now she wished she had. She had no idea if he’d be standing outside the gates, if he was their now, waiting for her to depart. Or was he halfway across the world, leading a totally new life and completely indifferent to today’s date? She swallowed heavily, willing her mind to calm down.

The click of sharp footfalls distracted her from her turmoil. Both girls turned to face the doorway, instantly recognizing the sound. Mrs. Cole entered a moment later, face as drawn and stoic as ever, hands folded calmly behind her back.

“Ms. Granger,” her words were clipped. “It is time.”

Hermione nodded and turned to face Carmen, her friend was already in motion and threw her arms around Hermione, nearly knocking them both to the ground. “It’s going to be okay,” Hermione whispered, feeling the tremor run through Carmen’s frame. Or was that her own body? Were her words meant to comfort her friend or herself?

She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around Carmen, returning the hug and fighting the urge to cry. She’d had nine years to prepare for this moment and thought she was ready, but it suddenly felt like it was hitting her all at once and she found her mind desperately racing with one thought at the forefront.

_Tom, where are you?_

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**Saturday July 9, 2005**

Hermione slowly opened her eyes, blinking against the ray of sunlight glaring in through the crack in the blinds. She turned over and groaned into her pillow. Then she heard the buzzing sound, what must have woken her. She sighed deeply before stretching out her hands, fishing for her mobile discarded amongst her sheets and comforter. She fell asleep reading emails again.

Feeling her fingertips graze the vibrating plastic she pulled it free from her bedding and flipped it open without checking the caller ID.

“Hello?”

“Oh shite, did I wake you?”

“Padma?”

“Yeah, sorry, I was expecting to get your voicemail.”

“Itsalrite,” she slurred, rubbing sleep from her eyes. “What’s up? The lab okay?”
“Oh yeah, this isn’t about class. I remember you saying you lost your other job at the library and were looking for extra work this summer.”

Hermione stifled a yawn and stretched, pinning the phone beside her ear with her shoulder. “Um… yes, I am.”

“Oh good! Because Pavarti needs someone to fill in for her at some posh event tonight.”

Hermione blinked, suddenly wide awake. “Wait, tonight? What kind of job? I thought Parvati was working at some cafe in Soho?”

“Oh she is, and at the Topshop in Leicester, and she’s a dog walker every now and then. But her catering job is the important one, it pays the best and if she doesn’t find someone to fill in for her tonight she’ll be chucked.”

Hermione scooted forward to sit against her headboard. “Catering? Padma, I’ve never worked in food service, I don’t know the first thing about… food… or serving.”

“It’s literally just walking around with trays of tiny, fancy finger foods and collecting empty wine glasses. No skill involved, just putting up with the occasional drunk arsehole who likes to get handsy with the help.”

“Lovely.”

“So do you think you can- shite! Hang on!” There was a shuffling sound followed by a muffled retching that was unmistakable even at muted volumes. Hermione cringed. She staggered out of bed and checked her alarm clock, groaning at the early hour. After a few moments Padma returned.

“Sorry, about that, Parvati was projectile vomiting in the sink.”

“I heard. Is she okay?”

“Yeah, must be food poisoning.”

“Poor thing,” Hermione muttered even as she rolled her eyes and made her way to the bathroom.

She knew for a fact Parvati and her roommate Lavender went to Friday Happy Hour at The Animal Bar & Nightclub near their flat practically every week. Both women were beautiful but together made an even more striking pair when they went out, often attracting male attention which meant copious amounts of free drinks. She had no doubt what the true source of Parvati’s early morning sickness was. Still, she wasn’t in the mood to point this out as she was in desperate need of extra cash ever since her part time job at the Paddington Library was absorbed during their staffing restructure.

She wasn’t thrilled with the prospect of catering but she had worked many worse jobs over the last ten years, holding down at least one part time job since she turned 16. Once she started at University College London she’d worked a variety of jobs at once to supplement her income. She was awarded scholarships for both her undergraduate and postgraduate studies but living in London bled a bank account fast.

“Hermione? Can you step in for her?”

Hermione chewed on the inside of her cheek to prevent a groan. “Yeah, sure, text me the info.”

“You’re a lifesaver! Parv would say thank you but she can’t really say much of anything at the
moment. So please allow me to express her sincere gratitude.”

Hermione couldn’t help but smile as she wet her toothbrush. “I suppose as twins you guys can express gratitude on each other's behalf.”

“Yep, it’s twin magic.”

Hermione laughed, then cringed as she spit toothpaste onto the mirror.

Hermione awkwardly tugged at the linen button down shirt layered beneath the sleeveless black vest that composed the upper half of her uniform for the evening. Padma had dropped off her sister’s clothes when Hermione couldn’t find anything appropriate in her own closet. As the majority of her time was spent in class, at the lab or library she really didn’t need nice dress clothes, and her budget was too tight to purchase new clothes for the one job.

The down side was that Parvati was a bit leaner than Hermione with a flatter chest, and despite strapping the girls down with a sports bra she still was practically bursting through the shirt. The tightness in the chest made the linen shirt ride up higher than normal, which meant she’d flash her stomach everytime she raised her arms too high. Lovely.

She groaned inwardly as she walked to the back of the venue towards the labeled service entrance. It was a sprawling country club with massive golf courses and beautiful fountains at the front. This meant she’d be serving the upper echelons of society. While feeling like an overstuffed sausage casing. She silently prayed the pay was worth it.

A harried looking woman holding a clipboard was speaking rapidly into a wireless headset. Hermione slowed down, unsure if she needed to check in with someone or how this worked. She glanced around for assistance but everyone seemed distracted with their own work. She made her way to the clipboard lady and was greeted with a manicured finger in her face, giving her the universal sign to wait a moment minus any eye contact or verbal communication. Hermione nervously tugged at her shirt again as she waited until finally the woman addressed her.

“Hi, this is my first time working with you guys, do I need to check in?”

“Yes. Name?”

“Uh, well, it’s Hermione Granger, but—”

“Granger, Granger, Granger… hm, I see no Granger on the list.”

“Right, I’m actually filling in for a friend, Parvati Patil. She’s worked with you guys a few times before—”

“Huh? Spell it.”

Hermione took a deep breath, desperately missing her peaceful library work as she spelled her friend’s last name.

“Oh, ok, I have that one. I don’t remember who that is, but whatever. Will you be able to work it out between you two if we send the check to the address listed for Ms. Patil?”

Hermione blinked, unsure how to respond. Truth be told she wasn’t that close with Parvati, only speaking to her a handful of times at events they both frequented, usually with Padma as the common denominator. Hermione met Padma in her Chemistry program years ago and developed a fast and
easy friendship with the intelligent and highly ambitious girl. Padma was a hard worker and very thorough, qualities Hermione appreciated greatly in a lab partner. It took a couple years before the two girls began to hang out socially, on occasion, and it was less often that Padma’s roommates, her sister and Lavender, joined them. Still, she was certain it would appear odd to say no, she didn’t trust Parvati to give her the check when she’d just claimed they were good enough friends for Hermione to fill in for her.

The clipboard woman was tapping the metal clasp with the pen irritably, annoyed by Hermione’s prolonged internal debate.

“Yeah, that’s fine.” She settled on, deciding to give Pavarti benefit of the doubt since she’d been nothing but nice to Hermione every time they met, despite Hermione’s personal belief the girl was slightly irresponsible based on stories relayed through Padma.

The woman looked deeply put out at Hermione’s delayed response, pointing her to the banquet hall impatiently. Hermione cringed as soon as she started her trail through the opulent country club. If the catering management was this pleasant she couldn’t wait to meet the guests.

*Stop, Hermione. You’re being judgemental again. You always assume the worst of the privileged.*

She shook her head at her internal beratement. She had developed a resentment for those born into wealth since she first joined Wool’s at the tender age of nine, her innocence stripped away by harsh reality of being an orphan in an already overcrowded system. She gave up hope of joining a family through adoption or fostering around the age of twelve, knowing her chances were beyond slim due to her age and appearance. Your best chance at being chosen was being under the age of five. Older kids had to “play the part” when perspective families visited, putting on a show and dance and dolling themselves up to look as precious and adorable as possible. Hermione couldn’t bear the charade and once Tom took her under his wing there was no point.

He taught her street smarts, how to survive on your own in a society that doesn’t provide handouts, doesn’t make exceptions for the weak and helpless. She absorbed his lessons like a sponge, so starved for companionship she would have undertaken his tutelage no matter what the subject matter, and with Tom the subject matter certainly varied.

At thirteen she could swipe a wallet out a man’s back pocket while standing in front of him and not making physical contact. By fifteen she knew how to hotwire just about anything with a motor. He exposed the veins of the city, stripped away all the glitz and glamor to show her the marrow of what kept the streets bustling, kept the money moving. She harbored no delusions about what awaited an orphan outside of Wool’s once they met majority. It was eat or be eaten, every man and woman for themselves.

Luckily Hermione held an advanced aptitude for learning beyond simple petty crime. Her intelligence was what Tom first took notice of, according to him, and her ability to hold both philosophical debates as well as her black and white reasoning was what held his interest. He made it his personal mission to show Hermione just how grey the world was.

He’d been quite successful in his endeavour. Both his teachings and her years spent scrounging for everything she ever had taught her there’s more to life than right or wrong, good or bad. Everyone lived by their own truth, their own code of conduct that they used to justify their choices in life. She just did her best to live her life without hurting others, an adage she retained from her mother, and something Tom considered a deep character flaw.

His mantra was simple, take what you can before someone takes it from you. He didn’t bat an eye at the beggar on the street corner holding a sign conveying a desperate plea for help. Those were
people who chose to wallow in their circumstances instead of fighting to overcome. He certainly didn’t seek kinship with anyone else at Wool’s outside of Hermione, which in turn isolated her until he left and she was able to form a friendship with Carmen.

And Tom’s strange obsession with the wealthy no doubt set the foundation for her own twisted view of the rich. He admired and craved their standing as much as he abhorred it. He didn’t want to be like them, he wanted to take everything from them, smashing their face in the dirt as he stood atop them in victory, knocking them down to the depths in which he started his life while he climbed steadily to the top rungs.

She was jealous of the somewhat sick fascination he had with wealth. It was difficult holding his attention for long, even for her, but one flash of a Rolodex and Tom was transfixed, a flash of hunger and violence lighting his face, turning his handsome and sharp features cold and cruel, making her skin crawl. That was another area in which they differed, Tom’s natural pinchent for violence, blood, pounding fists. He claimed to save such base actions as a last resort but she could tell by the expression on his face when a fight started how much he loved causing physical pain to others, watching crimson flow from the mouth and noses of his enemies, of anyone who dared slight him in any way.

Of all the lessons he taught her she could never stomach those, and he never pushed the matter. She often wondered why since Tom was relentless in every other area of her tutelage, never quite sussing out the reasoning. She settled on the reality that she was likely to lose most street scuffles she engaged in, if not simply due to her gender and size. It wasn’t an efficient use of his time to teach her how to physically overcome her adversary so he focused on the mental aspects and how to avoid altercations altogether, which was quite ironic considering Tom thrived on chaos, the explosive anger he could draw out of others. He was a predator, everyone else his prey.

Hermione held no delusions. She was not his equal, she was simply his favorite pastime distraction. A hobby he entertained while confined to the walls of the orphanage, one he dropped just as soon as he was free to legally join society. She often feared his abandonment, knowing in the forefront of her mind it was only a matter of time before he got bored and discarded her onto the scrap heap of his past disappointments. She just hoped she was wrong, paranoid and plagued with abandonment issues like most other Wool’s residents. She dreamed they’d have a future together outside of the orphanage’s oppressive walls, though she rarely voiced those fantasies aloud, and never in any real detail when she dared.

But in the end her worst fears were proven true, her paranoia totally founded, her abandonment issues further tucked into the recesses of her heart and mind. Tom turned 18 and left, disappearing into the dusky night along with every promise, every stolen look, every lingering touch. And he took a gaping part of her with him, one she still felt the absence of everytime her mind so much as drifted to those years.

But Hermione wasn’t thinking of him now, the hectic scene of the banquet hall distracting her over active mind and offering a blissful reprieve from the past. She stopped short, blinking at the chaos unfolding before her as a torrent of voices and clinking tableware erupted in a sea of sights and sounds. She took a deep, steadying breath, tugging absently at her shirt once more and continued forward.

**Wednesday January 1, 1997**

“If you make me say it again you’re going to be crying for a very different reason.”

She rolled her eyes, pulling a rumpled threadbare shirt out of his bag and meticulously folding it
beside her on the bed.

“I heard you the first three times. And I’m not crying.”

“You’re on the verge of crying, which is even more annoying.”

She sighed, shaking her head and pulling another article of clothing from his bag.

“And stop doing that, I have it packed a certain way.”

“Yeah, crammed like a garbage heap.”

She kept her focus on her work but could practically feel the temperature in the tiny room drop.

“I have a system to everything I do, Hermione, you should know that better than anyone.”

“I don’t claim otherwise. I simply don’t see what harm there is in my folding your clothing and putting it back—”

“Maybe I don’t want you going through my things.”

She stopped short, looking up and nearly cringing beneath his intense gaze.

“What else do you have in the bag, Tom?”

He rolled his eyes and marched the short distance to her side, snatching the shirt from her hands and grabbing his bag with the other, forcefully shoving the garment inside.

“You know better than to ask such questions. If I wanted you to know then you’d know.”

She looked away, playing with the end of her braid in an attempt to mask the hurt on her face. This was their last day together for… who knew how long, and she was vastly disappointed in the sour mood he’d chose to donn.

Why can’t you make this a pleasant parting worth remembering? Lord knows I’ll never be able to purge a second of it from my mind regardless of how you act.

She heard him sigh and chanced a glance upward, seeing the telltale softening of his features that most wouldn’t be able to recognize. But Hermione had spent many long years memorizing every last detail of his face and multitude of expressions that she could tell a reluctant surrender was on the horizon. He only backed down from a squabble when it came to her, though even that was a rare treat. She could only assume he was equally aware of the significance of this interaction between them and was trying to curb his otherwise volatile urges.

“Come here.”

The low spoken command sent a chill down her spine and her body reacted before her mind could register what was happening. She was on her feet and standing before him within seconds. He stuffed his arm deep into the bag he still held and started to fish for something at the bottom.

Her heart began to race, a multitude of possibilities flashing through her mind before her thoughts locked on the vivid memory of the first time Tom showed her a gun. He held it in his hands with such perverse wonder in his glittering grey eyes and played with it for hours before finally clicking the safety off and carefully taking her hands in his, molding her fingers around the grip with his lithe frame pressed flush against her back, warm breath aimed down her neck even as all the air was stolen from her lungs.
Pull the trigger, luv, he whispered so sweetly, so seductively in her ear. She was trembling at that point which only prompted him to hold her closer, though she didn’t see how that was possible as she could already feel the strong, steady thud of his heartbeat between her shoulder blades. I can’t, she whispered back, feeling equal parts foolish and terrified. Sshh, he gently admonished her, as he was apt to do when he was trying to sway her to his side of an argument. You can, you will, he nuzzled the side of her neck, You must.

Hermione’s heart was racing as she watched him rummage around in the bag and she felt her palms begin to sweat. She wiped them absently on her skirt when his hand finally emerged with a small black box. She blinked, taken aback by the item. She recognized it immediately, a small velvet jewelry box like the types in commercials and in the windows of fancy jewelers downtown.

Seeing it in Tom’s hand she couldn’t make sense of the moment. Tom had stolen plenty of jewelry before, usually right off someone’s neck or wrist, and petty theft didn’t come with neat velvet boxes. She suddenly felt her throat constrict at the notion of Tom robbing a legit store, box and all, and the danger he was putting himself in now that he was 18.

“What… where did you get that?”

He smirked, making her heart stutter anew.

“Don’t you want to know what it is first?”

His voice was dripping in honey, making her want to squirm where she stood and putting her senses on high alert. A seductive Tom was usually a Tom that wanted something.

She swallowed heavily, his smile grew fangs.

“Open it, little one, I promise it won’t bite.”

She narrowed her eyes. “It’s not the box I’m worried about.”

But she carefully took the box from his hand, feeling sparks along her skin where their fingertips touched. She inhaled sharply through her nose before briefly closing her eyes, both terrified and exhilarated at what she might find. She clicked open the lid, the hinge making a sharp snapping sound that caused her to instinctively look to the contents within. And just as suddenly all the air left her deflated lungs in a whoosh.

“Tom… I… it’s… it’s beautiful.”

“Hmmm,” he hummed, reaching out to carefully pull the gold chain from the silk pillow it was wrapped around. She watched his graceful movements as if from a distance, eyes wide in wonder.

“That’s, I mean, that’s for… me?”

“No, it’s for Crusty Cole. Do you think she’ll like it? I had such trouble shopping for her.”

“Git,” she muttered, unable to suppress the corners of her mouth from turning up.

His eyes gleamed, as though there was an invisible light source directed solely into his fathomless gaze. She felt her heart race quicken as he motioned for her to turn around. She did so on unsteady feet, breathing deeply as he stepped close behind her, his muscular chest bumping her back as he reached over her head and fastened the chain behind her neck, carefully pulling her braid free and then resting his hands on her shoulder. The warmth scalded her skin, as his touch always did. It was magnificent. She felt light headed as she reached down and touched the intricate pendant.
“Do you like it?” he whispered deep and low, his lips lingering at the shell of her ear while she wet her lips and tried to find her voice.

He’d never presented her with such a token, a gift for the simple sake of giving. His usual offerings were far more practical, which had never phased her as she was intimately familiar with the income he brought in working his various minimum wage jobs after school when he took a break from pickpocketing.

“I love it,” she whispered, then cleared her throat with burning cheeks. “Tom, how much did this cost? You shouldn’t have-”

“Hush now,” he pulled her back against him and she melted into his warmth. “You know better than to tell me what I can and can’t do. I wanted to get you something… worthy of your beauty. Unfortunately there’s nothing out there that can quite match it, but this small token will have to suffice until I can afford something better.”

She closed her eyes and rested into him further, unable to suppress the sigh of contentment as he wrapped his lean but toned arms around her front.

“I… I love it. I wasn’t expecting… It’s so… Thank you, Tom.”

She felt his breath scald her shoulder as he lowered his head, lips hovering above her skin.

“I want you to wear it when I’m gone and think of me.”

She could hardly suppress her laugh. “I hardly think I need jewelry to remember you by.”

“Then I want others to see it and remember me. And that you belong to me.”

Thank goodness she was leaning against him or she was sure to faint. Tom had only called her beautiful on two other occasions, instances she remembered in vivid detail, but never like this, never with a gold chain around her neck, marking her as his, a possessive brand for all others to see. They had skirted around their feelings for each other for seven long years, never outright saying what they were, what they meant to each other.

She harbored no doubt in her heart that what she felt for Tom was absolute and unbreakable, a bond forged at the root of her core forever tying her to this man of mystery and danger. But she was always unsure of his true intentions towards her, sometimes his eyes held a heat so primitive she felt stripped bare before him, exposed to the marrow of her bones. Other times he barely spared her a glance, dismissing her for whatever hobby or new obsession dug their hooks into his vastly complicated mind.

But now, touching the pendant at her throat, she felt a warmth permeate her body starting at her core and spreading out in every direction, making her skin flush and tingle. She traced the interlocking lines and loops with her fingertip.

“It’s a celtic knot,” she whispered, her voice sounding strange to her ears.

“The knots hold many different meanings, depending on the design and placement.”

She closed her eyes. “And… this knot?”

She gasped lightly as his lips grazed her neck, soft as butterfly wings.

“It’s called the Lover’s Knot.”
She was certain her knees would have given out entirely had she been supporting her own weight. Tom reached a hand beneath her chin and tilted her face up, resting his mouth so close to hers she could feel and taste the words upon her lips.

“I have to leave, Hermione. But I’m coming back for you, understand?”

She was so mesmerized by his stormcloud grey eyes she barely managed to nod.

“Good, because once you leave this place, I’ll find you. No matter where you go, I’ll find you.”

His words were spoken with such intensity it sent chills up her spine. She opened her mouth, unsure what she was going to say, words escaping her as quickly as the heat built. Tom’s gaze changed suddenly, a dark shadow coming over his eyes even as their gleam deepened. She knew that look, recognized it as his call to blood lust, but somehow some primitive part of her knew it wasn’t an urge to break and destroy that had seized him. It was another kind of lust, just as raw and powerful as all his other emotions and she surrendered completely to it just as she did in all things when it came to Tom.

His mouth descended on her hungrily, so unlike the exploratory kisses and touches they’d shared in the past. This was pure, animalistic need. He was marking her, seering his brand into her, claiming whatever part of her he could in the small time they had left.

She felt his tongue brush at her lips as though tasting, lapping gently, and she instinctively opened and let him penetrate, invade her mouth and explore the sweet inner caverns at his leisure. She moaned low and deep in her throat and felt the responding growl resonate through his chest, vibrating through his person and into her back pressed so tightly against his strong frame.

She slid her tongue along his, copying his movements, always his avid student hungry to learn from his teachings. He made a sound some base part of her recognized as hunger, need, raw desire, and she felt his hands begin to wander down her body. Strong hands seized her hips, pressing her more firmly against his pelvis where a rigid heat prodded into her bum. She felt her eyes roll behind her closed lids.

His hands slid up to her waist, long deft fingers sliding around to grasp her breasts through her blouse. Not pinching, not groping, merely splaying over her delicate flesh in an intimate brand of ownership. She trembled and felt her head lighten. She needed air. She attempted to pull away from his devouring mouth when he moved a hand to the back of her neck in a rapid movement, his reflexes lighting fast from years of harnessing the skill. He held her head firmly in place, taking what he wanted, taking her over, and she quickly forgot her need for oxygen, surrendering to the dark abyss of whatever fever dream this was.

Then all at once Tom pulled back, sucking in a sharp breath as he released her. She stumbled on her feet, unprepared to support her own weight so suddenly. Her entire body felt alight with some internal flame that still blazed through her bloodstream, though her outer skin felt cold in the absence of his body heat. She turned to face him, her face displaying the question her mouth was unable to articulate.

Tom’s eyes still burned, locked on her like a hungry predator, coals aflame in the recesses of his overblown pupils. He was running a hand through his long dark hair as though any piece were ever out of place, the other hand traveling lower to adjust the prominent bulge in his pants.

She reached out a hand for him but quickly dropped it at the shake of his head. Before disappointment could join the confusion already blossoming in her heart she heard the sound that Tom must have already zeroed in on, the sharp clicking of heels down the tiled hallway. Hermione’s
eyes bulged as she spun around to face the hanging mirror, adjusting her clothing and rubbing futilely at her flushed cheeks.

By the time Ms. Cole rounded the corner and entered the room Hermione was seated on the corner of Tom’s utilitarian cot with her legs primly crossed and hands folded atop her knees, eyes downcast. Tom stood at the dresser, bag packed and flung over his shoulder, eyes on the matron. She gave both of them a thorough once over and rose a graying brow, her features pinching even further.

“I see you’ve already said your goodbyes then.”

Hermione cleared her throat and kept her face averted down, fearing the matron would see right through her should she make eye contact. Tom stepped forward, his voice still mostly gravel when he spoke.

“I’m ready. Let’s get this over with.”

Cole speared him with her most intimidating stare. Tom didn’t flinch. The head matron had never been able to make this particular charge cower and he’d been an ongoing thorn in her side from the day he arrived at the orphanage in police custody.

“Very well then, follow me Mr. Riddle.” She spun on her heel and began her path to the front of the building, to the exit.

Tom turned to face Hermione and she grasped her chest, feeling a sharp pain alight through her body starting from her heart. She looked up at him and felt the tears spilling over her cheeks, unbidden, overwhelmed in the face of this devastating loss, the most emotionally jarring moment since the traumatic night she lost her parents.

“Tom-” she croaked, her throat thick with emotion.

She watched his adam’s apple bob as he swallowed once, heavily, and in two strides he was standing before her, grasping her shoulder and pulling her up.

“None of that. Crying is weakness, remember the first rule, never show weakness.”

She wiped at her eyes helplessly but the tears kept flowing. She gazed at him miserably, willing him to understand and to permit this one showing of weakness. She couldn’t bare to watch him leave. To lose him to the wide open world outside Wool’s gates.

He tenderly cupped her face with one hand and wiped away her tears with the other.

“She nodded her head but clung to him all the same.

“Sshh,” he whispered into her hair, gently rubbing at her back, “I promise, I will find you.”

“Mr. Riddle!” came the sharp command from down the hall.

He let her linger in his arms a moment longer before gently pushing her away, gazing into her eyes for a long moment and she realized her was searching for something, though she couldn’t begin to imagine what. She’s bared her soul to this boy, now a man, from the age of nine. She had no secrets from him, she was an open book he thumbed through at his leisure. What could he possibly be looking for in her that he hadn’t already discovered?
He broke their gaze to gently kiss her forehead, such a tender and familial gesture in light of the passionate kiss they’d shared mere minutes before. She felt her lungs burning with the need to gasp for breath, to scream, to vent the building rage and pain of loss inside.

She silently watched him turn away, adjusting the bag on his shoulder and he walked to the door and paused, looking over his shoulder to stare at her one last time, his eyes tracing over her slowly as if memorizing every detail.

Then he met her eyes, nodded, and left.

**Saturday July 9, 2005**

Hermione absently rubbed at the sweat collecting along her forehead with her linen covered forearm, balancing a champagne tray in the other.

This night, put simply, absolutely sucked ass.

She’d been taking orders from just about everyone with a headset, barking commands at her in code as if she’d spent a lifetime serving. She mostly watched her peers, taking cues from the other wait staff on where to discard empty trays and pick up news ones, which routes to take through the crowds, no, hoards of finely dressed and bedazzled dinner guests.

She thought it would just be walking around with trays of food and a fake smile plastered to her face all night. And it was that, but also a lot of other stuff that left her quite overwhelmed and physically exhausted only two hours into the event.

She’d been able to suss out from stolen snippets of conversation this was a fancy retirement party for some business tycoon bigwig named Malfoy. She wasn’t positive on the first name. Lyle? Lucien? Something like that. She’d been more focused on keeping the massive trays balanced as she bobbed and weaved through throngs of people.

She was making her way back to the kitchens with an empty tray of wine and champagne glasses when she felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise. She stopped in her tracks, quickly looking around on instinct. She shook her head upon seeing no eyes blatantly on her. Of course someone probably looked at her, she was in a venue overflowing with the rich and sloshed, they were probably eyeing her hard so she’d hurry back with a fresh load of booze and finger foods. She tried to ignore the distinct and irritating feeling of being watched and disappeared through the staff entrance.

She grabbed for a tray of puff pastries when the headset lady from her checkin appeared as if out of thin air beside her, shaking her head profusely.

“Speeches are about to start soon, start circulating more drinks, we’re done with the food for now.”

Hermione nodded and grabbed for a waiting tray of champagne flutes instead. She spun too quickly and all the glasses shook precariously.

“Christ! Watch it!” Clipboard lady scolded, glaring daggers at the back of Hermione’s head as she bit the inside of her cheek and walked carefully back into the party room.

She slowed down as the distinct feeling of being watched returned. She tried to brush it off as guests began grabbing drinks off her tray, most without acknowledging her presence. She tugged at the hem of her shirt with her free hand, wondering if she was attracting attention due to showing skin in the back. She swallowed heavily, the crawling sensation growing stronger until she couldn’t help but
chance a glance around the room for the upteenth time.

Her gaze swept over laughing and chatting faces of all shapes and sizes, some heavily wrinkled, others caked in copious amounts of makeup, glistening jewels shining from ears and throats. Suddenly she felt light headed. She swayed once on her feet and attracted the attention of a couple chatting gentlemen just to her right, both wearing the customary tuxedo for the black tie event. One reached out a hand to help steady the tray.

She blinked, the fog suddenly receding and she looked up to thank whoever had assisted. She stopped short, both men studying her were profoundly attractive, and that was from the neck up. The fine garb only enhanced their masculine suave. The one who had stepped in to help steady her load had a shock of thick, finely styled white blonde hair and perfect teeth, which she saw due to the killer smile he flashed.

“Everything okay?” he asked, voice pleasantly deep.

She felt a flush explode across her neck and face, he smiled deeper.

“Uh… yeah… sorry about that, I’m… Just not used to carrying these big trays around.” She bit her tongue, wanting to kick herself for sounding so moronic. The handsome stranger continued to gaze at her with curious amusement.

“I can understand, this tray looks to be twice the weight of you. Here, let me assist. Theo, can you clear the table?”

The other man standing nearby gave a somewhat sardonic smirk at his blonde comrade but set his own drink down to help clear a small space nearby.

“Oh, you don’t- I mean, that’s not necessary,” she tried to say, but the blonde was already taking the tray from her grasp with ease and setting it down beside them.

“There, much better, now I can see your beautiful face.”

Hermione blinked, her flush making her burn even hotter even as the hairs on her neck and arms stood on end once more. She shook off the sensation, assuming it was just another annoying bodily reaction to the debonaire male specimen before her.

“Oh, I… thanks. I’m not really used to this sort of stuff. But I have to get back to serving, toasts are about to start soon.”

“Speeches actually,” the blonde corrected without mirth, absentmindedly running a finger along the collar of his tux. She couldn’t help but follow the motion, taking note of his sharp jawline. She swallowed and closed her eyes briefly, willing her body to relax and act normal.

“I’m due on stage shortly, actually,” he said, taking a glass from her discarded tray and sipping at the bubbly liquid within. He licked the moisture from his top lip and she averted her gaze, he smiled and traced her with an intense male gaze from bottom to top. She had to grasp her hands behind her back to stop from fidgeting and pulling uselessly at the tight shirt.

“Are you close to the man who’s retiring? Mr… Malfoy, is it?”

She noticed from the corner of her eye the dark haired man the blonde had referred to as Theo smiled quite broadly before hiding the expression behind the rim of his glass.

“No, not especially,” the blonde said casually, eyes drifting towards the stage and big band playing
just off to the side. “I’m his son.”

Hermione jolted, staring back at the blonde with wide eyes. He shifted to face her once more with an air of grace and indifference to his statement that only the truly wealthy could manage. But try as she might, she couldn’t muster the usual disdain she reserved for the upper class for this particular gentleman. Something about him was… compelling. He drew her in with a sort of magnetism that couldn’t be denied. It reminded her of…

She felt breath on the back of her neck and spun quickly around. No one was there. She blinked.

“Everything okay?” the blonde asked, a note of genuine concern in his voice.

Hermione opened her mouth and closed it, turning slowly back to face him.

“Um… yeah… I just thought…” she trailed off, twisting her hands before her.

She felt distinctly uncomfortable all of a sudden, her body’s defense mechanisms all on high alert for some odd reason, but she had learned and accepted long ago to never ignore her natural instinct, especially when it repeatedly tried to warn her.

“I should really finish handing out glasses,” she said with a forced smile, reaching down for the tray.

A look of mild disappointment flashed across the blonde’s face, quickly hidden behind his charming smile and bright silver gaze.

“Certainly, far be it for me to distract you from your duty, Miss…?”

“Cole,” Hermione said on instinct, hefting the weight of the tray onto her hand once more.

She wasn’t sure why she felt compelled to lie to this handsome, obviously very rich and well connected man, but her intuition was on high alert for one reason or another and she felt it best not to share her true surname on this particular occasion. She used Cole whenever she wanted an easy to remember alias.

“Ah, Miss Cole. Lovely to meet you, I do hope to see more of you later this evening, perhaps after my father’s guests are well and truly sloshed and no longer in need of such around the clock libations.”

Hermione couldn’t help but genuinely smile at his casual mirth, reflecting a hint of aberration for the festivities that she herself harbored. “Perhaps you will, Mr. Malfoy.”

“Draco,” he said, flashing another brilliant grin that threatened to upturn her tray all over again. She quickly returned the smile and turned away before she could make a bigger fool of herself.

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**Saturday September 20, 1999**

Hermione adjusted her backpack, toying with the straps absentmindedly as she followed her matron outside the orphanage. She swallowed down any remaining emotion, not willing to break down before Mrs. Cole of all people.

“The taxi will be here any minute to take you to the assisted housing outside Stratford. Unless you’ve secured alternative arrangements?”

Mrs. Cole stopped short to pivot on her heel and pin Hermione with a sharp look equal parts
judgemental and knowing. Hermione knew exactly what the elderly matron was asking, and why there was so much judgement in her voice. Many of her young charges opted to shack up with friends and lovers in hovels throughout the city to stay closer to London and forgo the restrictions the government housing enforced on their young occupants. And considering Hermione’s relationship with Tom while under the woman’s care she no doubt suspected Hermione would do the same.

Hermione swallowed and tried to formulate a response beyond “I am happy to go to the facility in Stratford, unless Tom’s outside those doors, in which case I’ll follow him to the ends of the earth and back.”

Instead she cleared her throat and carefully met the matron’s eyes. “My plans aren’t finalized. I’d like to keep my job at the library but I suppose I can find work closer to the group home until I find something more… permanent.”

Mrs. Cole turned her nose up and sniffed the air.

“At least you have some sense about you, always have, more so than most of the dolts that come through these doors.”

Hermione bit her cheek on retort, eager to stand up for the abandoned, the discarded and scarred children that came through the orphanage, but also wanting to get through this ordeal as quickly as possible. Freedom was in sight, so close she could taste it.

Mrs. Cole waited out the beat of silence and, seemingly satisfied with Hermione’s lack of response, turned back around and continued to march to the large oak doors. Hermione held her breath, actually closing her eyes as the doors opened and the bright morning light flooded in. She blindly followed the soft click of her matron’s heels outside onto the cement landing. She inhaled sharply, held it for a count of three, and opened her eyes.

To see an empty courtyard, and an empty driveway beyond the gates.

She glanced around once, twice, three times with her heart beating painfully against her chest. She reached up to grasp the golden knot at her neck while willing the tears at bay.

Tom wasn’t here.

Tom isn’t here.

Tom…

“It seems your cab has arrived early, Ms. Granger.”

Hermione blinked, watching the black cab slowly turn the corner and crawl along the gravel path to the steps she stood upon. Hermione sucked in a deep breath, it caught unsteady in her throat. Mrs. Cole looked to her sharply, scrutinizing Hermione’s twisted expression as she fought back tears.

Suddenly she felt a hand upon her shoulder. Her eyes snapped to the side and met those of her strict and relentless matron.

“I know you were expecting him, my dear. I’m sorry if his absence upsets you. But let this serve as an important lesson, you cannot rely on anyone in this life. Especially a man. You must make yourself into a strong, independent woman. You of all my charges are capable of this. Do you understand what I’m telling you, Hermione?”

Hermione stared blankly at the older woman as her words processed in her still reeling mind. She
was most taken aback by the matron’s use of her first name. She couldn’t recall a single time in the last nine years Mrs. Cole referred to her as anything but Ms. Granger. Hearing her given name on the woman’s normally sharp tongue somehow made the moment more intimate, more real.

Hermione blinked back the tears and nodded jerkily, still feeling off kilter by Tom’s absence but grasping the severity of her matron’s message.

“Yes,” she said softly, holding the other woman’s strong, unyielding gaze. “I understand, Mrs. Cole. Thank you for that, and for believing in me.”

Mrs. Cole’s touch lingered on Hermione’s arm for another few second before she resumed her rigid stance, arms straight at her side as she tipped her head to the car below.

Hermione adjusted her backpack once again as she slowly descended down the steps and into the backseat of the cab. As she slid into the wide seat she glanced up at the large, intimidating architecture of the victorian styled orphanage where she’d spent her most formative years. She felt a pang of loss, of forced change, the discomfort of starting anew from scratch.

Her hand absently played with the pendant at her throat and her thoughts traitorously drifted to Him. Always Him.

_Damn you, Tom. Where are you? You promised…_

She closed her eyes as the cab slowly pulled away, Mrs. Cole lingering at the entrance long enough to watch the cab disappear, a rare look of emotion on the old woman’s face that Hermione missed as her thoughts were plagued with crippling disappointment.

As the cab turned onto the main road and the driver attempted idle small talk Hermione took a deep, steadying breath, releasing the pendant and folding her hands on her lap.

_Maybe he’s just waiting. He’ll find me in Stratford. Of course he will, he was just busy today. There’s still time…_

But it would be six more years before Hermione Granger saw Tom Riddle.

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**Saturday July 9, 2005**

Hermione leaned over the bussing table in the back kitchen trying to catch her breath. She felt so out of sorts tonight, between the around the clock service stations, mind numbing mingling with guests, and the unshakable feeling of panic festering in her gut, she was one popped champagne cork away from losing her shit.

_What the bloody hell is wrong with me? I don’t like large crowds but I’ve never reacted like this… like a prey grazing through the grass with a predator at my back._

She shook her head, running the cool washcloth over her forehead that one of the other, frieldier servers had slipped her way. She knew she didn’t have long to doodle, clipboard lady would no doubt be combing the kitchens for stragglers and unserved champagne trays any moment now. Speeches were beginning soon and most guests were seated.

Hermione stood, took a deep breath and slowly exhaled on a three count.

_You’re almost there, Mione. The nights over half way through. You’re in the homestretch._
She discarded the hand towel and slowly made her towards the party room…

Only to be cut off by clipboard lady, who wore her usually affronted look upon seeing Hermione.

“What the hell are you doing back here? The-

“Speeches, yeah I know.”

The woman’s eyes slitted further, clearly not appreciating having her scolding session cut short.

“The guest of honor is MIA, the speeches can’t start until he’s found. You’re lucky. Now get your ass out there and start serving drinks.”

Hermione briefly closed her eyes, praying for serenity. She vividly imagined ripping the headset from the woman’s perfectly tailored bob and strangling her with the cord. The thought almost made her smile.

Almost.

Instead she opened her eyes to an even more agitated face and quickly stepped past the irate woman before she began a new tirade.

Hermione entered the party room and picked up a bottle of wine from one of the nearby servers, walking the perimeter of the room and filling glasses at the tables along the edge.

Then she felt the strange sensation again. Ice down her spin, hair standing on end, eyes fastened to her every move. Her head snapped up and her eyes darted to the far back of the room on instinct, like some magnet was pulling her focus there.

And she promptly dropped the wine bottle, deaf to the shattering of the glass at her feet or the gasps of the guests at the table before her. Wine splattered up on her legs, the tablecloth, the gowns and tuxedos of the people sitting nearest.

She heard nothing, saw nothing.

But Him.

Standing like a sentinel at the back of the room near the large doors leading to the main body of the country club. Dressed impeccably as the rest of the guests. Hands calmly folded behind his back.

And his storm grey eyes locked on her.

They were glowing. Other worldly. There was no other way to describe it. To describe this moment. This couldn't be real. This couldn't be happening.

She blinked. And blinked again. And then rubbed at her eyes, but there he remained, his expression looking… amused?

She swallowed thickly. The sodding bastard. Laughing at her expense, even after all these years. It was him alright.

The realization stole the breath from her lungs and she doubled over, catching herself on the table before her even as the scandalized guests yipped and squealed over the wine incident.

“Oh my goodness, I am terribly sorry about this!” came an urgent, cringingly familiar voice.

Clipboard lady sidled up beside Hermione, gripping her arm so tightly the circulation began to wane
and pulling her back and away from the finely dressed guests. “It’s her first night,” she explained in a sugary sweet voice, pushing a still dumbfounded and speechless Hermione behind her. “We’ll get this mess cleaned up right away.”

As she dragged Hermione towards the kitchens her gaze remained locked on Him. She was afraid to blink again, afraid this was a hallucination that would evaporate as soon as she lost visual contact. He was still far away but she had memorized the details of his face so long ago she could recognize the lines and patterns in his skin from the space shuttle.

His features were even more angular, more chiseled in manhood that what she recalled from their youth. His fine pale skin was the same, unblemished as though carved from marble. His thick, shiny dark dark was longer, wavy, swept back in a stylish fashion. His broad chest and narrow waist filled the tuxedo perfectly. And his eyes…

His eyes remained the same. Gray and thunderous, blazing hot and freezing cold all at once, pinning you to the spot like a pin through a butterfly wing when his focus was directed upon you.

And right now, his focus was entirely directed upon Hermione. His eyes tracked her movements across the room, holding her gaze without blinking, just as all consuming as she remembered.

Could this possibly be a hallucination? A waking fantasy induced by stress? How could her mind possibly conjure up an adult version of the lanky teen she’d last seen eight years ago?

The only thing her mind was certain of in that moment was how devastatingly beautiful this man, no, this otherworldly creature was. Because certainly this couldn’t be her Tom. Not here, at this event, standing there like he owned the place, like a regent over seeing his people.

She swallowed heavily as she was dragged deeper into the hallway leading to the kitchens, finally losing sight of him. She jerked violently out of clipboard’s lady grip.

“What the fuck is your problem?”

But the demand fell on deaf ears, because no sooner did Hermione scramble forward back into the main room than he disappeared.

She blinked, standing limp and mute, eyes sweeping the room for any sign of him. Clipboard lady was at her back, hissing something at her, most likely of a threatening nature. Hermione ignored her and walked as quickly as she could to the last place she saw him, mindlessly bumping into tables and guests without a glance in either direction. She stood where he was last standing, rooted to the spot, spinning in circles looking for any sign.

Then that feeling of magnetism, of being lured silently by a siren’s call fell upon her again. The same impulse that directed her searching gaze to his presence the first time was now calling her out of the party room and through the large doors he was standing near, out into the main hall. She didn’t stop to ponder, to question, she gripped tightly onto the handles and slipped out of the party, her duties for the night long forgotten.

She stood in an empty hallway leading down to an empty concierge desk as the end, beautiful stained glass windows lining one side of the walkway, several large ornate doors similar to the one at her back dotting along the opposite wall.

*He’s hear. I can feel him…*

She took a deep breath and started walking, eyes flashing this way and that as though he’d materialize before her like a mirage if only she gazed at the right angle.
She was halfway down the hall when she heard a noise, a muffled shuffling and slightly louder thump. She froze, eyes darting to the right at a set of massive carved doors barely ten feet away.

She swallowed, her stomach filling with a sense of anticipation and dread, though she was too driven to see Tom up close to fully ponder the feeling. She grasped a handle on one of the large doors and gave it a gentle tug, surprised when it easily parted to allow her entry.

She held her breath and stepped inside.

The room was dark for the most part, only lit by a partially covered window. There were many tables along the polished wood floor, chairs tipped over on top, a smaller entertainment space. She glanced around as she crept further inside, her heart beating faster, an animal sensing danger nearby. But she squashed the feeling, ignored her instinct, her female intuition, and stepped further inside the room with slow, measured steps.

She cleared her throat lightly. “He- Hello?” she all but whispered into the large open space, instantly regretting it.

She bit her lip and turned in a slow circle, seeing nothing amiss, nothing out of the ordinary, no sign of-

There was a gentle tap, like a shoe against hardwood. She spun back around, heart in her throat, and realized there was a hidden bar at the back corner of the room. She could see part of the shelving, several high end bottles upon display. She didn’t hesitate, marching quickly around the corner and then coming up short.

The bar was fully within view, but it was empty, stools piled to one side and bar wear to the other. She instantly deflated, hanging her head and willing back the tears.

He wasn’t in here. No one was in here. She’d missed him.

Lost him. Again.

If he was even there to begin with, you crazy bint.

She started to pivot on her heel, resigned to returning to the main party where she was surely about to be fired on the spot for walking out, when something bright red caught her eye.

It wasn't so much the color itself, as the room was filled with bright furnishings. It was the fact that the color was spreading, like spilled paint. She blinked, standing numbly and watching the color pool and flow and grow, spreading out from some source behind the bar.

She could hear her heart thumping wildly in her ears as she neared the counter, holding bated breath. She didn't want to step in the bright liquid, some instinctual part of her knowing what it was before her mind caught up, so instead she stood on the opposite side of the counter and perched on her tiptoes, balancing her forearms against the granite countertop and slowly peering over the edge…

She gasped, jerking back as soon as her eyes landed on the crumpled body. All she'd been able to make out was a black suit and long, white blonde hair, half saturated in bright crimson. She brought a hand to her mouth and spun around wildly, braced to run for the door.

But as soon as she about faced a crisp white cravat came into view, taking up her field of vision. Strong hands grasped her upper arms, rooting her in place. She knew who it was before she looked up.
But she had to look up.

Had to see his face up close.

She squeezed her eyes shut briefly, tears pouring out of the corners, before sucking in a sharp breath and peering upward.

Tom smiled down at her like a cat that caught the canary, straight white teeth gleaming, eyes shining brightly as if lit from within.

*Otherworldly*… her mind thought helplessly.

She was trapped, and she was wrecked and devastated and filled with longing and anger and elation all at once… too many warring emotions to sort through, but nothing could quite override the blind panic she felt at discovering the bloody, mangled body behind the bar not five feet from where they stood.

She opened her mouth to speak but couldn't find the words to embody the entirety of the situation she found herself in.

His fingers dug into her flesh almost painfully. Looking at him was painful, his perfect beauty, so cold and hot, always a dichotomy for her senses.

His smile turned into a look she recognized, smug, satisfied with himself, as he released his grip upon her with one hand to slowly trail it up her arm, over her shoulder and around her neck. His long fingers slid behind her collar, short blunt nails lightly scratching against her sensitive nape and making her gasp, his thumb resting gently against her pulsepoint, his piercing eyes darting down to watch the rapid thrumming of her heart against her skin.

Then his fingers moved lower, catching on a thin gold chain that made his eyes turn darker, transforming into a look she also recognized from some time long ago…

He gently fished the necklace out of her shirt, running his fingers over the twisted celtic pendant, the silence so heavy and full she felt a solid weight upon her, crushing her lungs and expelling the breath from her body. She was weightless, held afloat only by his strong grip on her arm.

Finally, after a short eternity or two, his eyes latched back onto hers, rooting her to the spot permanently, seering through to her core. He pulled her in close, until she was flush against him, his body heat scalding her front and making her desperate for more.

“Hermione…” He whispered, honey dripping from his lips, catching onto her tongue and running down the back of her throat. “I told you I’d find you.”

She blinked, tears clouding her vision, sensing something terrible and great was about to happen. She opened her mouth to speak his name, a prayer on the wind, when she felt a sharp prick in her neck, a bee sting…

And her world faded to black.
Sunday July 10, 2005

Harry walked briskly along the long stretch of hallway, his meeting room at the far end. He scanned his badge at the intermediary check points scattered between here and his destination, fighting back a grimace at the stupidity of having multiple checkpoints in the same hallway. If an assailant managed to blow their way through one of the doors, what was to stop them from blowing their way through the rest?

On his more reasonable days, i.e. the days he wasn’t running painfully late, he understood the logic behind such a stronghold, to both deter and slow perpetrators down. But right now he wanted to pull out his piece and blow holes through the sliding doors himself as the reader rejected his ID badge over and over.

“Stupid fucking piece of-”

“Oi, Harry! What a miracle, thought I was gonna be the latest one to the party!”

Harry spun on his heal.

“Hey Ron, can you scan us in, the damn thing isn’t reading my card again.”

Ron made a show of patting himself down, Harry fought the urge to roll his eyes at the overplayed bit.

“Oh no, I think I left my badge at home! Shite! I’ll have to turn back and get it.”

Harry sighed, rubbing at the bridge of his nose over his glasses.

“Just taking the mickey outta ya, mate! I have it right here,” the redhead said with a beaming grin, way too bright and cheery for this hour of day.

Ron scanned his ID badge and the door slid open, Harry strode through with purpose.

“Hey, everything okay?”

He sighed. “Yeah, fine, just running on fumes and wasn’t expecting to be called in this early on a Sunday.”

“Yeah, I hear ya. Must be something big though, if we’re both being tapped, yeah?”

Harry mulled it over. “I honestly have no idea.”

They both paused outside their destination and turned to face each other.

“Paper rock scissors?” Harry prompted.

“You’re on.”
They threw their hands down, one, two, three…

Harry cringed and Ron grinned even wider.

“That’s the fifth round you’ve lost, old man, better switch to cutting cards or flipping a coin next time.”

Harry sighed deeply and turned the handle, bracing himself before entering the room, the sound of conversation ceasing. He slid in as quietly as he could, Ron moving behind him like a shadow.

Harry pulled up short when he saw who awaited him inside.

“There’s my boy!” Sirius shouted, exuberant as ever, even at seven thirty in the morning.

Harry cringed, nodding in his boss and mentor’s direction before sidling over to the empty seat next to him, Ron sitting in the vacant chair to his left. Across the table sat one of the usual suspects, Senior Officer Bartemius Crouch, the head of their department, and in the center chair directly in front of Harry sat-

“Thank you for joining us today, Dumbledore, we’re honored to have you among us,” Crouch groveled, causing Harry to swallow thickly.

He turned his focus to the legendary man himself. His reputation preceded him for the last three decades, since he was nothing but a British field agent working the streets of London where he cultivated one of MI6’s most valuable assets and had since saved the world at least three times, depending on which source you talked to.

Harry was in the presence of MI6 royalty and his felt awed by that power.

Dumbledore for the most part looked as easy and approachable as ever, a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth beneath his medium length gray beard as his pale blue eyes shifted from the latest arrivals to the previous speaker.

“Hardly a chore, Bartemius, seeing as I called for this meeting in the first place, seems the least I can do is attend.”

“Yes, yes of course,” Crouch droned on, face turning red and splotchy. Sirius peered to his side, sharing a look with Harry that nearly made him lose his composure. He averted his eyes just in time to avoid laughing out right.

“Let’s not keep these young gentleman hostage any longer than necessary, Bartemius. I can only imagine the plans we’re disturbing by calling them into the office at such an early hour, on their weekend no less.”

Harry felt Ron fidget at his side, likely feeling as uncomfortable as he did with the prospect of Dumbledore thinking either Intelligence Officers valued a lie in more than their work. Still, Harry felt unsure speaking in opposition.

Sirius did so for him.

“These boys are just as dedicated as their parents before them. You know Arthur, Albus, and I’m sure you remember James and Lily.”

Dumbledore’s eyes cut to Harry, the light blue melting into a liquid that reflected the light at all angles. It was quite mesmerizing.
“Ah, why yes, I finally get to meet the child of the incredibly brave and talented James and Lily Potter. What an honor it is my boy. Your parents were some of the finest agents to ever grace our organization. They accomplished a great deal, laid the foundation for many amazing developments in the way of technology and espionage. I was devastated to hear of their passing and I am sincerely sorry for your loss. I have no doubt they’d both be extremely proud of all you’ve accomplished in your short time at the Ministry.”

Harry felt like his mouth was filled with cotton, dumbfounded at Dumbledore’s sincere and heartfelt condolence. He was excited at the prospect of meeting someone else who knew his parents, another untapped resource for information on the people who left his life when he was still just a boy. He was equal parts flattered Dumbledore had kept any form of tabs on his own progress through the Intelligence ranks at the Ministry. But he knew this wasn’t the time for such a discussion. He merely offered a polite bow of his head and tried to keep his voice as level as he could.

“Thank you very much for your kind words, Agent Dumbledore, I am honored to be in your presence this day.”

Dumbledore offered a polite nod in return, then brought his hands up to clasp before him on the table, effectively ending the conversation as he swiftly changed topics, his expression hardening and his eyes losing the luster they contained moments before.

“I might as well get right to it, if you have no objections to my leading this discussion, Bartemius?”

“Certainly not.”

“Very well then. The reason I asked Bartemius to gather his team of most reliable operatives is because of what occurred last night between the approximate hours of 8 and 9pm at The Serpentine Country Club in North London. A retirement party was being held for one Lucius Abraxas Malfoy, owner and majority shareholder of Malfoy Enterprises, where approximately 300 guests were in attendance, minus any staff and entertainment.”

Dumbledore paused, briefly nodding his head to the stack of folders in the middle of the large desk. Each person at the table reached out to take one. Harry opened it, avidly studying the papers and photos inside.

“As you can see from the coroner’s report and crime scene images, Mr. Malfoy was reported dead on location, cause of death determined to be a severed femoral artery causing him to bleed out. He was 52 years old and leaves behind a wife and one adult child.”

Harry read through the report in silence, allowing Dumbledore’s deep baritone to wash over him while his mind raced along facts and speculations, connecting dots, unconnecting them, dragging the threads here and there, seeing where all the pieces fit best.

He was a skilled Intelligence Officer that quickly climbed the ranks for a reason. He had the ability to see what others missed, to ask questions that most would think insignificant but held some nugget of information necessary to help break the case. He had a stack of solved cases under his belt already, and he eagerly awaited the next challenge.

“Hm...” Sirius hummed to his side, also deeply immersed in the file. “52 seems pretty young to retire, especially for a captain of industry. You’d think he’d want to keep his family titled company under his thumb as long as possible before handing the reins over to junior. I assume his child will take over.”

Harry looked up, addressing his question to the room at large as his mind raced through possibilities.
“How old is his surviving child?”

Dumbledore stared back, eyes taking on that unnatural twinkle once again. Harry shifted in his chair, feeling somewhat perturbed, like the man knew more than he was letting on. He hated being left in the dark, especially when it came to solving cases.

“Draco Lucius Malfoy is 27 years old. He is a bachelor with no known children. He lives in a high rise flat in West London and has been helping his father run the company since he began University, taking the title of co-chair two years ago.”

Harry nodded, eyes drifting off to the distance. “Seems a bit young to take over as CEO of a multi-billion dollar company. What does the company do? Manufacturing, right?”

“Rumor is they design the stuff that makes bombs go boom,” Ron said, his voice unusually high. Harry didn’t spare him a glance, assuming his friend was nervous to speak in the presence of such a renowned agent. Harry sympathized, but his nerves were long forgotten in pursuit of the truth, he was on the hunt now and everyone was a possible source of information, regardless of rank or title.

Dumbledore spared him a small smile. “Rumors be as they may, Officer Weasley, the company is publicly known to produce a variety of technologies used everywhere from military grade avionics to simple kitchen appliances. I imagine the list of all their products and services would extend well beyond this table.”

Harry flipped through a few more sheets of paper before snapping his head up and locking gazes with older man once again.

“I think figuring out motive will be a lot easier to suss out if we have a killer in custody. I take it there are no leads at this point?”

Dumbledore shifted in his chair, so minutely Harry would have missed it himself if he hadn’t been studying the man with the same scrutiny as he would a crime scene. Dumbledore seemed to notice Harry’s intense gaze and leaned forward, effecting a casual posture.

“At this moment, no. Given the mode of homicide I would suspect a professional.”

Sirius shut his folder and laid it down on the table. “I would agree. And he’s had nearly half a day to disappear underground. Someone hired him to take out a billionaire, they’d have covered their bases by hiring non local. We should cross reference flights—”

“What about witnesses? Three hundred plus people, someone had to have seen something, even if they didn’t realize it at the time.” Harry spoke up, glancing to his mentor in apology for interrupting, but wanting to cover all the bases closest to home before extending outwards.

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair once again and Harry could tell by the look on his face the answer would be no.

“Actually, there is one witness who claims to have seen the killer.”

Harry blinked, his heart skipping a beat. This was a surprise. But he knew Dumbledore wouldn’t have buried the lead if the witness sighting proved to be a smoking gun.

“The victim’s wife, Narcissa Malfoy. However she has not proven to be a reliable source. We have her in agent custody at the moment while we try to make sense of her story, however her son is fighting for her release and is putting quite a bit of pressure on us from a legal standpoint. Her testimony is difficult to move forward with.”
“What did she say?”

Dumbledore sighed. “She’s…. Not in the right frame of mind. She claims a demon killed her husband. Multiple witnesses put her nowhere near the crime scene during the window of opportunity.”

Sirius sighed and Bartemius let out a low chuckle.

“Lovely,” Crouch began, “Sounds like the bird is off her rocker.”

“Not necessarily,” Harry cut in, “Mental or medical issues aside, she still may have seen something. May we speak with her?”

Dumbledore studied Harry in silence for a heavy beat before nodding slowly. “Certainly, Mr. Potter. If you think it will help your case. However I suggest meeting with her quickly, as I mentioned, her son is fighting tooth and nail for her release.”

“And Draco has been questioned?” Harry asked, his blood pumping wildly at the thought of such a high profile case. So many angles to work out.

“He was spoken to at the scene by the responding field officers, however I believe they covered the most rudimentary of basics.”

_The son would have the most motive, inheriting all of his father’s wealth so young… but why kill him when he was already retiring and handing the reins over? Other factors at play? Blackmail? Opposing company interests?_

He blinked, attempting to slow down his racing thoughts.

Dumbledore studied Harry closely, a small smile forming at the corner of his whiskered mouth. “I can see the wheels turning in your head, Mr. Potter. I dare say your parents would be very proud indeed.”

Harry was taken aback by the comment, feeling a strange flush blossom in his chest.

“I will call downstairs and tell them you’d like to speak to Mrs. Malfoy as soon as possible,” he supplied, sparing Harry the need to formulate a response.

“She’s being held here?” Sirius asked, brow raised.

“Yes, as I said, given the nature of the incident the Ministry was brought in immediately. She’s been in our custody since last night.”

Harry swallowed, running his finger along the edge of the file folder with a heavy look in his eyes.

“Is there something else you’d like to discuss, Mr. Potter, before this meeting is adjourned?”

Harry looked up and blinked, his mouth opening and closing, rarely at a loss for words but unsure how to formulate his question without causing offense.

“I…”

“Please, do not hesitate on my account.”

He swallowed and cleared his throat. “It’s just, I understand the nature of the murder suggests not only homicide but a professional hit, however there’s many agents who could take on such a case,
even for a well known business figure like Malfoy.”

Dumbledore stapled his fingers before him once more, studying Harry with that same indiscernible light in his eyes. Sirius shifted in his chair next to Harry, clearly unsure where Harry was headed with this line of inquiry and readying himself to step in and mitigate any damage.

“And you’re wondering why I’ve tagged Bartemius and Sirius in this case?”

Harry slowly shook his head.

“No, Sir, I’m curious why you were tagged.”

Sirius stiffened beside him but Dumbledore held up a steadying hand, silencing anything Harry’s mentor may have said. Harry pulled his shoulders back, harnessing every bit of pluck he could this early on a Sunday.

“You’re a renowned agent. And as famous or high up as Malfoy may be, I can’t imagine the Ministry pulling you in to investigate anything short of the Queen’s assassination or a full scale government collapse.”

The room was deadly silent, Harry held his breath and could practically hear the blood rushing to Crouch’s face, the man’s fat fists tightening under the table, the indignation on his face.

Then Dumbledore smiled.

And laughed.

“My my, what a clever boy you are, Mr. Potter. Clever indeed. The rumors about you are true, I see. You truly do see things others do not.”

Harry blinked, releasing the breath he’d been holding and watching Sirius and Ron do the same.

“I am not at liberty to discuss the full scope of the investigation that’s been launched, but there is reason to believe this killing could be linked to others of a… similar proclivity, targeting victims of certain standing in society, as well as government.”

Sirius sat back. “Bloody hell. But how can we investigate to the full extent of our ability if we’re being withheld information on similar killings that may lead us to the assailant?”

Dumbledore calmly folded his hands on the table top. “It is up to my discretion to bring others into the investigation, however at this time I see no evidence linking this case to the others, aside from the unusual mode of killing. I can assure you the other victims did not have any arteries severed, nothing so blatantly linking the cases. I was merely curious about this investigation given Lucius Malfoy was the victim. I would like to be kept apprised of what you uncover so I can make the determination whether this case should be rolled into the ongoing investigation. If it comes to that, I can then decide whether your team should join in.”

Harry watched Dumbledore closely, still feeling as if something was off, as though there were some key piece of information he wasn’t telling them, but he could hardly accuse the Senior Agent of such. Instead he followed his mentor’s lead by nodding and thanking him for the opportunity to work on such a high profile case, taking his leave and doing his best to ignore the light blue eyes burning a hole into his back as he left the meeting for Narcissa Malfoy’s interview room downstairs.

Wednesday October 31, 1990
Hermione squeezed the social worker’s hand tighter as they neared the ominously large oak doors of the orphanage. She had been trying her best to remain calm but the moment they passed through the rod iron gates the fear started to come to life, starting as a clenching pain in her stomach and spreading outward to leaden her limbs and numb her mind.

The social worker knocked once, twice, loudly rapping against the wood and then squeezing Hermione’s hand in gentle assurance, peering down at her with a warm smile that Hermione tried to mimic. Her face felt strange, the muscles not responding to her commands properly. She swallowed heavily as the door swung open to reveal a short, reedy thin woman with greying dark hair pulled into a bun so tight it surely was the cause for her slitted gaze.

“You’re late.” She said, the words holding no real emotion, simply a statement of fact.

“Apologies, Mrs. Cole, we hit a spot of traffic on the-”

“No matter. Come.” She spun on her heel, marching away into the strange abyss beyond. Hermione felt the adult sized hand squeeze hers once more but it did nothing to calm the rapid beating of her heart.

She was led inside, then given the official tour by the perpetually sour matron who stressed each rule of the orphanage as though it was God’s own gospel and her soul would suffer eternal hellfire for breaking any of the commands laid forth. Hermione nodded when she was supposed to, remaining otherwise mute and silently praying for the social worker to deem this place unfit and escort her out the same way they came in.

The orphanage wasn’t that bad, truth be told. Low on resources for sure, over crowded, no doubt. But the halls were filled with laughter, children playing and little feet pounding up and down steps. They seem distracted enough, immune to the ghostly presence of the foreboding matron who barked sharp commands to whatever child was closest each time she turned a corner.

Hermione knew the social worker would leave her there. She knew she’d never see the young woman again despite her promises to visit in a week’s time to see how Hermione was settling in. She knew adults made promises that they didn’t intend to break at the time of making but later found plenty of justifiable reasons to do so. And she didn’t fault the smiling blonde for that, or the downtrodden matron for her short fuse and hawk like glare, or the system for throwing her away like discarded rubbish, unwanted by society at large. She just felt empty. Every day. Every night. Void of all emotion, all cares and desires. And she couldn’t even muster to care about that.

That night she sat in the corner, pretending to read a book that was far below her advanced reading level, thumbing the pages for the simple distraction and the excuse to avoid the eyes of the nearby children, watching her closely, whispering among themselves about the new girl. It felt similar to starting primary for the first time, strangers deciding to label you friend or foe upon first glance only.

And she knew she looked a fright, her wild curls more unmanageable than ever without the careful grooming of a mother's touch each morning and night. Pale chalky skin with heavy bags beneath, the result of several sleepless nights. And most glaringly off putting, her air of indifference, her anti-social avoidance of all social graces. Let them label her how they wanted, think whatever they wanted. She just wanted to be left alone.

But of course, Amy couldn’t allow that to happen. Hermione knew the girl was trouble before she even glanced up from her book. She’d heard the pigtailed girl whispering harshly about Hermione’s appearance and mannerisms to her friends across the room, making sure her voice was just loud enough for her victim to hear. A skilled bully. She’d had the group snickering and out right laughing a few times, her comments growing more scathing as Hermione refused to bat an eye, sitting serenely
in her corner of the room with her eyes carefully trained on her book. She knew it was only a matter of time before the nasty girl stepped up her game.

She heard the footsteps approach and did her best to keep her expression neutral. She saw a pair of battered trainers in her eyeline, Amy hovering right in front of her, lording over her with an air of blatant entitlement.

Hermione’s eyes stopped pretending to scan the page as she waited with baited breath for the shot to come.

“I heard your parents fell off a cliff and exploded to bits on impact.”

Hermione blinked.

The statement took her so off guard she couldn’t help but look up, meeting the girl’s gleaming gaze, seeing the malicious smirk below.

And Hermione laughed.

It bubbled up spontaneously, out of her control. And it felt good. She threw her head back and let out her first true laugh in months, feeling the tightening in her chest loosen and the steel in her spine melt.

Amy looked at her like she’d grown three heads.

“What the hell are you laughing at, freak? You think it’s funny? Did you push them off the edge or something?”

Hermione laughed harder, dropping the book to grab her side, trying to suck in a breath to steady herself but finding it impossible. For the first time in months she felt hopeful. This Amy character was proving to be quite the village idiot and a wonderful source of unintended humor, which really was the best kind.

Amy’s face was growing steadily redder, by anger or embarrassment at not understanding the source of Hermione’s amusement, she didn’t know, but she saw the girl clench her fists at her side and wondered if she’d further amuse Hermione by trying to pummel her. The idea of being attacked by a pigtailed assailant made her laugh harder.

Amy’s mouth opened and closed as she struggled to regain her footing. The other kids who’d been watching the conflict play out nearby were exchanging curious looks, clearly surprised by the turn of events. Amy was losing ground and she knew it, her expression turning scathing.

“Weirdo. You’re a freak, aren’t you? Just like T-“

“Benson.”

Hermione watched with no shortage of curiosity as Amy’s entire countenance changed. Her body went rigid, her expression melting to one of undisguisable fear. Hermione fell silent upon the sight of Amy’s unmistakable terror. She caught her breath and glanced about the room, noticing other kids with similar reactions, most averting their gazes and many fleeing altogether without a backward glance.

Then she looked back to Amy and noticed for the first time the tall, gangly boy standing behind her. She couldn’t see his face, blocked as it was by Amy’s large pigtails.

Slowly the other girl spun around.
“T-Tom, I was just—”

“Leaving.”

Hermione blinked, her brows drawing together at the boy’s severe tone. She got the distinct impression he wasn’t coming to her rescue. Amy didn’t spare Hermione a fleeting glance as she jerkily slipped to the far corner of the room, joined her friends, and the entire group disappeared up the stairs.

Hermione slowly glanced around the nearly empty room in confusion and trepidation. Somehow she knew this boy had driven the other children away with no more than a cold greeting to Amy. She doubted that meant anything good where she was concerned.

She slowly brought her head around to face the owner of the cold voice. Her heart leapt into her throat upon meeting his piercing gaze. His eyes were a light gray but somehow fathomless dark. She felt her gut clench briefly in instinctual fear but she forced herself to take a deep steadying breath.

The boy stood about ten feet away, watching her closely, no doubt willing her to disappear with the rest of the children with his glacial stare alone. She was almost jealous. She’d love to be able to clear a room like that and finally find blissful solitude.

The longer she held his challenging gaze the more recognizable it became. There was a haunted quality to it, one he tried to mask with hostility no doubt, but she could almost feel the trauma radiating from him. The damaged child in her recognized the one in him. She suddenly felt a calming sense of familiarity staring back at her. She knew that dark, angry look. It had been staring back at her in the mirror for months now.

Hermione nodded once, acknowledging his presence, and leaned forward to scoop her fallen book from the ground. She casually opened it to a random page and continued reading. She felt the boy more than she saw him, now that he was no longer in her direct line of sight. But tendrils of burning heat and freezing cold seemed to radiate off him, lashing at her skin.

She swallowed lightly, trying to hide the motion by tucking a stray curl behind her ear. She counted to thirty in her head before the boy slowly moved closer. At first she thought he meant to hoard over her as Amy had, and dread started to pool in the pit of her stomach. This boy would not be as easily diverted as Amy had. But she released her bated breath when she realized he was moving towards the bookcase to her right. She heard him slide a heavy tomb from the shelf, wasting no time browsing the titles, before falling still.

She tried her best to ignore his lingering presence but she felt the hairs on her arms and neck start to rise, feeling his stare upon her. She couldn’t ignore it, it was like a magnetic force turning her head slowly to meet his gaze once more. She swallowed, her throat feeling suddenly dry.

He continued to study her, but this time his gaze lacked the hostile intensity from before. Now he merely seemed… curious. She held his stormcloud eyes far longer than she felt comfortable doing, but her mind was too addled to think of anything worthwhile to say. She watched in fascination as his pupils dilated just a fraction, making her feel like a rabbit before a fox. Her fight or flight response was too buried beneath months of mourning and depression, but she felt her heart rate increase all the same. Truthfully, she felt more alive than she had in weeks, pinned beneath this strange boy’s inscrutable stare.

And just as suddenly his eyes turned away from her, his body pivoting in a graceful movement as he walked out of the room with a comfortable swagger that seemed far too mature for someone his age.
As he disappeared from sight Hermione released a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. She gazed numbly at the book in her hands. Despite the welcomed break from her monotonous routine one thing was for certain, she had no desire to interact with that strange boy ever again.

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**Sunday July 10, 2005**

Hermione slowly blinked her eyes open on a low groan, reaching up to cradle her head on instinct. She swallowed, her throat dry and scratchy. She rolled to her side and buried her face in her pillow, the throbbing in her head making her dizzy.

She attempted to stretch out when she felt a tugging sensation at her chest. She blinked and gazed down. She was still in her overly tight uniform from last night. Strange…

She gasped sharply, sitting up so fast her head spun. Her eyes darted around the familiar space of her bedroom. She attempted to swallow again but to no avail. Her fists clenched in her bedding, a tremor running through her body. Bright morning light streamed in from the window beside her.

This can’t be happening. This can’t be real.

What day is it? Was last night a dream?

She realized she was hyperventilating and closed her eyes, forcing herself to count backwards from ten, a meditative practice she’d learned from Lavender, of all people. It didn’t help. She still felt a strong sense of hysteria when her eyes opened and she stumbled off her bed, nearly losing her footing to a strong wave of vertigo. Her balance was off, she supported her weight on her furniture and wall as she raced out of her bedroom, heart beating so fast she thought it might explode.

She paused in the hallway, debating whether she should enter the living room, terrified of what she might find.

Of who I might find.

She shook her head.

Think, Hermione, think. Whatever’s in the living room could have easily attacked you in the bedroom.

Chills went down her spine. She made a staggering dash back to her room, looking at her belongings for anything she might use as a weapon. She knocked over picture frames, tubes of lip balm and loose class papers as she scrambled. Then her eyes fell on her rather heavy organic chemistry book laying beside her bed. She leapt for it, hefting the large tomb with her as she slowly made her way outside and down the hall.

She held her breath before turning the corner into her living room, quickly scanning the bright open space, the book held aloft, ready to strike down on a moment’s notice.

Spun around, searching, listening, hearing only the thrum of blood rushing through her ears. She swallowed, her throat still parched, slowly lowering her book and releasing a breath.

She glanced at her front door. It was locked, the deadbolt turned. Her heart beat painfully in her chest. Her apartment wasn’t that big, if someone (not someone, Hermione, you know who you saw last night…) was still inside with her they didn’t have many options in terms of hideouts. Still, she’d never be able to breathe easy until she overturned every rock.
So she set her book aside for the fireplace poker and opened every closet, looked behind every door and parted the shower curtain with great trepidation, every muscle tense with worry until she was sure there were no other occupants with her.

As she made her way back to the living room the adrenaline flooded out of her system in a whoosh she could almost hear. She slumped into her couch, eyes tearing. She didn’t know where to begin-

Her ringtone sounded from a distance. She leapt to her feet and sprinted towards the bedroom, still off balance and bumping her arm into the doorframe so hard she heard the joint pop. She cringed in pain, holding her sore shoulder while spinning in mad circles, searching for her phone.

She saw it sitting at the center of her dresser, somehow overlooked in her quest for a weapon. She quickly snatched it up, reading Padma’a name on the caller ID.

“Hello?”

“Hermione? Oh my god are you okay?”

Hermione’s mouth hung open, lost for words. How did Padma know?

“I just turned on the telly and saw the news. Christ, I can’t believe there was a fucking murder at the club last night! Did you see anything?”

She blinked, remembering. The image of the crumpled body, the oozing blood, endless amounts of it, pooling, spreading, reaching out for her across the polished wood surface…

“Hermione? You there?”

She slowly sat on the end of her bed, feeling disconnected from her body.

“Uh… I…”

“You didn’t see anything did you? Parv’s asking me a million questions. It was that Malfoy bloke that got killed. At his own party. Christ.”

She pressed a palm to her chest, tears overflowing from her eyes.

“Mione, you alright?”

She inhaled a shaky breath.

“Padma, I… I…”

She couldn’t seem to force the words out beyond that.

“Yeah? Hermione?”

She shook her head, though she knew Padma couldn’t see the gesture.

“Mione you’re worrying me, love. I’m heading over to check on you.”

“No!”

She surprised herself with the outburst. She didn’t want Padma coming over. She didn’t even want to be in this apartment. It was all too much. The walls were closing in on her.
Last night really happened. I saw a dead body. I saw Tom. Tom was with the dead body. Tom was the one who…

She squeezed her eyes shut, unable to complete the painful thought. Padma continued to fret but her words were all jumbled in Hermione’s head. All she could think about were his eyes. They were exactly as she remembered, and yet so much more intense than her memory could have ever captured. They had rooted her to the spot, rendered her helpless beneath his gaze and touch. She had stood there, right before a dead man, and she’d done nothing.

How did I get home? I don’t remember anything after…

She absently rubbed at her neck and at the same moment the memory solidified. She leapt to her feet and lurched to her dresser mirror, pulling aside her collar and leaning in close, inspecting the side of her neck she’d felt the sting.

She had to squint, but there it was, a tiny red blemish on her pale flesh.

The blood drained from her face.

“Mione? I’m leaving now-”

“No, I, I’d rather come to you. I need to return Parvati’s uniform-”

“Screw the uniform!”

Hermione couldn't take her eyes off the needle mark.

“I just… I’d rather come to you, ok? Let me just… get changed and… I need to…”

“Hermione? You’re making me nervous, what’s the matter?”

She felt the hysteria rising again, she took a deep breath, trying desperately to sort her frantic thoughts.

“I just… I just need to get ready, ok? I promise I’ll be over later.”

“If you aren’t here by ten I’m coming to you.”

Hermione closed her eyes, agreeing to her friend’s request but seeing the haunting gaze of a terrifying stranger that shared the eyes of a boy she once loved.

Harry made his way down the stairwell with Sirius at his side, Ron two steps behind.

“Why don’t you take the interview with the witness, Harry. Ron, start compiling a list of every person who was at the Club last night. Not just party guests, I want to know every person who stopped in to play a round of golf that morning and every plumber that unclogged a toilet. We’ll pull Neville in as well, that list will be ungodly long.”

Harry nodded before glancing over with a raised brow. “Over three hundred people and only one person claims to be a witness? Insane.”

Sirius rubbed at his temple. “We’re definitely dealing with a pro.”

“You okay?”
Sirius blinked before his expression softened, the corner of his mouth lifting.

“Rem and I were in our cups last night, bloody date night.”

Harry smiled. “What did you get up to?”

“Not sure I want to be privy to this conversation,” Ron teased from behind.

“Shut it, you nasty ingrate. We tried to keep it tame, stayed in and rented a film. Made the mistake of letting him pick it. Some bloody french thing, all artsy and drab. I had to skull a bottle just to sit through the damn thing.”

Harry chuckled, shaking his head ruefully as they entered the lift hall.

“Wild animal, you. Alright, I’ll go see our supposed witness now, not sure how much time we’ll have to question her if her son is making as much noise as Dumbledore claims. I’ll meet you lot afterwards, yeah?”

“Actually Harry, hang back just a moment. Ron, you head on up, I’ll meet you in a few.”

Ron looked between the two dark haired men before smirking. “Harry’s in trouble, isn’t he? Please let me stay for the scolding?”

“Not a chance, young man. Now head up before I chuck you off the balcony.”

Ron threw his head back with a laugh, entering the open lift and saluting them as the doors closed over his amused face.

Harry tried to compose a bland expression while hiding his fidgeting hands in his trouser pockets.

“I’m being scolded?”

Sirius titled his head and studied his young charge, the one he’d taken under his wing at the tender age of sixteen, his godson for all intents and purposes.

“Am I the scolding type?”

“You gave me hell when I wrecked the mini.”

“That’s because you took it without permission. However when I learned it was to impress a bird I took pity on your poor soul and let you off the hook.”

“You call making me work all summer powerwashing graffiti taking it easy?”

“Manual labor builds character. Now listen, Harry, you know how impressed I am with your work for the Ministry. You’ve certainly earned your stripes and I have no doubt I’ll be answering to you before my retirement. But this is a high profile case. Eyes will be on us from every department. Crouch will be breathing down our necks. And you know how he is,” he trailed off, watching Harry rub his eyes beneath his glasses.

“I know, I know,” he continued. “I hate playing the political games. But Crouch lives and breathes that shite, and with Dumbledore in the eagle’s nest we’re going to have to cross every T and dot every I, do you understand what I’m telling you?”

A muscle in Harry’s jaw ticked as he suppressed a groan. “You’re telling me not to go off script. When Crouch says jump I ask him how high.”
Sirius nodded, though his eyes held a soft sympathy. “You’re brilliant, Harry. But being a great investigator is only half the battle for an Operative. You have to learn to play the game, as awful as it is. What you said at the end of the meeting, calling Dumbledore out like that, it wasn’t appropriate. If you had any concerns or questions relating to his involvement in the investigation you should’ve raised them with me, privately.”

“Dumbledore didn’t seem to mind.”

“Albus is a…” Harry watched curiously as Sirius searched for the right word. “Let’s just say he’s a rare duck. You got lucky. Other Senior Agents wouldn’t have stood for you questioning them so directly. I know you were only trying to further the investigation, but remember, office politics can’t be ignored, otherwise you’ll burn your bridges and be out vital resources, yeah?”

Harry’s head dropped, eyes averted down, properly scolded despite Sirius’s soft hand in doing so. He hated disappointing his mentor.

“I understand. It won’t happen again. I’ll be on my best behavior.”

He glanced up at Sirius’s sudden bark of laughter. “Christ, I never said to do that, what’s the fun of hunting down a killer if you can’t have a laugh about it?”

Harry shook his head and smirked. “Message received.”

“Good. Now go question the crazy bint that claims a goblin ate her husband.”

“I believe she said a demon.”

“Close enough. Report back after.”

Harry nodded, watching Sirius board the nearby lift and disappear behind the mirrored doors, leaving his own emerald eyes staring back at him.

Narcissa Malfoy wasn’t anything like Harry was expecting, and yet she was everything he’d envisioned if asked to picture a wealthy socialite wife. She was quite beautiful and well made up even after twelve hours awake in the bowels of the Ministry. Whoever had brought her in, Dean he expected, had put her in one of their nicer holding rooms, equipped with cushioned seating, magazines and a water cooler.

Her long blonde hair was pulled back into an intricate knot, long bangs framing her delicate face. Having an adult son Harry could guess at her age, but admitted she looked quite youthful, likely undergoing the knife at some point in the last ten years. She was slouched over on the couch when he entered, eyes heavy lidded and a Ministry issue blanket wrapped tightly around her shoulders.

The officer on watch outside had given Harry a sympathetic look when opening her door, and Harry had steeled himself for crazed hysterics, ready to dodge any projectiles being launched at his head.

But the room was deathly silent. She was so still beneath the blanket his heart seized in fear for a moment, sure he was staring at a lifeless corpse. But then her pale gaze lifted and met his. To say she looked haunted would be putting it lightly.

“Mrs. Malfoy, my name is Harry Potter. I’m one of the Officers investigating your husband’s murder. Please allow me to express my deepest condolences for your loss.”

She blinked once, twice, and then slowly sat up, the blanket falling from one shoulder.
They continued to stare at one another, the silence deafening. Harry cleared his throat, tearing away from her gaze and pulling a plastic chair in the corner closer to the couch.

“I am sorry you’ve been in holding for so long. I’d like to ask you a few questions, if you don’t mind. Then I’ll work on getting you back home with your son.”

Upon hearing mention of her son she seemed to come to life, her pale brows creasing as she leaned forward, closer to Harry.

“Draco? Where is he?”

Her voice sounded rough and weak from disuse.

“Your son is quite fine, Mrs. Malfoy, eager to get you home. May I call you Narcissa?”

She seemed to drift away again, leaning back slowly, lips drooping in a frown.

Harry swallowed his sigh, trying for another tactic, an underhanded one but something that he suspected would trigger a response.

“Draco asked us to help solve his father’s murder. It’s very important to us to find the person who did this and bring them to justice. Any information you may have is vital to the investigation. You told one of our officers on the scene that you saw the person responsible for what happened. Do you remember saying this?”

As anticipated, the sound of her son’s name seemed to light a spark in her eyes, but it quickly faded to an ember as the silence stretched.

Harry was growing impatient. He’d dealt with deeply traumatized victims and witnesses before, but it wasn’t his strong suit. He removed his glasses and rubbed at his eyes.

“I saw…” she whispered, so low that he almost thought he imagined the sound.

His eyes snapped up. “Yes? What did you see?”

Her eyes closed, her expression tensing.

“Evil.”

Harry studied her closely. “The person who did this is undoubtedly evil. Did you see them? Was it a man? A woman?”

Her eyes snapped open, wide open, taking Harry off guard and scrambling his thoughts for a moment.

“I saw a him…”

Harry’s heart started to race, now they were getting somewhere.

“It was a man, then?”

“I saw him crawl…”

Harry blinked, unsure what to expect but waiting with baited breath nonetheless.

“He crawled out of hell. He slithered… across the floor. He wrapped around his neck and sank his
fangs in…” tears began to pool in her eyes, slipping down her cheeks and smearing her dark eye makeup. “He sank his fangs into him!” she cried more loudly, becoming more animated. “He killed him!”

Harry’s heart stuttered a staccato beat upon hearing her words, the haunting shrillness of her cries. He leaned back into his chair as she crumbled in on herself, weeping freely now. He averted his gaze to give her privacy and to sort his thoughts.

His eyes fell on a silk clutch tucked into her side. The officer outside said he took her phone but he must have left her with the rest of her belongings. Harry reached forward and grabbed the bag, glancing up to ask her permission but quickly dismissing the notion when he saw how lost she was to her own grief.

Something was… off. To say the least. Harry released the gold clasp and opened the bag. He pushed aside lipstick and mascara and pulled out a prescription bottle, empty, and held it up to the light to read the label.

“Son of a bitch.”

“You want to do what, exactly?” Crouch asked, furry grey brows drawn together as he stared back at Harry through a slitted gaze.

Harry leaned forward onto his department head’s desk, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice.

“I want to admit her to St. Mungo’s immediately. Her system is swimming with valium. She’s of no use to us until she’s detoxed.”

Crouch crossed his arms and rested them atop his bulging stomach. “I’d say she’s of no use to us regardless. Prattling on about ghosts and demons-”

“Did you hear what I said? She’s loaded. She has no idea what she’s saying.”

“Then what’s to say she saw anything at all? Other witnesses, much more reliable witnesses, claim she never stepped out of the banquet hall all night. There’s no way she was there when her husband was offed.”

Harry’s jaw ticked as he tried to reined himself in. It would do no good to throttle Crouch.

“Who’s to say she didn’t slip out for a few minutes without any of the guests noticing? Maybe following her husband to ask where he was going? And even if she stayed in the center of the bloody room all night she still may have seen someone follow him outside. She’s more likely to be keeping an eye on her husband’s whereabouts than anyone else there!”

Crouch’s face reddened. “Don’t you take that tone with me, Potter! You might be some hotshot when it comes to busting up cock fighting rings but this is a serious investigation, where you need things like proof and evidence to admit someone into treatment-”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

“She’s our only credible lead at this poi-”

“You and I have very different definitions of the word credible!”
“Whoa, whoa! What’s going on?” Sirius asked, slipping inside Crouch’s office with a worried expression.

“Ah, Sirius. Just in time. Please help me explain to Mr. Potter why we can’t admit patients into Mungo’s without their consent when we’ve got nothing viable to hold them with.”

“What’s going on now?”

Harry sighed, turning to face Siris. “I went to find you after my interview with the witness—” he paused as Crouch loudly snickered at the word and did his best to ignore him, “but you weren’t in your office and I wanted to move forward as quickly as possible, given the circumstances.”

“Which are?”

“Narcissa Malfoy was in possession of diazepam. I have no idea how much she took between last night and this morning, but we essentially stuck her in a room by herself with water, pills and a blanket. She’s a mess and I want to get her into detox before we write her off as a dead end.”

“Pointless,” Crouch said before Sirius could respond. “A waste of Ministry funds, not to mention the hammer her son would bring down on our heads. He’s chomping at the bit to get her released, who’s going to tell him we’re checking her into Mungo’s for another day?”

“It wouldn’t have to be for a day, just a few hours, however long it takes to clear her system. And I’ll be the one to tell him, if it helps move us forward in the investigation.”

Crouch rolled his eyes and opened his mouth but Sirius cut him off.

“Harry, do you really think she might have saw something?”

Harry locked eyes with him, holding his gaze and nodding. “Despite her current state I could sense something beyond grief in her mannerisms. There’s fear. And she’s been adamant about the demon—”

Crouch scoffed loudly but Harry pushed on. “It’s symbolism.”

“It’s drugs!”

Harry looked away from Sirius to glare at their boss. “It’s both. The drugs have altered her memory, no doubt, but not by fabricating a tale. If that were the case the story would have changed by now. She’s saying the same thing that she did last night, but she’s superimposed a demon, a monster, in pace of the killer. Once the drugs are cleared of her system she’ll be able to access the true memory.”

The room was thick with tension as the two men continued to stare each other down, Harry’s fists clenched at his sides. The silence was broken by a new deep voice.

“Very interesting theory, Mr. Potter.”

Crouch’s eyes went wide and Harry spun around, watching Dumbledore step inside the office.

“My apologies for snooping, I couldn’t help but hear the spirited debate taking place inside, and seeing as the door wasn’t closed I thought I’d drop in to see what has everyone in such an excited state.”

Harry swallowed, feeling his cheeks color.

“No need to be embarrassed, Mr. Potter. Though I dare say you may want to practice using your inside voice, though the same can be said for you, Bartemius.”
“Albus, I-”

Dumbledore held up a hand, silencing the portly man. “I admit to only hearing the tail end of your… discussion…. But I’m inclined to agree with Mr. Potter’s assessment. Why throw out a possible lead before it can be properly tapped?”

Crouch’s face turned a deep plum, whether in rage or embarrassment or some mixture of both, Harry was unsure, but he felt a swelling of elation in his chest. Not because Dumbledore sided with him, but because he was one step closer to solving the case.

“Arrangements can be made to get her admitted immediately?”

Sirius nodded. “Yes, I’ll have Ron call ahead.”

“Excellent. Well, I must be on my way, please do tell me what you uncover, Mr. Potter.”

Harry nodded, once again unnerved by the otherworldly twinkle in the man’s glacial blue eyes.

Thirty minutes later he was downstairs, overseeing Narcissa’s transfer into the ambulance. He stood nearby as she lay on the gurney, her gaze empty and far off. Still, he tried explaining to her what the plan was. He wasn’t sure if she heard him. He could only pray that his row with Crouch was worth it, that Dumbledore extending him benefit of the doubt paid off.

His gut instinct told him Narcissa Malfoy truly did witness something of note last night, and he learned to trust his instincts long ago. They rarely led him astray, even if the path they wound him through was filled with obstacles, he always found his way in the end.

As she was being loaded into the back she began muttering under her breath. Harry leaned forward but only caught a word or two.

“What is she saying?”

One of the paramedics looked up. “Nonsense, sounds like. We’ll start her on fluids once we arrive, should help clear her up a bit.”

Harry shook his head. “Hold on, I want a minute with her.”

The paramedic shrugged, backing away towards the front of the truck.

He moved to her side, leaning down to better hear her whispered words.

“Lucius… Lucius…”

Harry sighed and pulled back to allow her a moment of privacy, but then her hand shot out and grabbed his wrist in a surprising display of strength. Her eyes met his, still dazed, but no less intense.

“Did the snake kill my husband?”

Harry hesitated, unsure what response to provide. He didn’t want to rile her up, but he didn’t want to do more damage by lending her false hope that her husband was still alive.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Malfoy. Lucius was killed last night. But I promise you, I won’t stop until I find out who is responsible.”

“That poor girl.”
His heart jolted. She let go of his wrist and leaned back into her gurney, turning her face away. He was at her side in an instant.

“Mrs. Malfoy? What girl?”

“We’re cleared to go!” shouted a paramedic from the front seat. “Let’s load her up!”

“Hang on!” Harry called back, an electric current buzzing up his spine. “Mrs. Mal- Narcissa,” he wet his lips, “Did you see a girl with your husband? With the- the snake?”

She turned her eyes up, they were once again hallow.

“It got her, too.”

Harry blinked. The paramedic stepped back into view.

“Sorry mate, we gotta take her now. You can stop by Mungo’s to finish questioning her, we’ll have her in a private room.”

Harry’s heart was racing, his mind firing wildly, trying to suss out the meaning to her cryptic message. “I’ll be seeing you this evening, Mrs. Malfoy.”

But his words fell on deaf ears, her eyes once more unfocused, lost to the haze and terror of her own mind. He watched with a determined gleam in his eyes as she was loaded into the back of the ambulance, doors closing, and driven out of his reach.
A/N: Words cannot describe how much I love my wonderful, beautiful readers! Your show of support has left me tingling with excitement and inspiration to write! I want to thank you all with another update. From here on out I’ll try to stick to a weekly posting schedule. As always, thank you for following along and sharing your thoughts, reading your reviews makes me write like a mad woman :)

Saturday May 2, 1992

Hermione rubbed absently at her shin as she sat beneath the budding shade of a large birch tree, indulging in her favorite past time. She turned the page but before she could begin reading a small projectile hit the side of her head.

She instinctively cringed away, glancing about and quickly spotting the culprits. Billy and his gang of idiots, his first mate Amy at the helm. They erupted into laughter as she picked up the thrown acorn and tossed it aside with a roll of her eyes.

She reopened her book with a sigh, already knowing her oasis was ruined now that the they had spotted her. They wouldn’t let up unless Tom arrived, which was a toss up. He was so hot and cold with her sometimes she preferred his absence.

Except in moments like these, she craved his company. No one could clear a crowd like he could.

“Hey Herman!” Billy shouted, Amy cackling behind him. “Head’s up! I get thirty points if I can land it in the bird’s nest on your head!”

Hermione pursed her lips and refused to look up. She saw the incoming acorn out of her peripheral and leaned back, watching it fly by her face. She glared down at her book, trying to ignore them but finding it frustratingly impossible.

“Wide shot!”

“Oi! Let me try!”

“We’ll both throw!”

“No idiot, you have shite aim, you’ll just mess up my turn!”

“Shut up you wanker, just throw the damn thing already!”

She held her breath and watched one of the boys draw his arm back and then swing it forward on release. She watched in frozen horror as an acorn came darting right at her forehead, her brain processing the moment in slow motion. She cringed, eyes closing, braced for impact.

That never came.

The roarous laughter cut off abruptly. She opened her eyes, dumbfounded by the sudden silence.

She held her breath and watched one of the boys draw his arm back and then swing it forward on release. She watched in frozen horror as an acorn came darting right at her forehead, her brain processing the moment in slow motion. She cringed, eyes closing, braced for impact.

That never came.

The roaring laughter cut off abruptly. She opened her eyes, dumbfounded by the sudden silence.

There was a fist clenched an inch in front of her face. She blinked, releasing a breath and following the hand to a bony wrist, up a pale arm with jagged scars along the bicep peeking out beneath a sleeve, past a sharp jawline and finally met Tom’s glacial stare. She felt her spine go rigid. He looked
incensed.

His fingers relaxed and the acorn fell dead to the ground. She swallowed.

He slowly released her from his gaze as he turned his focus to the group across the yard.

They promptly scattered in different directions, though Billy threw a scathing look over his shoulder as he sauntered away, Amy tossing her head back with one last shrill laugh that sounded too nervous to be insulting.

“What was all that about?” He asked, still facing away and brushing his palm against his torn jeans.

Hermione felt heat rise to her cheeks, as tended to happen in his presence regardless of the conversation. She always managed to feel foolish next to him.

“Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“I can see that.”

She suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. He didn’t like it when she did that, at least not to him. He turned around to pin her beneath his all consuming stare. She couldn’t help but fidget.

“Because it looks to me like you were sitting there letting those idiots pelt you with acorns.”

She looked down and snapped her book shut, biting her tongue.

“Hermione.”

She rose to her feet, brushing dirt and grass off her corduroy skirt.

“Hermione. Don’t ignore me.”

She froze, feeling the warning in his voice spread across her skin like an electric current. She turned around to face him, eyes averted down.

“Look at me.”

She sighed and did as commanded, feeling suddenly drained of all fight.

“What’s the matter with you? You have the nerve to defy me but you can’t stand up to Billy?”

“It wasn’t just Billy.”

“Billy is their leader. You cut off the head of the snake and the body dies.”

She swallowed. Sometimes she forgot he was only two years older. He made her feel weak and pathetic, stupid and useless, a pale comparison to everything he exuded.

“I’m not like you, Tom. I can’t clear a room just by entering it.”

He shook his head and looked away, dismissing her. She wilted, trying to keep her shoulders back and tears at bay until she was alone under her quilt. This interaction with Tom was far more damaging to her psyche than anything Billy or Amy could possibly subject her to. She didn’t care about their opinions.

She clenched her hands into fists to prevent from rubbing at her eyes. If she cried in front of him it
was over. Their uneasy association would officially end and he’d go back to treating her with the same hostility he did all others.

He noticed the movement, of course he did. A dark brow rose, his eyes taking on a challenging look that stabbed at her further. She wasn’t trying to pick a fight with him! Did he think she was that stupid? She was just trying to maintain her composure, the bloody git.

She felt anger boil within her gut, bubbling out through her veins. She was so tired of this. So tired of this place, these cruel children, and some days Tom was the worst thing of all. Condescending, patronizing, unnecessarily judgemental and cruel. In a lot of ways he was meaner than Billy and his gang, subjecting her to more scrutiny than anyone else.

She felt the heat climbing up her neck, her throat burning with fire, she opened her mouth and expelled smoke.

“What did I ever do to you, Tom?!” She shouted, her stance going rigid.

He blinked, taken aback by her sudden switch.

“I never asked for your help, so don’t make me feel like a fool for offering it! If you think I’m pathetic like all the others then just leave me alone!”

His eyes flashed, something dark taking root at their center and causing the pupils to expand, swallowing the grey. She was shaking with pent up emotion, everything she’d been burying beneath the surface for the last eighteen months spilling over, breaking free, ripping her to shreds from within.

She felt the tears brimming now and started to march past him, refusing to let him see his effect on her. She wouldn’t give him that final satisfaction.

His hand shot out and caught her wrist, squeezing it so painfully she cried out and pulled back. He merely yanked her closer, she tripped over her feet and fell into him, her face burning red with indignation and embarrassment.

“I’m not a ragdoll, Tom!”

“Shut up.”

Her eyes bulged in their sockets. The nerve of this boy! She’d seen him treat others like they were beneath him but it was painful to realize he obviously thought as little of her.

“Let me go!”

He shook his head again, not in refusal but in obvious disbelief.

“Christ, maybe Amy’s right, you are crazy.”

She reeled back, as far from him as she could get with her wrist still captive by his iron grip.

“How dare you! Take it back!”

He blinked, then stared at her for a heavy beat before lifting one side of his mouth in an obvious smirk that only served to rile her further.

“Make me.”

She scoffed loudly, indelicately, and it felt wonderful to throw her manners to the wind.
“I don’t care how scary you are Tom, I will still punch you, I swear it. I don’t care what awful thing you do to me after, it will be well worth it!”

She expected murder to flash across his face, as it did when others attempted to stand their ground against him, always unsuccessfully. So when he burst out laughing it shocked her so completely she went limp against him, the sound effectively snuffing out the raging inferno in her chest.

She stared at him in disbelief. She realized she’d never heard him laugh, not once in the eighteen months she’d been here. The sound was… nice. Melodic, fine tuned, like everything else about him. His eyes held a light that was mesmerizing, she couldn’t look away.

She realized belatedly that he’d released her wrist but still stood flush against her. She swallowed and stepped back two paces, her cheeks burning anew. His laugh fell away, she already missed the sound, but his amused expression remained.

“You have the nerve to threaten me but you can’t stand up to Billy Stubbs?”

Hermione blinked.

He watched her in silence for several moments before shaking his head.

“They pick on you because they’re weak, they need to destroy things to make themselves feel strong. You are strong, stronger than most. But if you continue to let them torment you you’ll eventually break.”

She inhaled sharply, his unusually candid words cutting off her airway.

“If you want to continue this way, then by all means do so. I’ll leave you be. But if you want to learn to stand up for yourself, I can teach you.”

Her heart thud painfully against her ribcage. Her skin buzzed. Billy and Amy’s laughing faces flashed in her mind’s eyes, so vivid she could practically hear their cruel jests. Still, she felt apprehensive.

“Why would you do that?”

His jaw ticked. “That’s for me to know. And the offer is only good for this moment. Decide quickly.”

She suppressed a sigh, annoyed that he’d once more reverted to his usual defensive self. But his eyes held a new depth she was starting to recognize the more they interacted. He seemed… guarded. She realized with a jolt he was prepared for her rejection, braced for impact as she was with the acorn. He was expecting her to refuse his offer and walk away. A part of her wanted to, just to spite him, just to know what it felt like to spite someone.

But his draw upon her was more powerful than any of those baser urges. He exuded power and strength, even at this tender age, something that all the other children recognized and bowed to. She wanted that.

“Ohay. Teach me.”

Her heart skipped a beat as his face transformed, eyes alight above his cruel grin.
Hermione was having a strange day.

After getting off the phone with Padma she’d walked into her living room like a zombie, collapsing lifeless on the couch. Her vertigo was fading but her mind still felt clouded and slow. She rubbed absently at her neck, her eyes slitting.

_That son of a bitch injected me. What the hell did he put in me? Propofol? Pentobarbital? I could have stopped breathing in my sleep! Was he trying to murder me? Am I supposed to be dead right now?_

She swallowed thickly, closing her eyes.

_Breathe, just breathe…_

_Think, Hermione, you can think you’re way out of anything._

_You have a headache, dehydration? Maybe it was sodium thiopental?_

_What the hell is he doing walking around a party with that kind of shit in his pockets?_

Her eyes snapped open.

_He wasn’t walking around the party though, was he? He was standing there, watching. Me. And then he was in that room, with that body… and he drugged me._

She felt suddenly nauseous.

_Tom killed him._

Her heart stuttered painfully, her body accepting the truth before her mind.

_But was he trying to kill me also? Why not just slit my throat and leave me there? Why bring me back here?_

_Suddenly his words came back to her, deathly sweet and haunting._

_“I told you I’d find you…”_

_She rushed to her kitchen and gagged into the sink, dry heaving for a few moments until she was gasping for breath, silently crying as she slid against the cabinets to the floor._

_What do I do?_

_You know what to do! You witnessed the aftermath of a homicide! You have to call the police!_

_But, I’m not positive of what I saw…_

_Of course you are! Why else would Tom be there? Why else would he drug you?_

_Maybe there’s another explanation, maybe Tom discovered the body moments before I did…_

_Do you really believe that?_

_Why did he bring me back here?_

_You mean why did he leave you again…_
She cried out, shaking her head and willing her mind to shut up. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t see, couldn’t think.

*Take it slow... break it down... piece by piece... what’s step one, Hermione?*

*I can’t...*

*You can, you will, you must.*

Her eyes snapped open.

*Step one is getting off the floor. Step two is scrubbing your skin raw until the stench of death is gone. Step three is getting out of this apartment. Far, far from this apartment.*

*Good girl. Now stand up.*

She inhaled sharply, wiping absently at her tear trekked face and pulling herself up against the counter.

*Step one complete. See? Piece of cake.*

Squaring her shoulders, she took a determined step towards her bathroom.

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Tom watched the scene playing out on his computer screen, his attention rapt.

He watched Hermione crumble and break, wilting like a flower, folding in on herself. He watched her cry and scream and rant. Then he watched her fall still and silent, no doubt having an internal conversation that looked quite maddening. Her expression morphed and changed at least a dozen times in as many minutes. He didn’t blink, unwilling to miss a thing.

He’d been without her for so long, he wouldn’t spare a moment of her now.

He watched with supreme pride as she slowly pulled herself up, bracing her weight against the countertop and catching her breath. As she slowly made her way to the bathroom and out of sight of his camera he released a slow, steady breath, his lips curling up.

“That’s my girl.”

---

Harry ran a hand through his wild mane and turned the corner into Sirius’s office. He knocked against the open door.

Sirius glanced up, sighing and nodding for Harry to enter.

“Close the door.”

Harry averted his eyes down as he shut it.

“The witness all squared away?”

“She’s in route to Mungo’s. They’ll start her on intravenous detox, I’ll head over to complete our interview this evening, give her some time to rest.”

Sirius tipped his head in acknowledgement, setting aside whatever he was working on and crossing his alarms slowly.
“Listen, about earlier-”

“About the yelling match you had with our boss or about our conversation where you agreed to avoid yelling matches with our boss?”

Harry closed his eyes and sighed.

“Avoid is really the key word there-”

“Shut your smart mouth and sit down.”

Harry opened his eyes and reluctantly fell into the chair across the desk.

“What the hell is going on in that head of yours, kid? Sometimes I wonder if you really do see the world through a different lense. In what reality did you think it appropriate to go rounds with Crouch?”

“That wasn’t my intent! I just asked him for-”

“Well there you go, you shouldn’t be asking him for anything, you should have come to me first!”

“I tried! You weren’t here and the witness was in serious need of immediate medical evacuation!”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Bloody hell, what a lovely soap opera we have playing out, eh? Immediate medical evacuation? Her leg didn’t get blown off, she was flying high on tranquilizers. A tall glass of water and good night’s rest is all she needed.”

“Maybe so, but can you guarantee that we have that much time with her? What were we supposed to do, move a cot into the holding room? You really think Draco Malfoy would let us keep her as long as it took for that shit to clear out of her system naturally?”

“Harry, none of that has anything to do with the fact that you once again went over my head to Crouch, and then engaged in a bloody row that Dumbledore walked in on! Can you really not see the problem here?”

“I didn’t do anything wrong! Why am I being punished for trying to pursue this witness to the best of our abilities? Am I the only one trying to solve this case?”

“Don’t you dare-”

“ Seriously! If you spent half as much time worrying about this case as you do about pleasing the higher ups we’d have the killer in custody!”

Sirius slammed his fist down on the desk, his expression furious. Harry jumped in his chair, his mouth snapping shut but his eyes still flashing.

“That’s enough!”

Harry swallowed, the adrenaline fading and leaving him feeling bereft and foolish.

“I didn’t-”

“I said that’s enough,” Sirius said more calmly, flattening his palm against the wood. “I know you have your opinions. I know you’re passionate and don’t like hearing the word no. And I know you hate office politics, all the bureaucratic red tape we have to navigate through when it comes to certain investigations. I don’t like it either. But that’s the reality of our job, and it isn’t changing anytime
soon. If you really want to work with this witness and help solve this case you’re going to have to curb your urges. I’m dead serious, Harry. I can only shield you from so much now that you’re an Officer. If you don’t play by their rules they’ll chuck you like yesterday’s garbage, no matter the solved cases to your name.”

Harry was breathing deeply, willing his anger to abate. He knew he had a short fuse and he’d been that way since youth, since losing his parents. Being an Officer meant everything to Harry, his career meant validation, made up for every loss of the past. He couldn’t imagine having that taken away.

“I-” he stopped short, clearing his throat and shifting in his chair. “I’m sorry.”

“I’ve been hearing that word a lot from you lately.”

Harry looked down. “I… I just can’t stand the bullshit. I don’t know how you put up with it. It’s like swallowing poison and thanking them for the pleasure.”

Sirius leaned back into his chair, shoulders relaxing. “That’s a rather apt description. And quite poetic, didn’t know you had it in you.”

Harry sighed. “I know I keep apologizing, but I really am trying to keep my nose clean. I just want to investigate, no games, no ass kissing. Why can’t it just be about the work?”

Sirius’s expression softened. “You have heart. Some days I think you have too much of it. But then I look in your eyes and I see Lily staring back at me, and I remember where you get it from. With the parents you had you never stood a chance, kid. You’ve got fire and passion in your blood, the inability to look the other way when there’s some injustice being done. Sometimes I just think you look a little too hard for trouble. Trust me when I say enough of it will find you, you don’t have to go searching for problems to solve.”

Harry tipped his head back and exhaled slowly, turning his eyes forward in surrender.

“I know I sound like a broken record, but I promise, no more mistakes.”

Sirius smirked. “At least not for today.”

Harry nodded. “At least not for today.”

Hermione left Padma’s apartment still in a daze.

The moment she entered the three girls inside had all but pounced on her for information. Hermione was drained by the time she finished telling her recount of events of the night.

All fabricated.

She wasn’t sure what force was compelling her to keep quiet about what she’d seen, what she’d experienced. She knew she should have dialed 999 immediately upon waking up, or at the very least after taking the morning to sort her thoughts.

But then again, her thoughts were hardly sorted. She still felt half asleep, trapped in a waking nightmare. She knew she was dreaming, but couldn’t force herself to wake up. As she crossed the street she pondered stepping out in front of a car, just to test her theory. Injuring herself was an abstract thought, but she indulged in several dark fantasies to distract herself as she trekked to the University campus.
I could throw myself on the tracks at the station, surely that would jolt me awake. Or perhaps I’ll throw myself from my balcony. No, I could jump from the library window, do the windows on the third floor open?

When she wasn’t engaged in morbid thoughts she was glancing about like a criminal, watching those around her and jumping at any sudden movement in her direction.

Why is that man staring at me? What’s he got in his hand? Is that a knife? Oh, it’s a coffee cup.

She took a deep breath and shook her head. She glanced up and spotted one of the chemistry department buildings up ahead. She felt relief wash over her. She was back someplace familiar. She was home.

Most of the facilities were closed to students on the weekend but she had special access as a grad student who taught tutoring sessions during the summer. It was only two days a week but it was extra cash in her pocket and she got to work in the lab doing what she loved. It really was a fabulous set up. And right now she was thankful for her keycard access, allowing her to slip into the building, hearing the heavy automated lock slide in place behind her.

She let out a breath, shoulders instantly relaxing and her hurried gait slowing as she walked down the hall. She’d be safe here.

Unless Tom had a keycard.

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**Saturday March 11, 1995**

“What time is it?”

“Two minutes later than the last time you asked.”

“Tom, I don’t want to miss curfew! Cole will have me scrubbing toilets every night this week again.”

“We won’t be late, now be quiet. It’ll be over faster if you stop annoying me.”

She groaned.

“How much further?”

He stopped and spun around so abruptly she crashed into him, gasping and clutching his coat to catch her balance. His hands reached out to steady her, most likely on reflex since his eyes held murder.

“What did I just say?” he hissed, his mint and menthol breath blowing the loose strands of her hair away from her face.

“I’m sorry, I just-”

“And what did I say about apologizing all the bloody time? It shows weakness.”

She sighed, looking away. There was never any winning with him.

“Now keep your mouth shut and follow me. When we get there you do exactly as I tell you. Nothing more, nothing less, do you understand?”

She stared up at him with petulant eyes.
“Do you understand, Hermione?”

“I thought you told me to keep my mouth shut.”

Danger flashed in his eyes, taking on a feral gleam. Her heart lurched in her chest but not in fear. She felt a blush rise to her cheeks, her damming pale complexion always betraying her inner most thoughts. He spotted the flush spreading up her neck and rolled his eyes, something that was fine for him to do but not for her.

“Bloody brat. Come on.”

He grabbed a hold of her wrist and started his brisk walk through the alley, half dragging her as she jogged to keep up with his long legs. She was surprised she didn’t have permanent indentations in her flesh by now after so many years of Tom pulling her around in such a manner. God forbid he be seen holding her hand, like a proper gentleman. No, he had to manacle her wrist like she was his captive, bound to escape the moment he lost contact.

As if she could ever escape him, even if she wanted to.

She wanted to ask him where they were going, how much further, what they were looking for. But she knew her questions would float out into the open air and dissipate into nothingness. Tom would only get mad at her for asking in the first place. If he wanted her to know something he told her. If she was lacking a piece of information it was by design. She’d learned that years ago.

Still, she wasn’t happy about him coaxing her from the gated yard where she’d been finishing up a rather thrilling novel with his promises of an evening snack and crowd watching. She should have seen right through him, known he wouldn’t be content with such a laid back end to his Saturday. The older he got the wilder he became, the more daring, more dangerous and unpredictable. It was equal parts off putting and exhilarating.

And deep down she knew she would have followed him into the unknown regardless of his honesty. Where Tom went, she followed. It was a simple truth known throughout the orphanage, throughout their school even. Sometimes she lay in bed, staring up at the cracks in the ceiling with tears brimming in her eyes, disgusted with herself for her weakness, her absolution to the boy fast becoming a man. But by morning she was craving his company, searching him out along the hallways and faces, her heart not resting until she knew his whereabouts.

She spent other nights wondering if she had any kind of similar effect on him, if he felt a magnetic pull guiding him across the grounds to her location. If he missed her when they were apart.

Sometimes she thought he did. But mostly she thought he didn’t.

She swallowed bitterly as she tried to keep pace behind him. Tom knew she’d fall in line with him tonight regardless of what lie he told her to lure her out. But god forbid Hermione try to manipulate him in any way. He’d punch a hole through her wall and leave it there as a reminder so she never forgot her place again.

And yet I still follow him, like a hapless dog with her tail between her legs, desperate for his attention, his approval…

She scrunched her nose as they passed an overflowing dumpster, careful of her footing to avoid stepping in something awful. She had just cleaned her trainers. She squealed as she slipped in something squishy and soft. Tom shook his head like she was ridiculous, startling her by pulling her closer and wrapping his arm around her middle, lifting her a few inches off the ground and walking
her over the mess. As he set her down he resumed their rapid pace as if nothing had happened, leaving her to blink at him stupidly, touched and surprised by his casual act of chivalry.

*And this is why I keep coming back. These brief windows where I think I see something inside of him that no one else does, and I’m desperate to coax it out.*

She was pulled from her silent musings when he slowed down, gesturing for her to stay silent. His eyes held a certain glint she had come to recognize as uncertainty. He was always on his guard when roaming the city, trusting no one. He was especially cagey when she was with him, taking responsibility for her safety. She knew he wouldn’t try anything too crazy if he’d brought her along. He saved his most wild acts for when he was alone or meeting with some of the other boys from his class, juvenile delinquents in her opinion. She supposed Tom was of the same label, though she didn’t see him that way. He was a step above everyone else.

Tom stopped at the mouth of the alley, leaning casually against the brick wall as if he owned the building it was attached to. Hermione squinted in the darkness to better see what was in front of them. It was nearing nine oclock and she was resigned to missing curfew. Even if they turned around now, which Tom looked in no desire to do, they’d never make it back in time. Damn him for getting her into trouble again. And damn her for letting him.

She sighed petulantly and crossed her arms, nonverbally letting him know her thoughts on the matter. His eyes swept over her briefly and he smirked, returning his focus to the street outside. Several minutes ticked by and she pulled her thin jacket closer to her body, feeling the chill set in now that she wasn’t moving.

“Where’s your coat?”

She ground her teeth together. “Someone didn’t give me time to run inside and grab it before they dragged me off like a cow to auction.”

“Always so dramatic,” he said with a shake of his head, slipping his arms free of his heavier coat.

“Tom, don’t be silly, you’ll freeze.”

“I’d rather freeze than listen to you complain about being cold.”

“I didn’t say anything!”

“You were about to,” he crossed over to her and draped his coat around her shivering frame.

It smelled like him. Spearmint gum and clove cigarettes. She took a steadying breath and pulled it closer.

“Thank you.”

“Mmm. Now be quiet, I don’t want anyone seeing us.”

Her brows drew together. “Any chance you’ll tell me what we’re doing here now that we’re here, wherever here is?”

He pinned her with a warning glance and she sighed, leaning back against the opposite wall and playing idly with a long curl. Her hair was to her waist now, wild as ever, but everytime she brought up the prospect of cutting it Tom threw a fit. She didn’t understand his investment in the matter but she knew better than to go rounds with him on it. She usually kept it all braided back or pinned up, but today she’d washed it and let it air dry loose. She ran her fingers through the thick curls, feeling a
touch of dampness remaining. No wonder she was freezing.

She started to braid it all into an intricate plait, pausing halfway through as she felt the tell tale sign of Tom’s eyes on her. She glanced up, wondering if he was trying to signal her it was time to move on. But his gaze was locked on her hands, eyes hooded as if in a trance. She smirked slightly and continued her menstruations, watching Tom watch her all the while. When she got to the end of the braid she had no tie to bind it so she let it rest against her chest, slowly unraveling from the bottom up. His eyes lifted and caught hers, stealing her breath for a moment.

The world was static, time froze, nothing existing but him and her tucked away in a dark corner of the universe.

And just as suddenly as the bubble encased them, it popped. Tom’s eyes snapped away and back to the street where something had caught his attention. His stance changed, alert and ready to pounce. Her heart stuttered as she tried to see what he saw, wondering if he was going to do something particularly dangerous despite her presence.

“He’s here.”

“Who’s here?”

“No one.”

“Tom…”

“I’ll be right back.”

“What?!” she gasped, eyes wide as he started to leave the alley.

“Stay right here and don’t talk to anyone. I’ll be right across the street, back in five.”

“Then I’ll go with-”

“No, I want you to stay here.”

“Tom, please tell me you aren’t dealing drugs or something.”

“Jesus, Hermione. Are you really asking me that?”

She sucked in a breath, already regretting her words. She knew she’d struck a nerve by the anger on his face, but she was most affected by the flash of hurt in his eyes.

“No, of course not, I’m sorry.”

He stared her down for a moment longer and she let him, feeling she deserved his animosity in this instance. She knew about Tom’s history, the events that led him to Wool’s all those years ago. She felt terrible for bringing up any past trauma.

“Stay here.”

She nodded, properly scolded. She sank back into the shadows and watched him closely as he jogged across the narrow road to the cross walk. There was a group of people standing there, she wondered if he was meeting with one of them. A girl with long blonde hair and painted red lips laughed loudly at something her friend said. Hermione knew the moment she spotted Tom beside her. She did a double take, then fluttered her lashes and uttered a coquettish giggle, sneaking a glance at him over her shoulder to see if she’d ensnared him yet.
Hermione clenched her fists, eyes narrowing at the display.

Tom glanced over at the girl, though she could tell it was more out of annoyance for her rappent noise making. She deduced that whatever he was trying to do, he was trying to be covert about it. Having a fan club wouldn’t expedite matters any.

*Unless he thinks she’s attractive, and flirts back…*

She swallowed.

Tom smiled at the blonde. He had many smiles, all of them lethal in one way or another. This one was meant to disarm her entirely, and it worked, if the way she stumbled on her feet while standing still was any indicator. Hermione felt the blood rush to her head, her eye twitching when she watched Tom wink at the stranger.

*I can’t believe he dragged me out here to watch him pick up slags!*

*The nerve! Who does he- How can he- What does he think I-*

*I’m leaving.*

She spun around on her heel in a fit of irrational anger, facing the alley they’d just traveled through. For some reason it looked vastly different minus Tom. Darker, colder, longer. She tightened the coat around her, realizing a moment too late she was basking further in his traitorous scent, and turned to face the street once more. She didn’t see Tom, and she didn’t see the blonde or her friend.

*Did he leave with them? Would he really bring me out here to watch this?*

She felt her chest alight with a sharp pain that stole her breath away. She marched out of the alley onto the sidewalk and started in the direction she hoped home was. She wasn’t used to being out at night, the city took on a different life force when the sun went down. It was louder, brighter in the light of the moon, livelier, more everything.

She had barely walked two blocks when a group of men stumbled out of a bar into her path. And stumbling was putting it generously. Two of them had their shoulders braced under the arms of a third, bodily holding him up. A fourth laughed like a jackal into the sky, his breath created a cloud of smoke against the cold. A fifth started walking into the road without a glance in either direction, causing a cab to swerve wildly and honk as his friends exploded in laughter.

She felt the hairs on her neck rise, danger thick in the air. She slowed to a stop, hesitating, debating if it was better to continue forward and pass them or turn around and risk having them at her back.

*A decision I wouldn't have to make if Tom hadn’t left me!*

She knew the moment one of them locked eyes on her, the atmosphere changing.

“Hey there, where you goin’ babe?”

She blinked, taking an instinctive step back.

“Hey now, don’t go, come party with us.”

Hermione shook her head, always too polite for her own good, at least according to Tom.

“No thank you,” she whispered, backing away.
“Don’t be like that! We’re celebrating! It’s this guy’s birthday!”

“It’s my birthday!” the nearly incapacitated man sprung to life as though the magic words to his revival had been spoken.

“Come party with us, we’re going back to the hotel- we got bottles on ice baby, come on.” He started walking towards her, his arms out as though he intended to grab her.

Hermione glanced around wildly, all other pedestrians knew to keep their distance and had crossed the street further back to avoid the drunken mess. Hermione was alone with them. Her heart was racing, palms sweating.

Should I run? Am I making too big a deal out of this? He’s drunk, I can walk around him. He won’t follow, surley…

She spun around and started to walk the opposite way when she felt a hand squeeze her ass through her jeans. She squealed in shock and spun around, the jackal was right behind her, eyes glassy and lost, a feral smile upon his face and sour breath upon his lips.

“Gimme a kiss, beautiful,” he braced an arm around her middle, pulling her in close. “You shouldn’t be out here alone, come with us, we’ll take good care of you.”

She opened her mouth to scream for help but her throat was constricted, rendering her mute and breathless. She pushed as hard as she could, straining, digging her nails into the thick leather of his jacket. He only pulled her in harder, bruising her, closer to his puckering mouth.

She started to thrash, slapping him with her hands and twisting, trying to get an angle to kick him in the knee, hoping he’d release her if struck hard enough.

“Oh Jimmy you got a wild one tonight!”

“She’s hot! Is she coming back to the hotel with us?”

“She got any friends with her?”

“Yes, she does.”

Hermione blinked, ceasing her struggles at the sudden arrival of the familiar voice, causing the supposed Jimmy to pull back in surprise. She twisted her head and glanced over her shoulder, trying to convey a message of terror, just in case there was any confusion as to whether she was an active participant.

“Oi, move on, fucker! She’s with us!”

Tom reached out lightening fast, grabbing the wrist of the arm that bound Hermione and twisting it back so hard she heard a loud snap. A second later the man was screaming into her face like a wounded animal. She staggered back, finally free of him. She bumped into Tom and then reached out to grab his shoulder, her legs were shaking so hard she was afraid she’d fall.

He barely spared her a glance, moving out of reach and falling onto his prey in a blur of limbs and swinging fists. Within seconds the drunkard was on his back, weakly shielding his head with his arms, Tom straddling his torso and unleashing hell upon him.

“Fucking. Pervert.” He ground out between punches, blood smattering his bruised knuckles and dripping along the man’s chin, pooling in his broken mouth. “Think it’s fun to force girls to do
“whatever the fuck you want?” Another headshot. “You picked the wrong girl, mate.”

Until that point the man’s friends watched the altercation in a dumbfounded stupor, one she could relate to, but suddenly they all lurched into action, staggering towards Tom with murder in their eyes.

“Tom! Stop!” She screamed, finally finding her voice. She raced over, grabbing at his shirt and pulling with all her strength, the material stretched out but the boy remained, oblivious to the world outside of the prone form beneath him.

“She’s fucking fourteen! You know that? Fourteen you fucking pervert!”

“Tom!”

“Get off him, asshole!”

“Let’s fuck him up!”

One of the men pushed her out of the way and wrapped an arm around Tom’s neck, putting him in a chokehold and dragging him away from the bloodied body beneath him.

“Help! Someone help!” she screamed aimlessly into the night, utter terror taking hold.

She kicked at the man dragging Tom away, he was easily twice the boy’s size. But when she managed to catch Tom’s eye she didn’t see an ounce of fear, only a black rage that squeezed painfully at her heart.

“Mi-nee,” he choked out, struggling to pry the arm off his throat but not taking his eyes off her.

“Stay… back…”

Stay back? They’re going to kill you!

She spun in a circle screaming her lungs out for help, seeing people stop and glance warily their way.

What’s wrong with you people? Don’t you see what’s happening? How can you not help us?

But a part of her also knew this was the way of things. People didn’t help people. You could only help yourself.

As the other three men fell on top of Tom, kicking and punching while the larger one held him down by the neck Hermione spun in a circle, desperately looking for anything to wield as a weapon. That’s when she spotted the tiny rod iron table and chairs set up outside the bar they stood near. She didn’t think about her actions, grabbing the nearest chair and dragging it with all her strength towards the pile of bodies. She’d lost sight of Tom.

She could barely lift the thing but managed to brace it against her body and push it forward, like a lion tamer, dead center into one of the men’s back. He howled in pain, falling over and crashing into the cement. The others looked up at her, one of them forcefully yanking the chair out of her grasp and throwing it to the side. It hit a parked car, shattering the window and setting off the alarm.

Now people started coming out of the bar, yelling, pointing, and a group of men ran over to break up the fight.

A woman reached for Hermione, trying to bring her inside, asking if she was hurt. She pushed her away and ran for Tom, lying prone on the ground. One of his eyes was swollen shut, his nose broken, blood everywhere, on his face, his arms, his shirt and soaking his hair.
She wept, gently lifting his head and laying it in her lap, using her sleeves to wipe away the blood. There was so much of it. And as the police cars turned the corner with sirens blaring the blood came to life, dancing beneath the blue and cherry lights.

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**Sunday July 10, 2005**

“Hello Tom.”

“Hello Mr. Green.”

“Having an eventful weekend I see.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“It looks like you’re going somewhere, is this a bad time?”

“Would it matter?”

Mr. Green smiled, walking around the breakfast counter and inspecting the row of high end appliances.

“Espresso maker? I thought you detested coffee.”

“I do.”

The older man looked up, his grey brow rising.

“What an enigma you are, Mr. Riddle.”

“The pot says to the kettle.”

Green laughed. “I can see I’ve caught you while you’re preoccupied, and I fear I will only preoccupy you further.”

Tom watched his handler carefully, not taking the old man’s skills for granted despite his advanced age.

“Perhaps we should sit down then.”

“Certainly.”

They crossed the large living room to sit at the leather sofa, light streaming in from the floor to ceiling windows.

Tom settled deep into the plush cushions, spreading his arms along the back rest while Green perched on the edge of the facing loveseat.

*Good, he doesn’t intend to stay long.*

Tom really had been preparing to leave his flat when his uninvited guest arrived. He didn’t have time to waste, but he tried to maintain an air of leisure as to not tip his handler off to the fact he had something very important to take care of.

“I’ll be brief, I can tell you’re anxious to get going.” Green began, the corner of his mouth tipped up.
Tom rolled his eyes.

*Nothing gets past that fucking man.*

“*I came to ask you how last night’s event went. I heard it was quite a spectacular turn out.***”

“*Yes, it was. Well over 300 people, as anticipated. Lots of gate crashers. Imagine that.***”

“*Yes, well it was a rather well publicized event. Lots of young socialites in attendance, it makes sense others would want to sneak in and experience a bit of the good life for a night.***”

“*Hmm. Yes, I suppose so. Unfortunately the good life didn’t extend to the guest of honor.***”

“So I’ve heard. There were no complications then?”

Tom raised a dark brow. “I completed the mission without fail.”

Green tipped his head back, gazing at Tom from a different angle, as though studying a specimen beneath a microscope.

“That is true. But also not an answer to the question I asked.”

Tom’s jaw tensed as he adjusted his position on the couch. “You’re obviously here to deliver some bit of news, you know I hate guessing.”

“Yes, I know you do. I also know it’s not like you to leave behind witnesses. Which is why I thought it prudent to stop by in person and see how things went.”

Tom felt his chest seize, his heart stuttering painfully behind his breast bone, but his face remained placid.

“A witness?”

“Indeed. A woman.”

*It’s not possible.*

“And who claims I left this woman behind?”

*He’s bluffing. He can’t know about her.*

“The Ministry. She’s being held by MI6 as we speak.”

Tom felt a crushing wave of relief, he let out a slow exhale and tried to disguise it by clearing his throat.

“How interesting. I tell you we have a witness in agent custody and you look relieved.”

* Bloody bastard.*

“I assure you, I am merely looking forward to tying up this loose end.”

“I see.”

Green continued to study his charge carefully. “Is there anything you’d like to tell me, Tom?”

*You’ll never find out about her. Never.*
“Not at all. I was hoping you could provide me with some details so that I might clear up this mess accordingly.”

“The target’s wife is your new mark. She’s being transferred to St. Mungo’s for treatment. Lucky for us she’s being provided a private room.”

“And a private security detail, no doubt. Lucky me.”

“You are very lucky, Tom, for our source within the Ministry tells us she was a babbling fool when first brought in, and that no viable testimony has been delivered. I highly suggest you make sure it stays that way.”

“I’m on it.”

Green lingered, staring at him in that all too knowing way that made Tom’s skin crawl. But he held his ground, refusing to crack. There was no doubt Green suspected something was amiss, for it was indeed very unlike Tom to leave behind witnesses. However last night had been no ordinary mission. But Green didn’t know that. Couldn’t ever know that.

*If he finds out about her, I’ll have to kill him. And I have a feeling he’ll be my most tricky mark yet…*

Better to avoid the mishap altogether.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it then. I trust you’ll have the issue resolved by tomorrow?”

“Certainly.”

“Excellent. I will speak to you soon, Tom.”

He watched Green casually make his way out of his flat, waving goodbye at the door like they were long time friends. Once the door was shut and Tom was once again in solitude he scowled, leaning forward to open his laptop and pulling up the tracking app attached to Hermione’s phone.

“Where are you, kitten?” he muttered, watching the dot move along the map at rapid speed.

She was taking the train north.

He had a strong inkling where she was headed.

His smile turned wicked.

__________________________________________________________________________

“Knock knock.”

Harry looked up from his computer.

“What’s up?”

Sirius strolled in slowly, hands in his pockets, tipping his head to the room’s other occupant.

“Hey Nev.”

“Hello Sirius! Thank you for bringing me in on this! It’s the most exciting project I’ve had in a while.”

“If you think compiling a list of names and addresses for hundreds of socialites is exciting then I
cringe to see your other work.”

Neville laughed and Sirius smiled, but Harry could see the light expression was forced.

“Oh god, you have bad news.”

“You know me so well. Sorry, kid. We’ve been given the axe on our witness.”

“What!” Harry leapt to his feet. “Is this about Crouch? I swear to god Sirius, I’m really trying here, but-”

“No, no,” Sirius held up his hand, “It’s not us, it’s her kid, he got the big gun lawyers involved and they somehow gave him power of attorney, we can’t question her without his permission or presence and he’s refusing to let us see her before she’s released to his custody.”

“Son of a bitch…”

“You’re telling me.”

Harry kicked the plastic recycle bin, papers flying across the floor.

“Ah, that’s better.”

Harry shook his head. “Shit, sorry. I just… this is bloody ridiculous. Talk about red flags. This whole thing is turning out to be a fucking shit pile.”

“Again, you’re telling me.”

Harry crossed his arms, shaking his head and silently fuming. Sirius nodded to him with a sympathetic gaze and slowly backed out of his office, disappearing down the hall.

“Sorry Harry, was talking to this witness a big deal?”

Harry sighed deeply and retook his seat, leaning back and peering at the stained ceiling tiles. “It was our only deal.”

Neville chewed on the end of his pen. “I heard Dean talking earlier, said she was a bit batty?”

“She was a lot batty. But it wasn’t her fault. Her husband was just murdered and she was sunked on downers. I’m surprised she could speak at all.”

Neville scratched the back of his neck. “Sounds a bit like my grams. After pa died she started abusing the pills a bit. Gave us quite a scare. We had to admit her to a clinic for a while. She’s doing better now though, thank god. Still sees a therapist, but it’s not-”

Neville trailed off when he noticed Harry’s eyes go wide, jolting in his chair.

“Harry, you okay?”

“Neville, you are bloody brilliant!”

“I am? Why?”

“For several reasons, but at the moment for giving me a fucking great idea.”

“Oh. Okay.”
“I’ve got to run, I’ll call you later okay? Actually, you may not hear from me tonight, but I’ll meet you in my office tomorrow morning.”

“Um… sure… Harry, I didn’t inspire you to do anything, like, illegal, right?”

Harry smiled at his longtime friend and coworker. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow, Nev.”

Hermione sat at her teaching desk in the classroom she used when she tutored. It was blissfully empty, devoid of noise, the florescent lights off throughout most the building, lit only by the bright sunlight streaming in through the windows. It would have been a very peaceful setting, had it been any other day.

But since she was still trapped in the never waking nightmare of this particular day, she sat slumped over with her arms folded atop the desk, cradling her spinning head. The vertigo caused by whatever drug was lingering in her system had long faded. But her racing thoughts still plagued her, immobilized her as effectively as a tranq dart.

_I need to go the police. Now. If I wait any longer they’ll think I was complice in the murder._

_What the bloody hell are you going to tell them? Do you really have it in you to rat Tom out? To give him up?_

_I can’t give up what was never mine…_

_Regardless of your history, you have no idea what’s going on. What if Tom was trying to help you? What if by going to the authorities you’re putting a target on your back?_

_Can I spend the rest of my life knowing I let a murderer get away?_

_You’ll be haunted by the memory of last night regardless of what happens now. Why make it worse?_

_What if he comes back?_

_What if he comes back…_

She heard a door closing down the hallway and she shot up in her seat, heart thudding painfully as she held her breath, her entire body tense.

She waited for the sound of footsteps, they never came.

_Bloody hell._

She swallowed and slowly took to her feet, every limb trembling. She glanced about the room, debating her options.

_Should I even bother trying to escape down the hall? I should just climb out the window…_

_You’re on the second floor, genius. Are you going to scale down the drain pipe? Your parkour skills are a bit rusty. You can barely lift the watering can._

_Calm down! You don’t even know who’s out there! Don’t panic until there’s reason to panic. Then try not to panic._

She shook her head, willing the rambling of her mind to quiet. She strained to listen for any accompanying noise emitting from the dark hallway beyond, but only vast, empty silence greeted
her. She felt like she was in a vacuum, all the air being sucked out of her lungs along with the sound. She slowly crept to the open doorway and closed her eyes on a stuttered heartbeat, then leaned forward at a snail’s pace to peer down the long empty stretch of hall. She turned her head left, turned her head right, saw no one.

She released a breath and sagged against the doorframe.

*I’m losing my mind. I need to get out of here, back around people. It’s safer out in the open, near a crowd.*

Was it safe for Lucius Malfoy?

The thought chilled her.

She spun on her heel and strode back to the desk, collecting her bag and checking her phone for the time.

The sound of metal scraping metal filled the hallway, screeching, echoing loudly into the room and surrounding her in a blanket of terror.

She could no longer pretend there was nothing in the building with her.

She glanced at the windows and cursed herself for heading upstairs. The only feasible exit was through the hallway, down the main stairwell and out the front, the exact way she came in.

Unless…

*I can use the faculty entrance, it’s closer and my badge will let me through.*

She didn’t waste time, running blindly into the hall and staggering to a stop, still seeing nothing in either direction. She turned right and ran deeper into the darkness, not liking running blind but knowing the twists and turns of the building like the back of her hand even without use of her vision. It was a much shorter jaunt than going back the way she came, and maybe if the killer couldn't see her he wouldn’t be able to catch her…

The killer? *You mean Tom?*

Even thinking his name caused her to hyperventilate.

Suddenly there was loud bang behind the wall in front of her and a light clicked on, the bright bulbs flickering before fulling waking up and humming overhead. She skid to a stop and bodily crashed into the wall before she could check her momentum. And without making any conscious decision to do so she let out a blood curdling scream.

Her entire body was thrumming with adrenaline, it filled every vein, pushing out the blood and turning her entire being into a live wire about to spark and burst at the slightest provocation.

“What the bloody hell?” asked a rusty voice from the lit room.

She slid to the floor in her panic, scrambling backwards across the hard tile on her bum.

“Who’s there?” asked a voice some distant part of her recognized, but in her blind mania everything screamed danger.

She felt tears tracking steadily down her cheeks as she tried to find her footing, eyes wide and locked
horribly on the approaching shadow of a very male figure.

“Oi! Stop there! Who are you!”

A bright light flashed in her eyes and blinded her, she instinctively raised a trembling hand to shield her vision.

“Christ! Calm down!”

The command threw her further off balance, finally making her fractured mind click long enough for a spark of recognition to take hold.

“F-Filch?”

“Bloody hell woman, what er’ you doing screaming your head off like that?”

She gasped for breath, actually clutching at her chest in an attempt to slow her rapid heartbeat.

“I-I thought… I thought you…”

“You shouldn’t be ‘ere, girl. The building is closed today. Didn’t you see all the lights off?”

She nodded, body going numb in wake of the blinding terror she’d just put it through.

“I, I’m sorry. I’m going now…” she swallowed weakly, slowly backing up and heading for the stairwell at the opposite end of the hall.

Filch eyed her accusingly as she departed. The head of the janitorial staff always thought each student was up to no good. She did her avid best to avoid him most nights she stayed late on campus, but today she was grateful for his presence. It calmed her to know at least one other person was with her.

She was still breathing heavily as she pushed open the doors to the stairwell. Only the bright red emergency door light illuminated the narrow space. It took her eyes a moment to adjust. But it took her body no time to detect a predator in its midst.

The air shifted, something on the wind alerting her to the presence at her back, and as the doors clicked shut behind her on a deafening click she saw the shadow in the corner spring to life.

She spun on her heel, reaching for the push bar and inhaling sharply to let out another hysterical scream when a hand covered her mouth and an arm snaked around her waist, ripping her back and pulling her off her feet entirely.

She thrashed wildly, her eyes tearing up as she struggled for air. She was pressed fully back into something solid and warm, and just beyond the rapid pumping of her blood she could hear a steady breath at her ear. It felt a short eternity before the shadow spoke.

“Stop fighting me. I’m not going to hurt you.”

Upon hearing his voice she fought harder, becoming somehow even more terrified and desperate.

“For Christ’s sake! If you don’t stop struggling I’m going to have to knock you out again, and we’re going to have start this all over again tomorrow.”

She blinked, taken aback by his hissed commands.
“I can’t I can’t I can’t I-

“Hermione.”

The sound of her name on his lips punctured her lungs. She deflated on que, her vision fading at the edges, leaving her floating in a haze of red light. He set her down slowly, still held captive by the steel band at her waist. His large hand adjusted, freeing up her nose and allowing her to inhale sharply, taking his heady scent with it.

“I’m going to let you go. But first, you need to know two things. One, if you scream, you’ll only alert the elderly janitor. And I’ll have to kill him. Two, if you run, I will catch you, and we’ll be right back where we started. Nod if you understand me.”

She swallowed heavily, tears pouring freely down her cheeks and pooling along his hand.

She nodded.

“Good girl. Now nod if you believe me.”

She closed her eyes and felt a tremor seize her body.

She nodded again.

A distant part of her mind thought it strange he didn’t tell her not to scream and not to run. He left the options open to her, simply telling her what the consequences would be of either decision. Classic Tom, controlling her every move under the guise of freedom.

He released her mouth first, slowly, no doubt testing the waters to see what she had planned. She sucked in a shuddering breath but beyond that remained silent. She felt his rigid stance relax at her back, his arm slowing falling away, leaving her to support her own weight on trembling legs. She staggered forward, heading for the wall instead of the door as to not give him cause to restrain her again.

She leaned heavily against the cold cement, shrinking back into the corner of the landing and trying to press herself through the wall by way of osmosis. She watched him carefully. He looked the same as he did last night, the apparition more devastatingly perfect up close. And he’d changed into casual wear, which somehow made him more terrifying, that such a creature could manage to walk among the populace without detection.

She watched his dark gaze roam over her slowly, from her shoes to her forehead before flickering down to catch her eyes.

“You look terrified.”

She blinked, feeling a hysterical laugh bubbling up her throat. Luckily her airway was too constricted with fear to release it.

He slowly approached her, holding her gaze the entire time, a secretive smile playing at his lips. She remembered that expression from their youth and it caused her chest to seize painfully. The reality of this moment was starting to set in as the past and present clashed, colliding hard, exploding to pieces and leaving her mind a tangled mess of memories, dreams and desires. She couldn’t distinguish one from the other anymore, where reality stopped and started.

All that existed in the world was the cold, unforgiving wall at her back and the black, all consuming smoke billowing towards her. The cloud reached her, filling her nose and mouth on her next inhale,
racing through her airway and filling her lungs, permeating soft tissues and sinking into veins, racing through her blood until finally reaching her heart, her core, and possessing her fully.

Tom stood not an inch from her, hands pressed flat against the wall on either side of her head as he leaned forward, caging her in and gently nuzzling her hair, tasting her scent with his next deep breath.

She swallowed desperately, feeling overwhelmed in every sense of the word.

“Wha-“ her voice broke, she wet her lips and tried again. “What do you want, Tom?”

He closed his eyes briefly upon hearing his name from her lips. Like he was savoring the sound. She felt a fever burn it’s way through her limbs, snapping and sizzling at her skin. Then his eyes opened, staring into hers so deeply she felt as though the ground were opening up and swallowing her whole.

She watched in a fascinated sort of horror as his lips curled into a cheshire grin. She wanted to trace it with her fingers. She clenched her hands at her side to curb the urge. But the black magic spell was broken by the absurdity of his next words.

“I want to take you to lunch.”
Sunday July 10, 2005

“I don’t like that look in your eyes.”

Harry chewed at the inside of his cheek, trying to buy time to let his mind to catch up with his feet. He’d dashed out of his office and come straight to Sirius’s without formulating just what to say.

“And now you’re at a loss for words, which really terrifies me.”

Harry took a deep breath and stepped fully inside, closing the door behind him.

“Christ, this can’t be good. Did you get yourself fired in the two minutes since I last saw you?”

“Nothing so exciting. But I like your thinking, let’s continue down that path.”

Sirius rolled his eyes, setting down the paperwork he’d been looking at and leaning back in his chair.

“Very funny. What’s on your mind that requires this level of espionage?”

Harry sat down across from him.

“I have an idea on how we can gain access to Narcissa Malfoy, tonight, without her son’s sign off.”

Sirius sighed deeply and Harry read the dissent in his eyes so he continued quickly before the other man could voice his objections.

“Wait, I know, I know it sounds… bad, I guess-”

“You guess?”

“Come on, Sirius, this is a fucking murder investigation with billionaires and assassins rolled in, this is no run of the mill case and should require some out of the box thinking every now and then. Just hear me out, I really thought this through, okay?”

“In the last two minutes since I saw you.”

Harry held his gaze. “Plus the minute and a half I’ve been talking.”

“Oh great, you had me worried there for a moment.”

“Look, Nev said something that triggered me. Then I remembered from the Pink Rhino case—remember the strip joint shooting last year?”

“How can I forget? I’m still finding glitter in the wash.”

“I had to admit one of the dancers for detox before I could officially take her statement, just like Mrs. Malfoy. I showed up the next day to check on her and she was in a counseling session with one the Mungo’s therapists, it was rolled into the detox program and I had to wait outside for an hour before I could get clearance to interview her.”
Sirius raised a brow. “I assume there’s a point to this pleasant trip down memory lane.”

Harry ran a hand through his hair, his mind firing at all cylinders. “I’m saying that a therapist will be in to speak to Narcissa between now and her discharge, and they’ll be legally allowed to speak of the night’s events if it’s conducive to her mental health.”

Sirius’s eyes turned alert and guarded. “You better not be suggesting what I think you’re suggesting.”

Harry swallowed. “I’d like to pretend to be a licensed therapist and interview the witness in her hospital room.”

Sirius blinked, looking dumbfounded for a whole three seconds before he rolled his eyes, shaking his head. “Dumb ass. Very funny.”

Harry tried and failed to contain his grin. “But doesn’t that make my real request sound that much better?”

“No, it doesn’t actually. Because not only are you risking both of our careers with this assainine plan but you’re risking Remus’s as well.”

Harry’s expression turned serious, he leaned forward imploringly. “You know I’d never do anything to risk Remus’s neck.”

“Oh, just mine then?”

“Exactly.”

Sirius sighed heavily, looking away. Harry pushed forward. “Listen, Remus has helped out at both Mungo’s and the Ministry before, he’s trained and licensed to talk to trauma victims, if anything we’re doing Narcissa a favor by getting her the best help we can versus whatever psych intern they’ll throw at her. And trust me when I say this could literally crack the case—”

“No, Harry, it can’t. Because any information Remus collects during his session with her will be held to the client privilege law which means any information we’re privy to will be linked directly back to Rem. Not to mention the fact we can’t move ahead with information that wasn’t obtained during a sanctioned interview to begin with—”

“Remus is allowed to share information that could otherwise put his patient at risk. If she witnessed her husband’s murder, at the hand’s of a trained killer no less, she’s most definitely at risk. There’s no way a judge would—”

“Harry—”

“Please, please Sirius, just let me finish. Let me get it all out and then you can say no, okay? But I just need to get it all out there.”

His eyes held a naked desperation Sirius hadn’t seen in many years, not since he first asked if he could start spending more than just the summers at Sirius’s house while pulling his sleeves over the bruises on his arms. It shook him up, stole his ability to think for a second, so he merely nodded and allowed Harry to finish.

“A therapist is going to meet with her either way, right? That’s happening, there’s nothing her son can do to stop it. If it’s a hospital issued therapist they won’t know what to ask her. Remus will. If he is able to discern she was witness to a murder then, given the nature of the crime, her life is at risk.
and he’s legally allowed to share that with us. Once we have her statement, given to a board certified therapist, obtained during a legally sanctioned counseling session, then we can petition the court to overturn her son’s guardianship and we have our witness back.”

Harry inhaled sharply, desperate for air. The following silence was oppressive and deafening.

Sirius laced his fingers together, bringing his hands up to rest beneath his chin while his eyes fixed to a point somewhere beyond Harry’s shoulder.

Harry was desperate to speak, to argue his case more, but he recognized when Sirius was lost to thought. He bit his tongue and shifted restlessly in his chair, ten years old again and eager to expend his pent up energy.

He counted silently to forty in his head before Sirius spoke, his voice already sounding resigned.

“And let me guess, you’d like to move forward with this plan absent our department head’s approval?”

Harry couldn’t fight the cringe that thinking about Crouch automatically induced.

“I would think my immediate supervisor’s permission would be enough. And your position does allow you to make executive decisions pertaining to the immediate welfare of your active cases, wherein your direct reports are concerned.”

“Did you just quote the HR handbook?”

“I’ve had to brush up on a few chapters these last few months.”

Sirius sighed, trying to look more put out than he felt. His earlier statement rang true, Harry was very good at reading him. Harry could feel victory at the tips of his fingers but maintained his stoic expression to avoid rocking the boat any further.

“Bloody hell. I can’t believe I’m even entertaining this…”

A slow smile blossomed across Harry’s face outside his control, making his eyes sparkle like the gemstones they so resembled.

“Don’t look so bloody cheery. I haven’t decided yet. I need to talk to Rem. And there’s no telling what he’ll think about this insanity. He’ll probably deem the plot so unethical he’ll ban you from Tuesday night dinners for a month.”

“If he knows what’s at stake, hunting down a professional killer, I think he’ll understand where I’m coming from. Not to mention Narcissa is a deeply traumatized widow, regardless if she witnessed the crime directly. She could really benefit from his help either way. If nothing else comes of it, at least he’ll have helped someone who truly needed it.”

Sirius shook his head. “Bloody brown noser. You could sell the ocean a cup of water couldn’t you?”

Harry smirked. “Please, think about it, Sirius? I wouldn’t be so damn annoying about this if I didn’t think it was truly worth our while.”

The older man sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. “I know, kid. I know. Now get the hell out of here. I have a call to make.”

Harry couldn’t hide his excited grin as he quickly slipped from his boss’s office.
Saturday September 9, 1995

“I see a turtle.”

Tom glanced around the grass.

“Where?”

“There.” Hermione pointed up to the sky, tracing her finger through the air as she cloud gazed on her back.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I would never joke about something so important.”

He shook his head.

“Your hairs going to be a fright when you sit up.”

“My hair is always a fright. And I wanted to bring my blanket out here but someone stole it.”

“Stole it back, you mean. You took it from my room last winter when the furnace broke.”

She rolled her eyes, indulging in the taboo practice since she was angled away from him.

“I remember you offering it to me.”

“Not to keep.”

“God forbid you ever give me a gift. Are you afraid to get your immaculate hair dirty, Tom? Too proud to lay back and look at the sky on a beautiful summer day?”

She smiled just envisioning what his scowl looked like. But then she heard the shifting of material, the rustle of grass, and to her great shock and enjoyment Tom laid out beside her, shoulders touching, pillowing his head beneath the opposite arm.

She glanced over, studying his perfect profile and smirking. “I see you still managed to protect your head from the ground.”

“Shut up and look at the clouds, Hermione.”

She laughed, doing as bid with a broad grin. It was such a warm, beautiful day. School had started back up the previous week so she really only got to spend time with him on the weekends, and even that was a rarity.

Over the summer Tom started spending a lot more time with the guys at school. One of them set him up with a job at a local mechanic. Tom was brilliant at understanding the way things worked, taking them apart, studying each component and putting it back together different, better than before. He saw things in a way most people didn’t, at least in a way that confounded her.

But since taking the job he started hanging around with a slightly different crowd. She went down to the shop one afternoon to see if he wanted to grab lunch and had found him standing with a group of young men about his age laughing. It did strange things to her, to see him laughing in the presence of others. She was so used to him closing himself off to the other children in the orphanage. But she was genuinely happy he seemed to finally be making friends beyond her.
Male friends, anyway. She was just fine being his only female friend. What did a guy need multiple female friends for anyway? They’d end up annoying him. She was just looking out for Tom.

The guys at the shop had tattoos and piercings, one sported a bright green mohawk and another had dreadlocks to his knees. They wore leather and wife beaters and drove motorcycles and muscle cars. It was so beautifully cliche it made her face hurt with spent laughter just thinking about it. But in all the ridiculousness she saw incremental changes in Tom she couldn’t deny were to her liking.

He started wearing a black leather jacket over his t-shirts, to work, to school, downtown and the park. Even in the blistering heat he seemed just fine under the garment, while she was sweating like a pig at his side. He’d also started coming back to the orphanage with grease under his nails. Most people would consider that a downside, but she liked seeing the proof of his manual labor, his hard day’s work. It made him seem less god and more man, and she liked learning about his mortal side.

But the best change of all was the matte black cruiser he’d turned up with last month. He’d spent eight weeks repairing the bike he pulled off the scrap heap, putting every dime he earned at the shop into it and selling off stolen wares to buy parts. He was terribly proud of the end result, try as he might to act indifferent about the machine she could see the gleam in his eyes everytime he started the engine. She teased him about it but was equally proud of him for completing his pet project. Plus, she loved riding around the city seated behind him, arms around his middle and hair blowing back. She understood his obsession with the mechanics of the bike from that regard, nothing else made her feel quite so free.

And if it wasn’t for the pending appointment they were waiting for, she had no doubt they’d be zipping through the streets at this very moment. She’d taken to cloud gazing to try and distract him from what was in store and the memories it stirred up.

Six months ago was “The Fight”, as the Wool’s residents referred to it, an apt name given to the second worst evening of Hermione’s life. The first would always be the events that led her to Wool’s, but had Tom actually died on the sidewalk, in her arms that night, the traumatic evenings would have easily tied in devastation.

But he’d been spirited away to St. Mungo’s with non fatal injuries, despite looking like death warmed over on the gurney. Hermione had been hysterical, demanding to ride with him in the back of the ambulance and denied entry because they wanted to hold her back for questioning.

By the time she relayed her version of events to the responding officers she’d had to beg and plead to be taken to Tom’s bedside instead of returned to the orphanage. They only agreed on account that Mrs. Cole was also at the hospital and agreed to Hermione’s presence.

By the time the doctor’s had him set up in his own bed, heavily medicated and hooked up to all kinds of machines, they’d discovered three broken ribs, a broken clavicle and nose, head lacerations, a damaged cornea, a fractured femur and a sprung wrist, though she knew the last injury was due to his inflicting violence rather than receiving it.

Hermione had thrown up in the ladies room after seeing him, unconscious, bruised and swollen. Mrs. Cole had taken pity on her and let her have two days to recover from her trauma before inflicting punishment for being out after curfew, wandering around the city without a chaperone, and engaging in the fight in the first place, though Hermione was very adamant about relaying the circumstances regarding the brawl. She made sure everyone knew Tom had came to her defense that night. She was terrified to think of what might have happened to her otherwise, as devastated as she was by the aftermath of the evening.

With Tom being hospitalized for as long as he was in recovery, rumors flew throughout Wool’s and
their school. By the time he returned to home and classes people were whispering about his multiple stab and bullet wounds, looking at him in awe of his ability to single handedly fight off over twenty armed attackers. The stories made her roll her eyes at their outlandish stupidity. Despite the fact he was so badly beaten no one thought to make fun of him, somehow his injuries made him more infamous, more mysterious and dangerous.

Or perhaps the other teens gave him wide berth because at least one thing had been proven for absolute certain... Tom wasn’t afraid to take a hit. And he wasn’t afraid to dish one out. The rumors of his violent nature were proven glaringly true overnight, and the legend grew from there.

Despite the fact the man Tom attacked had no desire to press charges, likely embarrassed about being beaten to a pulp by a teenager because he was caught forcefully groping a minor, the courts still got involved due to Tom’s age and being a ward of the commonwealth. They took mercy on him considering his injuries and Hermione’s testimony of how the events transpired. But he still threw the first punch, according to all versions of the tale, and despite the fact that it was to protect her the adults in the fancy courtroom didn’t consider violence to be the answer. Ever. Hermione bit her tongue several times that day, thinking the judge’s reasoning to be the stupidest thing she’d heard in a long time, and she slept across the hall from Amy.

If violence was never the answer then why did the British Army still engage in wars? The magistrate was obviously a man who never had to fight for his meals, his clothing, his place in the world. Hermione detested violence but she understood it, and why so many people turned to it in times of great stress and hardship.

It was after Tom’s hearing when she realized just how much he’d rubbed off on her, altering her world views just by association.

In the end the magistrate had opted against a juvenile hall stint, droning on about throwing away society’s youth rather than dealing with the problem. This was a progressive judge. Or one that liked to think so. So he sidled Tom with a fate worse than death.

Therapy.

The court assigned youth counselor was due to arrive at the orphanage at any moment to meet with Tom for the first court mandated one hour session a week for god knew how long. She didn’t find the outcome that unsettling. She wasn’t keen on therapy herself but she knew she’d prefer it to most other punishments the courts were known to dole out. She thought Tom was overreacting in his abhorrence but she bit her tongue on any retort, tired of rowing over the incident.

Tom still hadn’t forgiven her for leaving the alley.

She still hadn’t forgiven him for leaving her in the alley.

It was a stalemate neither were keen to break, Tom on principal and Hermione on being tired of losing every other argument to him. He claimed he was meeting someone at the other side of the road that night, he had no idea who the girls at the crosswalk were and it was happenstance they disappeared from the embankment at the same time.

She didn’t really think he would lead her out there just to flirt with girls and she felt ridiculous speaking the nature of her true heartbreak that night. She didn’t tell him she stormed off in a jealous rage, though she was sure he suspected as much. She tried to save face and said she left in anger because he’d left her behind like a petulant little sister while we went off and did whatever the hell he wanted. Which technically wasn’t a lie. She would have felt that way regardless, the girls were just added insult to injury, salt burning an already festering wound.
But she wanted to avoid the fight today, knowing how closely emotions were brewing beneath the surface with the appointment just minutes away.

“I saw a black car arrive about twenty minutes ago,” Tom spoke suddenly, jarring her from her thoughts.

She swallowed tentatively. “Must be them, then.”

“This is utter bullshit. Therapy for throwing a punch, to stop a fucking assault no less. What is the country coming to.”

She blinked, staring up at the puffy clouds but not really seeing them.

“It’s only an hour…”

“Yeah, every Saturday from here until however long that uppity prick says. I have better things I could be doing with my time.”

“Like getting into more fights?” she chanced a glance in his direction, smirking upon seeing his glare. “Too soon?”

“You’re a riot. No wonder those guys were trying to drag you back to their hotel.”

“Tom…” she sighed, frowning at the hostility in his voice.

“No, Hermione. Thank you so much for causing such a fucking stir that night. Please, run off half cocked into the city more often, I really hate all the free time I have between school, my job, and now this. I could use for some more excitement.”

She clenched her jaw, tasting his bitter words on her tongue.

“It wasn’t my fault-”

“Excuse me?”

She rolled to her side swiftly, eyes narrowed. “I am sick and tired of fighting about this, Tom! Neither one of us is going to say they’re sorry!”

“What the hell do I have to be sorry for? Thinking you were intelligent enough to understand simple english?”

“Ah!” she screamed, sitting up and tearing at handfuls of grass. “I wouldn’t have run off if you hadn’t of left me!”

“I said I’d be back in five bloody minutes, I had barely walked away when I saw you sprinting down the street-”

“Oh shut it, I was not sprinting, I waited and I lost sight of you and then I walked down the bloody sidewalk-”

“Right into the path of those fucking Neanderthals-”

“How is that my fault? I hardly carry a crystal ball with me! I stopped dead when I saw them, but then he grabbed me and-”

“I know, Hermione, I was there!”
“I know you were, I remember quite vividly, Tom! I thought you were going to die in my arms!”

Her voice broke on the final words, tears spilling from her eyes. She was mortified, not prepared for the rapid onset of emotions she felt when the memories settled in her mind.

Tom opened and closed his mouth, his eyes still slitted but his shoulders relaxing a touch. She wiped miserably at her eyes, turning her face away and resting her head against her knees.

“Hermione…”

She sucked in a sharp breath, willing her nerves to calm before turning to face him once more. “I won’t say I’m sorry, Tom. I won’t. Not this time.”

He held her gaze, the silence stretching and the gentle sounds of nature fading around them until all she heard was her heartbeat in her ears.

“But I never said thank you, either… and I… well, thank you. You really did save me that night.”

Tom’s eyes darkened but she knew the anger wasn’t directed at her. She knew he yelled at her about that night so often because he was mad at himself for leaving her so exposed, so vulnerable, and at the men for trying to take advantage in the narrow window of opportunity he’d left for them.

“You’re welcome.”

His voice was low, whispered, and she smiled. His expression was calm once more, and she hoped they could recover at least part of their day. It really was quite beautiful out-

“Mr. Riddle!”

Her body tensed and he went rigid beside her, both turning their heads to stare across the grounds as Mrs. Cole approached. Hermione swallowed, brushing the grass and dirt from her knees to avoid the measured gaze the matron pinned them with.

Her long shadow fell upon them, casting out the sun.

“It is time.”

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**Sunday July 10, 2005**

“Are you ready to order?”

The waitress opened her mini pad, pen at the ready, eyes transfixed on Tom.

“Hm, let’s see, Hermione, have you decided what you want?”

Hermione blinked, holding the menu in numb hands. She’d opened the heavy cardstock several minutes earlier… or was it hours? How long had she been sitting here, in this corner restaurant across from campus filled with floral bouquets on white linen tables and bright sunlight streaming through the windows, fancy silverware and empty wine glasses at her side and a professional killer at her front?

“Um… I…”

Tom tipped his head a fraction, an amused smile playing at the corner of his lips. Despite the fact that he had deferred to Hermione the waitress’s eyes remained upon him. Tom glanced up at the girl,
awarding her with a disarming grin.

“Perhaps a few more minutes.”

The girl swallowed thickly, nodding and slowly backing away, eyes still trained upon him. But Tom’s focus was back to his dining guest. Despite the small table they had plenty of space to themselves, the other diners scattered at enough distance to put them well out of earshot. Hermione felt trapped, isolated in their private nook.

“Maybe another minute, then?”

Hermione stared back at him mutely. She blinked slowly, setting the menu down and sliding her hands into her lap to hide their tremor.

“I’m… not very hungry.”

“Hmm. Well perhaps a salad then?”

She had no idea what to say. She had no idea what the fuck was going on.

Am I really here right now? With him? This must be some insane fever dream.

He can’t possibly think this is normal.

Tom’s smirk turned into a sympathetic smile. He casually leaned forward, his head dipping low as if about to convey a secret.

“Hermione, please, don’t be nervous. I just want to talk to you. In fact, you don’t even have to talk if you don’t want to. Just listen. I can explain everything, and it’s not as bad as you’re thinking, I promise.”

His eyes were soft, warm and pleading, a look of open longing and hope she’d never seen on his face before, little less combined.

“I’m sorry, I’m getting carried away. I’m a bit nervous you see. I’ve been looking forward to this day for a very, very long time.”

She swayed in her chair, fingers interlaced so tightly they turned white beneath the table cloth.

“I’ve imagined it in my head countless times. What I would say, what you would say. How you would look. If your eyes still look like golden honey or if they changed over the years. They do by the way. Still look like honey, that is.”

She listened to his words in a stupor, her vision fading at the edges and leaving only Tom in focus, the focal point tethering her to this twisted, surreal plane of existence.

“Of course that doesn’t mean you haven’t changed in other ways, we both have. Obviously. But I must say, I’m quite excited to see the many differences in you. You’re a grown woman now, a completely different person. And I feared the person you’ve become wouldn’t approve of the person I’ve become.”

She swallowed thickly, her tear ducts starting to burn beyond her control. She blinked rapidly to slow the inevitable.

“Of course that decision is ultimately up to you. However I only ask that you allow us this moment
to talk, to once again familiarize ourselves with the other’s company, and to have an open mind before you decide anything. Would you give me that opportunity? For old time’s sake?”

Hermione continued to blink stupidly, his words spinning in circles around her like a cyclone of insanity.

“You’re still at a loss for words. How ironic that I can’t seem to stem the flow of mine.”

His melodic laugh was self-deprecating, followed by a rueful shake of his head, glancing away as though embarrassed by his own nervous ramblings.

Hermione opened her mouth to speak but could think of nothing to say. She promptly snapped it shut and inhaled sharply, closing her eyes to allow her brain to recalibrate without Tom taking up her field of vision. She counted backwards from three before forcing herself to face him once more.

“Tom…”

That was all she could manage, unsure what message she was trying to convey, what message she wanted to convey.

But Tom didn’t look disheartened by her lack of vocabulary in the slightest, his eyes alight with playful mischief.

“She speaks. I admit I was hoping for a bit more conversation, but if all you can manage is my name then I’ll hardly complain. It sounds divine from your lips, it always has.”

She felt a blush creep up her neck and spread across her cheeks, the rosy hue deepening when she saw Tom’s stormy gaze track the flood of color.

“I see I can still make you do that. Good. I was worried I’d lost my touch.”

She shook her head, part of her senses returning in light of his playful banter. His words fell upon her like satin sheets, exquisitely soft but cold and slippery. Something about them felt off, intangible, which was really saying something given the nature of the situation at large. His words and mannerisms seemed straight out of a romantic comedy, guy reunites with long lost love, tender cuteness ensues…

She blinked, reality clicking into her mind like a seatbelt. She watched the gentle smile play at his lips, the hopeful glint in his eyes, the way he leaned his entire body towards her imploringly.

And she saw red.

“You’re always playing a game, Tom. From the moment I first met you you found some way to challenge me. And this…” she brought her hands up to gesture wildly at his person. “This… this act is just another one of your games! You aren’t this… whatever the hell you’re trying to pretend to be right now. My eyes look like honey?” She scoffed, poison dripping from her tongue. “I see right
through your masks. I always have. I always will. So if you’re going to continue this masquerade then I suggest you kill me or let me go.”

She reeled back in her seat following her vehemence outburst.

*Where the hell did that come from?*

*Did I just tell him to kill me? Why did I make that a viable option??*

She swallowed, pressing back into her chair to distance herself from him further while her eyes reflected the fire still licking through her veins.

He held her gaze a moment longer, studying her features, before nodding once.

“Very well.”

And before her eyes, Tom transformed.

It was a terrifying, mesmerizing thing to witness.

His eyes flickered, shuttering, darkening. The hopeful eagerness they housed hardened, the edges folding in, the pupils expanding out, locking onto her like a searing, scorching brand.

His mouth followed, the innocent, rueful grin growing daggers, sharpening into lethal points, reflecting a cruelty that punctured her heart.

And then, finally, his body morphed, bones breaking, cracking, resolidifying at sharp, unforgiving angles until he grew ten feet before her eyes, spine stretched to eternity, shoulders blocking out the sun, a king upon his throne, Hermione at his feet.

The metamorphosis filled her head with the sounds of screeching metal, Tom was a machine programmed to function any way necessary, only reverting to his true form when not in operation.

The over eager childhood sweetheart that sat across from her moments before was disemboweled, gutted, blood dripping from the fangs of the predator that sat in his chair.

“There you are.” she whispered, devastated and awed.

His smile widened, sharp canines glinting in the sun, ready to sink into the tender flesh at her throat.

“Here I am.”

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Harry’s phone buzzed in his pocket while he stood in line at the sausage trolley, the smell of meat and onions heavy in the oppressive heat. It was unusually warm this summer, Harry didn’t spend much time researching things like climate change and global warming but as the sweat beaded along his neck beneath his collar he was starting to think there was something to it. Alas, his mind could only stay focused on something outside of his casework for snippets at a time, the heat and hunger pains already forgotten upon seeing Sirius’s name flash across his caller id.

He quickly answered. “Hey.”

“Hey, to you. Well, no reason to beat around the bush. I spoke to Remus. I know you’re anxious to hear what he said. So I’ll put you out of your misery and not draw this out any longer than-”

Harry sighed deeply, running a hand over his perspiring face. “Hilarious.”
“Come on, it’s Sunday, I’m allowed to have a little fun on the weekend.”

“I’m glad someone is.”

“Alright fine, he agreed to do it. But- and this is a big but Harry so wipe that shit eating grin off your face-”

Harry laughed, his face sore from the massive grin that broke free upon hearing Sirius’s words.

“Sorry, mate, I can’t.”

“Well listen up, Remus agreed to meet with the patient and will conduct a session by the book. He isn’t going to bend the rules for us. If his conversation with her leads to information that fits the bill of endangering her then he’ll tell us, but that’s it. He’s not going to conduct an off the books interview with her on our behalf.”

Harry was nodding his head as though Sirius could see him.

“That’s fine, that’s all I want, all we need. Thank you, Sirius, and thank Remus for me-”

“You can thank him yourself when you see him later. This was your idea Harry, you’re the one taking him.”

Harry nodded. “Great. I spoke with the attendant and he said she knocked out as soon as they admitted her. He thinks she’ll be more stable in a few hours. We’ll visit her this evening.”

“Remus is still in Cambridge. His train gets back at seven thirty if you want to pick him up and head straight over.”

Harry tried to keep the excitement out of his voice but knew he failed terribly.

“Thank you, Sirius, I mean it.”

“I know you do, kid. Just find this son of a bitch that killed Malfoy and we’ll be right as rain.”

Harry’s smile fell, his expression hardening, eyes intense.

“I intend to.”

Saturday September 9, 1995

Tom stopped before the closed door, his spine rigid, stance defensive.

_Bloody ridiculous waste of time. I could be doing something worthwhile right now, earning money. Instead I have to devote an hour of my weekend to this shit._

He closed his eyes.

_Just get through it. Play the part. The bloody sessions will end once they see you’re a well adjusted, productive member of society. Then you can go back to breaking the law._

The thought made him smile, especially when he pictured what Hermione’s reaction would be to the statement.

_“Tom, I hate when you strip cars, or pawn stolen radios, or rob houses…”_
He shook his head. She’d come a long way over the last few years but she still had a moral fiber that refused to fray, no matter what he exposed her to. He supposed it would be endearing if it wasn’t so annoying.

He opened his eyes on a sigh. The sooner he went in the sooner it would be over.

He rapped his knuckles against the wood.

“Come in.”

The voice was muffled but distinctly male. Tom had to make a conscious effort to keep the scowl off his face as he opened the door and walked inside.

“Mr. Riddle, I presume?”

“Yes.”

“Right on time. I appreciate your punctuality. Please, take a seat.”

Tom kept his expression neutral as he slid gracefully into the wood slat chair across the desk from the court appointed therapist. Tom casually studied the man, taking in every detail he could without being overly obvious about it.

He was up in his years for sure, nearing retirement by the looks of it. His hair was salt and pepper but full on his head, neatly swept back in a modern style. His clothes were finely made, fitting his well built frame in such a way that suggested professional tailoring. Obviously this was a man of class and wealth.

Tom instantly hated him.

He burned with it. The bitter tang of resentment steadily climbing up his throat, searing his esophagus and threatening to spill forth onto his tongue as scathing words.

You can’t. Not with him. You have to get him to like you, sign off on your papers and end the sessions.

Or I can just piss him off enough that he signs the papers to get rid of me.

He’d have to feel the man out over the next hour to decide which approach was best suited to the stranger.

“You seem remarkably intuitive, Mr. Riddle.”

Tom blinked.

“I can tell these things about people, you see. I am very adept at reading others, detecting their inner most thoughts without them having to say much. A hazard of the trade I’m afraid.”

Tom forced himself to remain still, not to fidget or adjust, not letting his body give away anything that he may be thinking or feeling at the moment.

We’ll see how good you are at reading people, you fucking twat. What am I thinking now?

“Right now you’re thinking you don’t like me very much, because of my appearance or mannerisms, or some combination of both. And you’re strategizing on the best way to get free of me and these sessions. You haven’t decided what role you want to play in this room, which is why you’re
choosing your words carefully and minimizing physical movement. Am I close?”

Tom felt his heart skip a beat, blood draining from his face and breath stealing from his lungs. It was a rare thing for him to be rendered speechless, but this was one of those moments.

*Who the hell are you?*

“And now you’re wondering who I am, and how I’m able to read you so well when you make masking your thoughts and emotions into an art form.”

Tom bristled. “I find it ennerving.”

The mysterious man smiled, flashing a set of unsurprisingly white and perfect teeth.

“Yes, I usually have that effect on people. I imagine you make quite the impression as well. I’ve heard a lot about you, your case file is three inches thicker than any other patient I’ve worked with.”

Tom straightened his already ram rod spine, face hardening, daring the man to breach the taboo topic of his past this early into their conversation.

The man simply smiled and raised a staying hand. “No need to get so defensive, Mr. Riddle. I have no desire discussing your past with you.”

Tom found himself thrown for another loop, losing his footing in the dance once again.

“Isn’t that the point of these sessions? To dredge up all my past mistakes and chase away my inner demons? Turn me into a good little boy for the courts?”

The man threw his head back and laughed, the sound chilling in the small space. He wiped absently at the corner of his eye as he gained his bearings.

“No, Tom, that is not my purpose here with you. Once I heard about the incident you were embroiled in last March I specifically asked to be assigned to your rehabilitation.”

Tom couldn’t help but flinch at the word. He knew there was no point in trying to mask it, this strange man obviously knew how to read him like an open book regardless of what he tried to convey.

“I know, a nasty term. *Rehabilitation*. It implies that you are broken, defect, in need to being set right because what you are is currently wrong.”

Tom studied the man in silence before slowly wetting his lips, utterly intrigued and knowingly taking the bait.

“And what other purpose would these sessions serve if not to, *repair me*, as you say?”

The man smiled, a lethal glint in his eyes that Tom recognized instantly. It was the same feral gleam that he saw staring back at him in the mirror each morning.

“I do not think you are broken, Tom. Far from it. In fact, I would like to help you continue down the path of self discovery without asking that you modify your behavior or deny your natural impulses in any way.”

Tom’s breath was shallow, suddenly becoming aware of who was in his midst.

A predator.
Tom wasn’t used to sharing such confined quarters with his own kind. His instinct was to challenge the obvious alpha in the room, fight and overpower, retake the mantle of control. But he was also curious. Painfully so. Who the hell was this man? Why did the courts allow him to take his case if he didn’t plan on curbing his violent nature?

Tom held the man’s dark gaze, seeing his own pale features reflected back in the wide pupils. He leaned forward a touch, knowing the stranger would interpret the movement how he intended, as a recognition of the power shift in the room. Tom would never play the role of prey, but he was willing to relinquish control for an hour once a week if the trade off proved beneficial.

Finally Tom broke the silence with the most insignificant and powerful question there was.

“Who are you?”

The man’s feral smile gleamed brighter, light refracting off his sharpened teeth. A true predator.

“For the purpose of our sessions, you may call me Mr. Green.”

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**Sunday July 10, 2005**

Tom ordered her a salad.

It sat untouched before her.

He ordered the prime rib for himself, cutting the meat into meticulous, even sized pieces before placing them into his mouth with practiced grace, his manners impeccable, just as they were in youth. But this time he wasn’t trying to prove he was just as good as the children who attended private school. No, it was painfully evident that Tom had finally become that which he once despised most.

Refined.

She felt her throat tighten painfully. She tried to swallow past the pressure but found it impossible.

He glanced up at her after swallowing another expensive bite of meat, his eyes glowing from within once more, the masks stripped away and nothing impeding her view of the dangerous creature beneath.

She couldn’t bear the weight of his stare and averted her gaze to the tabletop, her focus falling on the flatware. She eyed the butter knife with trepidation and longing.

*Can you stab someone with that? Shit. I should have ordered a steak so I could get a decent knife.*

“If you plan on using that as a weapon later I suggest being less obvious about it.” His voice jolted her, snapping her focus back to him. His eyes held her steady in a gentle current of acid. His tone was even, calm.

“It’s like pickpocketing. Draw my focus somewhere else while you slip the knife under your napkin. Then distract me while you bring the napkin to your lap. Your sleeves aren’t long enough to conceal the blade entirely so you’ll have to draw me in close to spring your attack. The blade is dull so you won’t be able to slash, you’ll have to stab and put a lot of force into the motion, it’s best to swing in a downward arc. Since I’m sure you’d like to stab and run you’ll need to make the first hit count. Don’t waste time with muscle, and I doubt you’d be able to pierce my breastbone in one go. Your best bet is the lower organs, something vital. A stomach wound would be easiest to manage. It won’t bleed as much, the acids would eventually kill me but I’d have time to return the favor. You really
are better off with something sharper, something that can sever an artery. Most people die of stab wounds due to exansigunation. All it takes is a knick in the right spot and they’re utterly helpless within minutes. But now you’ve brought too much focus to the knife, and I’ll notice its absence. So if you’re still planning to stab me you’ll have to do so spontaneously, taking me off guard. Or, we can sit here and have lunch without you making any attempts on my life and we can forget you ever considered doing so in the first place.”

Hermione blinked.

_Fucking hell…_

“I appreciate the advice. But I think I preferred the fake Tom better. At least he complimented my eyes.”

He smirked at her casual contempt.

“I was trying to give you a break. After last night and the stairwell this morning I thought the real me would overwhelm you.”

He brought another bite to his lips, savoring the flavor. He swallowed slowly, eyes rooting her to the spot.

“The act was a lie,” he continued. “But not the words. Your eyes do still.”

“Spare me.”

He chuckled under his breath, shaking his head to himself. “You haven’t changed. I was afraid you had.”

She crossed her arms, huffing a breath. “I most certainly have changed, in ways you could never imagine. Because you’d of had to be there to appreciate the magnitude.”

His amused expression dropped from his face like a dead weight, the liquid grey of his eyes solidifying into stone.

“I couldn’t come to you. It wouldn’t have been safe.”

She sat tense in the silence that followed, jaw ticcing.

“Not safe for who? Me or you?”

“Neither of us.”

She held her head high, eyes drifting down to the table.

“Because you were… killing people?” She cringed at her own nativity.

Tom leaned back, setting his knife and fork down. He glanced at the nearest restaurant patrons, deep in their own chatter, then his gaze cut to the bar where their waitress lingered, talking to another staff member.

He faced forward, sardonic amusement etching his face.

“Let’s not call it that while we’re in mixed company. Let’s refer to it as… maintenance work.”

She bristled at the callous wording, laced with his black humor.
“Fine. How long have you been doing...” she breathed deep, tasting something bitter in the back of her throat. “Maintenance?”

He smiled, basking in her ire like a cat in the sun. He pushed his plate forward, leaning back into his chair and effecting a comfortable position, no doubt settling in for a question and answer session.

“I had to be trained first. I was tapped six months after leaving Wool’s,” her heart thumped painfully at the reminder of their last moments together at the orphanage, “I was sent on my first assignment about eight months after that.”

Her shoulders dropped, her heart breaking for the boy she once knew. They recruited him when he was still so young, in such a vulnerable position, out in the world on his own for the first time, no resources or family to turn to. If his employer’s chosen profession wasn’t enough to hate them for then their targeting of desperate youth certainly solidified her feelings.

“But… how can you… do what you do, Tom? Ki-” she stopped short at his warning glare, clearing her throat awkwardly. “How can you… do maintenance on innocent people?”

He tipped his head forward, his annoyed posture loudly conveying Really, Hermione?

She pulled her shoulders back. “I’m sorry if I’m not good at talking in code. I’ve never had to discuss… maintenance with a professional… mechanic.”

She felt her cheeks tinge pink, using the first word that popped in her head and knowing it was due to memories of Tom’s first job. Memories seemed to hit him at the same moment, his face softening and conveying a genuine lightness. She blinked and the expression was gone, replaced by his mask of neutrality.

“If you can’t make an effort to do so then we’ll have to take the conversation somewhere more… private.”

She swallowed, his voice changing on the last word, deepening. She shifted in her chair.

“I’m quite fine here. In public. With witnesses.”

He tipped his head down, a shadow crossing his face, darkening his eyes.

“Do you think anyone here can protect you from me, Hermione?”

She pressed further back into chair, heart thrumming like a hummingbird’s wings.

“If I wanted to hurt you I would have done so at the Club. If I’d changed my mind after I would have killed you on the stairwell. Taking you to lunch isn’t a part of some master plan to harm you.”

She relaxed a fraction, his reasoning sound even if the words were chilling, but she leaned away again when his dark eyes gleamed, his fanged smile returning and tugging painfully at her heart strings.

“But if I wanted, I could tear you out of that chair, throw you on this table, and do whatever the fuck I wanted to you. And no one here could stop me.”

She felt her heartbeat in the back of her throat, stuttering her words.

“You w-would…” she swallowed painfully, “kill all these p-people? For no reason?”

“There would be a reason. To ensure I left no witnesses behind. I don’t leave loose ends.”
She inhaled sharply. “What about me? I know too much now. Are you going to kill me?”

He smiled with the corner of his mouth, his secretive grin, and leaned forward, resting his forearms against the table and bringing his face that much closer to hers.

“Like I said, if I wanted to kill you I would have done so by now. I wouldn’t be providing additional information. However, I may still throw you on the table.”

She felt a tremor race through her body, following the path of her spine. She turned her face away, unable to maintain her composure.

“Don’t…” she whispered.

He tilted his head, studying her from an angle. “Don’t?”

“You know what. I’m trying to have a conversation with you and I can’t focus when you…”

The corner of his mouth turned up, eyes dancing with humor. “When I…?”

She crossed her arms and harrumphed, making him smile outright.

“Are you done making jokes?”

His lips fell. “I wasn’t joking.”

He was staring blatantly at her mouth now, eyes predatory. She struggled to find breath. After a short eternity he released her from his thrall, looking away and leaning back in his chair.

“I won’t hurt you, Hermione. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever. Because I know I can trust you. If you intended to turn me in to the authorities you would have done so by now. But you didn’t. And you won’t. Even though you hate yourself for it.”

She inhaled sharply, the truth of his words stabbing her most vital organ, leaving her to bleed out before him, utterly exposed. She didn’t bother trying to argue, left to wallow in the shame of how right he was.

“If I had tried to turn you in… would you have killed me?”

She knowingly abandoned the code word but whispered the question so low she could barely hear it herself. Yet somehow she knew Tom would have no trouble perfectly attuning to any and every thing she said, every move she made, however subtle. Sure enough she watched him react physically to the question, something wild flashing in the depths of his eyes before the shutters came down, closing her off once more.

“I suppose we’ll never know.”

She was vastly disappointed by his response, though she didn’t know if there was a good answer to such a dark question. She peered down at her hands folded in her lap.

“It doesn’t really matter now, Hermione.”

She glanced up, heart stuttering at the low spoken sound of her name. He watched her leisurely, like she was a painting on his wall, there for his visual enjoyment whenever he saw fit.

“Thanks to the scene you stumbled in on last night, there’s only one logical option.”
She blinked. “What do you mean?”

“The things you saw, the information you possess, the fact that you know my real name, it all puts a target on your back. The smart thing to do is to part ways here, now, and agree to never seek the other person out ever again. We’ll never see or speak of each other from this day forward. It’ll be like the other person never existed.”

Hermione opened her mouth without making the conscious decision to speak. “There’s no other option?”

He pinned her with a knowing look, looking supremely pleased by her outburst. “I suppose there could be. If we’re careful.”

She held her breath, shame and intrigue burning through her heart, scrambling her thoughts.

_I shouldn’t be looking for another option. I should take his offer to leave and walk away, go back to my life._

_But we both know I don’t want that..._

_He doesn’t either._

That truth sustained her, gave her the strength to sit upright as Tom fed her poison from his hand.

“We will discuss it tomorrow night, at your place.”

She reared back. “Tomorrow?”

“Unfortunately I have business to attend to for the remainder of the day, as much as I would like to linger in your company. And I imagine you have many more questions for me. Some conversations are best had in private. This will be one of them, I assure you.”

Cold water washed down her spine. “Tom, I...”

_I may come to my senses by tomorrow. The spell may be broken..._

_You may disappear again. I can’t go another eight years..._

He seemed to read her mind, lightning flashing in his storm cloud eyes.

“I’ll come to you tomorrow night, Hermione. And don’t worry,” his words were sharp pins, driving through her limbs, rendering her motionless. “If you aren’t home when I arrive, I’ll wait for you inside.”

Harry rubbed absently at his forehead, his fingers grazing the raised scar above his right eye. His mind traitorously drifted to the night he received it, his breath shallow as he walked down the steps in his childhood home, hand clutching the railing like a vice, fingers strained and knuckles white. Before his twelve year old self could round the corner, step into the pool of blood, the sound of automatic doors opening snapped him out of the waking nightmare.

He blinked, pulling together his composure as people began exiting the station, pulling rolling bags and carrying suitcases.

Harry straightened as his eyes roamed the faces as they appeared, a smile breaking out when he saw the familiar sweep of sandy blonde hair, a set of warm, tired hazel eyes set beneath. He started
moving closer, waving his arm to gain the man’s attention.

“Harry, my boy, you are a sight for sore eyes.”

Harry wrapped one arm around Remus’s thin frame in a hug while reaching down to carry his bag with the other.

“Rem, you have no idea how much I appreciate this.”

“Sirius told me this was vital to the case you’re working on.”

“Yes, it is, but I understand your stance from a medical and ethical standpoint, I don’t expect you to do anything with the witness that you wouldn’t normally do.”

Remus smirked. “For starters, I’ll be referring to her as my patient, not a witness, as my meeting her is not linked to the investigation at this point.”

Harry nodded, walking beside the man he’d long considered an uncle, another mentor and stand in parent during his turbulent teen years.

Both Sirius and Remus were longtime friends of his parents before Harry was born, all having met while training at the Ministry. Remus completed his basic training but branched out to the psychology program versus undertaking the field work necessary to become an Operative. He preferred helping people while his friends preferred hunting them down, as Sirius so caustically put it.

Remus and Lily were extremely close while Sirius and James were connected at the hip, once his parents fell in love the group became inseparable. Then Remus left for the States not long after Harry was born where he set up a successful private practice for over a decade, flying home to spend holidays with the Potter family, Sirius among them. Harry didn’t know why Remus left the country in the first place and of all the times he’d asked he didn’t think Remus ever provided him with a true answer. But really, it was his return that made the greater impact on Harry’s life.

Remus claimed he moved back to England because he missed home and wanted to be closer to his mother as she got up in her years. Harry knew the truth. Remus moved back the week after his parents died, the haunted look in his eyes never fully dissipating from that moment Harry first saw him at the funeral.

Remus started his career anew in London, living with Sirius while he got his feet back under him. He just never moved out. At twelve Harry didn’t have a strong concept of what love was beyond what he felt for his parents and his unofficial uncles. When he lost two of the four most important people in his young life he felt broken, even more so when he was shipped off to his Aunt Petunia’s family. Sirius was a young field operative traveling the world, risking his life on the daily. Remus was just back in the UK with no job, there was no way the courts would allow either man to take custody.

The neglect and abuse Harry faced by the hands of his blood relatives over the next four years taught him that love was an even more abstract concept, something that couldn’t be bought or won or begged for. It was something that flourished beyond the realm of what the human mind could conceptualize or control. And it was something to be treasured, kept and protected at all costs, for the second most powerful feeling in the world beyond love was its absence.

Harry was quite certain he realized Sirius and Remus were in love before they did. It wasn’t strange to him, wasn’t something he had to stop to wrap his head around. It made sense, given their shared history, shared loss, and their shared interest in Harry’s well being. When he turned sixteen and
moved in with Sirius they tried to hide their relationship, sleeping in separate rooms, avoiding eye contact when in the same room with him. He thought it ridiculous, offended that they’d think he wouldn’t be able to understand or accept their relationship.

So one day he snuck a look at Remus’s date book and went to the corner shop to buy some candies and a card, leaving the gifts on the counter for the men to discover when they came downstairs on the morning of their second anniversary since they’d made it official, at least to each other. When he got home from school the entire atmosphere had changed, Remus was cooking a roast and Sirius had the football game blaring from the living room, the two of them playfully bickering at each other and sharing warm looks of affection they no longer felt the need to mask.

Sirius greeted Harry by playfully swatting his head and calling him a cheeky arse, Remus hugged him and said he couldn’t believe how much like his parents he was, how proud he was of Harry and how proud they’d be. The night was a rather casual affair with deeply poignant undertones that marked a shift in Harry’s world. He was a part of a family again, he had something to fight for and protect, and that was a very powerful motivator.

Harry led Remus along the path to the lot, unlocking his car and sliding Remus’s bag in the back.

“How did your meeting go?” Harry asked as he started the car, slowly backing out.

“Ah, it’s impossible to tell with that lot. Bloody robots.”

Remus first interviewed for a teaching position at Cambridge six months ago. The positions were so highly sought after it involved a rather gruelling multi round interview process, he was in the final legs which involved meeting with University donors and board members.

“What was it? Another fancy wine and cheese party?”

Remus shook his head. “I wish. It was bloody golf, Harry. Golf!”

Harry couldn’t control his laughter. To say Remus wasn’t athletically inclined would be to put it mildly. And of all the sporting events he detested the most, golf reigned supreme.

His laughter died down as his mental image of Remus stumbling about a golf course triggered his thoughts on the case. The Serpentine Country Club had rolling golf greens. He wondered how Ron and Neville were doing compiling the list of names…

“How?”

He blinked, pulling out of his mind. “What was that?”

“I was talking about the- nevermind, it’s not important, not compared to what we’re doing now.”

“Sorry, Rem. It’s been a weird day. I want to hear more about yours though, come on, tell me me which iron you used on your shots…”

He smiled on Remus’s groan.

Harry stepped out of the elevator with Remus keeping pace a step behind. The nurse at admittance had been surprised to see them, he hadn’t called ahead to warn her he was coming to ensure Crouch wouldn’t catch wind and run interference.

She’d also been surprised when Harry told her Remus was here to conduct the counseling session for
the detox patient. She’d insisted it was too late in the evening, that Narcissa needed rest, so Harry had pulled his badge out and insisted. He knew if she called the office to confirm his presence she’d only get voicemail, and hoped she wasn’t the type to really push the issue.

Her face puckered, obviously displeased by the turn of events, but she finally backed down, scanning her badge to let them access the private floor above and telling them the patient’s room number.

It wasn’t really necessary, seeing as the first thing Harry saw upon entering the private wing was two Officers sitting outside of a closed door, one sprawled in a chair and the other posted like a sentinel against the wall, back straight and arms folded.

“Dean?”

The standing Officer blinked, head whipping around.

“How? What are you doing here?”

Harry’s mind raced. He’d been hoping for two low level security officers, easily dissuaded from their post. Harry was senior to Dean but Officer Thomas was very astute, and very dedicated to rules. Harry wasn’t technically breaking the law, but he was definitely acting on orders in direct opposition of his department head, regardless of Sirius’s blessing. Dean didn’t report into Sirius, he reported into a string of others that eventually led into Crouch, meaning he may prove an obstacle unless dealt with carefully.

“I’m escorting Remus to conduct a one-on-one counseling session with Narcissa. The detox program she’s in requires her to speak with a licensed professional before her discharge.”

Dean studied him carefully. “Now? It’s nearly nine.”

Harry nodded. “Yes, I know the hour is late, but her son is fighting to have her discharged first thing tomorrow,” he held his expression, his words more of a guess than a statement of fact, “We wanted someone trained in dealing with trauma victims to see her before she leaves. I spoke with her earlier, I don’t think the hospital issue therapists would fit the bill.”

All, technically, truths, just skirting his real motivation. Dean didn’t seem satisfied. Damn. Harry sighed, having to brace himself to leap yet another hurdle on this cursed day. His nerves were wearing thin.

“Listen Dean, I don’t see the need to make this into a production. Remus is going in there alone to speak with her, following hospital policy, and then we’re leaving. This doesn't affect you or your post.”

Dean seemed to debate something internally. “Listen Harry, I respect the hell out of you. But I have a job to do. I’ve got my orders, don’t let anyone in that room who isn’t a doctor or nurse.”

“What about a licensed therapist? One of them is heading in that room between now and tomorrow regardless.”

“That may be, but Lupin isn’t on the Mungo’s staff.”

Harry took a deep breath, rubbing his eyes beneath his glasses.

“Dean, I understand you have to follow orders while at your post. So I’m relieving you.”
Dean blinked, the second officer sitting upright his chair.

“What?”

“I’m officially pulling rank and relieving you of your watch duty, I’ll take over from here.”

“Harry-”

“It isn’t personal, and I understand you’ll need to report this to your superiors tomorrow. I respect that. But tonight you’re officially off duty.”

Confusion and hurt stole across Dean’s features before he schooled them to a mask of indifference.

“I understand, Officer Potter.”

Harry did his best not to cringe at the cold sound of his title being spoken like a curse. Then Dean nodded to the other officer and they took their leave down the hall to the elevators.

Remus rubbed the back of his neck, as he’d been doing since the two men started to exchange words.

“Well done, Officer Potter.”

“Shut it.”

The doors across the hall opened, a janitor pushed his wheeled cleaning cart across the tiled floor towards the bathrooms, a nurse appearing from behind him, stepping around and proceeding toward Harry and Remus with a clipboard in hand.

“You’re here to speak with Narcissa Malfoy?”

“Yes, well, he is, I’m to wait outside.”

The nurse nodded, clicking her pen and scribbling something on the pad.

“Alright. Last we checked she was still asleep, let me run her vitals real quick, I’ll let you know when you can go in.”

Harry nodded. “Perfect, thank you.”

The nurse slid the clipboard into the plastic container nailed to the door before she opened it and slipped inside. Harry caught sight of a white curtain pulled around the sole bed in the room, the sound of machines beeping at different intervals, then the door closed behind her and silence fell across the hall once more.

Harry glanced at Remus. “We have a few minutes, I’m gonna take a piss.”

Remus cringed. “You do that on purpose, don’t you?”

Harry smirked. “No idea what you’re talking about, mate.”

He made his way down the long stretch of hall to the bathrooms. The men’s room door was propped open with an orange cone.

*Fuck, just my luck.*
He glanced inside, seeing the cleaning cart perched in front of a sink and spotting the janitor’s feet under one of the stalls.

“Hey, mate, can I pop in real quick?”

The janitor spoke through the wall.

“Sure thing, just filling paper and emptying bins.”

“Thanks.” Harry slipped past the cart, making his way towards the stall on the end. The janitor was backing out at the same time and their shoulders bumped.

“Oh, sorry!” Harry raised a steadying hand on instinct, but quickly withdrew it when his eyes locked with those of the janitor.

The man held a light, amused expression, but his eyes were like darts, needling into Harry’s skin. Harry’s mouth fell shut, taking a step back.

“No, it was my fault, I wasn’t paying attention.” The man’s voice was deep, amicable.

Harry blinked, pulling himself out of his momentary stupor.

“No worries.”

The janitor smiled, holding a fresh roll of toilet paper in his hand.

“No worries,” he repeated, walking to his cart and kicking up the break.

Harry blinked, shaking his head and entering the stall.

A few minutes later he was washing his hands and then fishing for a paper towel in the dispenser. It was empty.

Just my luck indeed.

He cursed to himself and wiped his hands dry on his pant legs. He walked out of the bathroom and started cutting a path down the hall back to Narcissa’s room. He saw the janitor’s cart parked against the wall about halfway there with no sign of its owner. Probably inside a room fetching a rubbish bin. He also didn’t see Remus.

Harry paused before reaching her door, spinning in a circle. The private wing was managed by minimal staff but he didn’t see any sign of life. He sighed, checking the watch at his wrist. It’d been over five minutes, he wondered how long it took to run basic vitals.

And where the bloody hell is Remus? I didn’t see anyone else in the bathroom.

Maybe he’s already inside with her?

No, he’d have waited for me to get back.

Harry wasn’t sure what first tipped him off to something being amiss, Remus’s unexplained absence or some shift in the air, an invisible breeze carrying the iron tang of blood on the wind. He spun around and approached the closed door, hairs on his neck rising as he heard the muffled sound of machines going haywire. He reached into his inner holster and drew his weapon, pointing it towards the floor and knocking loudly on the doorframe.
“This is Officer Potter requesting entry, please stand away from the door,” he spoke loudly, his body tensed and ready to spring.

His only response was the high pitch wailing of machinery.

He drew in a deep breath and opened the door, pushing it hard so it swung open all the way, using the wall to shield his body while he aimed his eyes and weapon into the interior of the room.

_Oh my god…_

Harry ran inside, skidding in blood, catching himself against a stationary cart. Machines were beeping madly, sharp alarms blaring, lights flashing. The nurse was laying unresponsive on the floor by the top of the bed, blood marring her scrubs and soaking her hair from the pool of it she lay in. The bright red was expanding, growing, but he saw the source was coming from somewhere behind her prone form, trickling down from some place higher up.

The white curtain was still drawn around the bed but there was blood splashed upon it, even the outside, like a Jackson Pollock painting. He steadily approached with his weapon fully drawn, the angry cry of machines growing louder, creating a shrill chorus of chaos and terror. Harry ripped the curtain open and paled at the sight within.

Narcissa Malfoy grabbed futilely at her sliced throat, blood pouring out in a river, slipping between her thin stained fingers and coating her chest, streaming over her thrashing body and over the side of the bed onto the floor.

Harry holstered his weapon, opening and closing his mouth in disbelief, reaching for her as if in a dream. He placed his larger hands over her own, pressing them against her throat in a desperate attempt to staunch the flow.

Sweat dripped into his eyes, stinging them, mixing with tears, but they were still able to lock onto her pale gaze, the pupils rapidly constricting. Her face was as white as the sheets beneath her, standing out in vivid contrast to the bright crimson pouring from her neck.

She opened her mouth and gargled blood, spitting it onto her cheeks, stringing bloody phlegm across her lashes, her tongue lulling helplessly in a pool of it.

“No!” Harry shouted desperately, pressing his hands in harder against the wound. “No no no no…” The blood was seeping through his trembling fingers, running in rivulets across his hands, coating them up to the wrist.

“Help!” he screamed desperately. “Somebody help! Help us!”

But there was nothing for it, the blood wouldn’t slow, wouldn’t stop coming. He sucked in another desperate breath, tasting copper pennies on his tongue and at the back of his throat, filling his nasal passage and turning his stomach.

He locked eyes with her once more, read the terror there, which was surely mirrored in his own. But then a new expression slowly spread across her face, a sort of dark resignation that cracked open his ribcage, squeezed his heart until he was unable to distinguish one beat from the next.

“No, hang on! Just hang on!”

He saw the life fading from her eyes as quickly as the blood drained from her body. It was as though her irises were turning matte, unable to reflect the lights stationed above. He swallowed thickly, his entire body shaking so hard he could barely keep his grip on her with the slick liquid coating his
He opened and closed his mouth, trying to find the words to say. As her fingers went lax between her throat and his hands he whispered the only thing that came to mind.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

Her body went limp, the torrent of blood finally slowing. Her eyes remaining locked with his as she died.
A/N: Hello my little beauties! Thank you for following along with my sordid tale :D

And most of all, thank you to everyone who reviews, especially my loyal readers who review each chapter! Nothing- literally nothing- motivates me to write like reading your comments, however short or expressive. I read each one, obsess over each one, and send brain waves of love to each reviewer <333

And now, something for all you nature doc lovers out there… Don’t say I never gave you anything ;)

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Monday July 11, 2005

Harry sat across the table from Crouch, Dumbledore, and a smattering of other high up officials he’d never bother learning the names of.

But his eyes remained transfixed on his hands. He turned them around, studying the backs, then the front, the lines in his palms, the swell of his knuckles, the dried scraps of his cuticles.

He could still see the blood on them.

Soaking them, saturating them, permeating the dermis and staining the bone. He could still see Narcissa’s eyes, hollow and glazed, capillaries broken, void of life.

“Mr. Potter, is there anything you’d like to add?”

He swallowed thickly at the sound of Dumbledore’s deep baritone.

He leaned back, placing his hands beneath the table to obscure them from view. He looked up, eyes tired and red rimmed to gaze at the man seated across the table. Dumbledore’s light blue stare held a deep sympathy, one that was hard to meet. Still, Harry cleared his throat and forced his voice to work.

“No, I have nothing else to add.”

“So what you’re telling us is that you knowingly and purposely dismissed the witness’s security detail and left her completely exposed while you ran to the men’s room?” spoke an irate voice.

Harry’s eyes moved to Crouch, his hands clenched into fists where they rested on his thighs. “I was gone for five minutes. It was a five minute window between when Dean left and I exited the bathroom.”

“Five minutes is all the killer obviously needed with no security to hold him back!”

“Bartemius, please-”

“I’m sorry, Albus, but I am tired of everyone protecting this boy, of making excuses for his brash stupidity. He knowingly violated a direct order set down by me and went to visit the witness anyway, and then he had the nerve to pull rank and dismiss her security detail, only to leave her door bloody exposed and thrown at the mercy of whatever madman was wandering the hallway! It's unacceptable! She is dead as a direct result of his actions!”
Harry cringed, his chest burning.

“I think it hardly fair to speculate exactly what would have occurred had Mr. Potter been outside the door when the killer walked by. Perhaps he would have been deterred, or perhaps Mr. Potter would have suffered grave injury. But one thing is certain,” he pinned Harry beneath an intense gaze, “It was inadvisable to dismiss Officer Thomas and his associate for the sole purpose of isolating Mrs. Malfoy for your own designs.”

Harry swallowed, but it was Sirius at his side who spoke up.

“This was my fault, Albus, I gave the boy my blessing to-”

“See, always someone trying to protect the little punk!”

“That’s enough, Bartemius.” Crouch fell silent at Dumbledore’s command, his face a splotchy patchwork of red. “Be that as it may, Sirius, Harry took on the responsibility of providing for Mrs. Malfoy’s safety the moment he dismissed the other officers. Leaving her unprotected for that five minute window proved disastrous. Fatally so. I am sorry, but my hands are tied. Harry, please turn in your badge and weapon.”

Harry blinked, his head filling with a cloudy stupor. He opened his mouth but he could think of no words to say. Sirius sprung to life beside him.

“No, wait, Albus-”

“There is nothing that can be said to mitigate the magnitude of last night’s events, Sirius. I was barely able to argue the case for your position to remain at the Ministry.”

Sirius fell silent, eyes wide, glancing to Harry in open shock and panic.

Harry shook his head, reaching into his coat pocket to remove his badge. “It’s alright, Sirius. Dumbledore is right. It’s my fault she’s dead. I should have never dismissed Thomas, I was being... I don’t know. But I should have never left her door unattended. I knew what was at stake. I knew we were dealing with a professional.”

Sirius’s dark brows drew together. “Harry, I-”

“Just give us your badge and weapon, boy.”

Sirius spun around, nearly leaping over the table to get to Crouch. “You were the bloody one who wanted to release her to her son from the get go! She’d be dead in her boudoir by now if we’d have listened to you! Harry was the only one who tagged her a viable a witness, the only reason she had a security detail in the first place!”

“Oh, and a lot of good that did her! She’s not any less dead because we checked her into Mungo’s! Now her death is on us, we’re the ones who dropped the ball, lord knows the hell the Malfoy heir is going to bring upon our heads!”

“Always thinking of your fucking self you selfish, fucking ponce!”

“Gentleman, that is enough.”

Harry reached for Sirius, pulling him down into his chair while Dumbledore raised a hand before Crouch, silencing him.
“Sirius, please, just leave it. You’re going to get yourself fired as well,” Harry hissed.

“This, this isn’t right, Harry.”

Harry sighed, laying his weapon on the table beside his badge. “It’s right. I messed up. Someone died because of it.”

Dumbledore reached out and slid his belongings across the table where another Officer picked them up.

Suddenly Sirius was tugging in his own pockets, his face red. Harry raised a dark brow, pulling back in shock as Sirius slammed his own badge onto the table, leaning in close to Dumbledore, the two men’s gazes locking.

“You know this is wrong, Albus. If you’re chucking Harry, you’re chucking me as well.”

“Good riddance to you both!”

Albus raised a hand to silence the man at his side, eyes not leaving Sirius’s face.

“Do you really want to do this, Sirius?”

“I gave Harry the green light to visit her last night. I should be held responsible for setting the events into motion.”

“The board has decided to pardon your transgressions.”

“Then I quit.”

Harry shook his head, standing and placing a hand at his mentor’s back. “No, Sirius, this isn’t right—”

Sirius turned his face to look at Harry, eyes burning bright. “What is necessary is not always right.” Then he turned forward, pinning Dumbledore beneath his smoldering gaze. “A wise man once told me that. I didn’t understand what it meant until now.”

The room was silent. Harry looked desperately to Dumbledore, willing him to overturn Sirius’s resignation. But the older man simply nodded, albeit sadly, and slid the second badge and gun across the table to be collected as well.

Harry followed Sirius out of the room in a numb stupor. Once they turned the corner Sirius led him to a private alcove beneath the stairs.

“Sirius, you didn’t have to do that. Your job was safe. You shouldn’t have—”

He fell silent as Sirius placed a hand on his shoulder, giving a gentle squeeze. “I meant what I said, I was responsible for setting last night’s events in motion. I gave you the green light to proceed, I made the call to Remus, I am equally to blame for this, so I should share equal parts of the burden.”

Harry’s head dropped, he rubbed tiredly at his eyes. He’d been through the ringer since last night, since he stumbled from the room containing Narcissa’s corpse to find a staff member. He’d made it halfway to the elevators before he ran into another person.

Remus.

He’d reared back, relief and shock nearly knocking him to the ground. Remus took one look at Harry’s disheveled, blood splattered appearance and promptly ringed the necessary parties. As fate
would have it Remus decided to use Harry’s bathroom break as a window of opportunity to check in with Sirius, he’d been pacing the windows of the waiting room talking on the phone while Harry tried desperately to stem the flow of Narcissa’s blood.

And Harry had been grateful for that, certain Remus would be injured or dead had he been anywhere near her door when the killer struck.

Within ten minutes her room was swarming with people, the entire hallway labeled a crime scene since Harry had tracked DNA halfway to the nurse’s station. The nurse he’d passed by in his haste to assist Narcissa was alive, knocked unconscious from behind. She hadn’t even sensed another presence in the room before she’d been struck.

Then Sirius had arrived on scene, desperate to get his eyes on the two most important people in his life, relief plain as day on his face as he embraced them both. He’d taken Harry back to the Ministry despite his pleas to speak with the hospital staff and suss out any leads.

It took a few hours for the cavalry to be awoken and summoned, but they’d finally arrived and he was subjected to hours of questioning, relaying the events of the last day over and over again until his words began to slur. His rapid dip in adrenaline paired with the lack of sleep over the last 48 hours made him dead on his feet, resigned to his fate. He knew termination was a very real possibility, but hearing it delivered to his face by Dumbledore of all people was surreal.

He never intended to take Sirius down with him.

He gazed up at his mentor, his substitute father, tears brimming in his eyes. Sirius looked stricken.

“Sirius, I- I’m,” he sucked in a breath, “I’m so sorry-”

Sirius pulled him in for a hug as his voice broke. He buried his face in the man’s shoulder, guilt and shame riding him hard. He clung to Sirius’s back, the weight of the last 24 hours setting in.

He saw Lucius’s cold, lifeless corpse splayed out across the crime scene photos, Narcissa’s terrified, pleading eyes, blood running from her mouth, wet gagging sounds emitting from her torn flesh, and then he saw Dumbledore’s ice blue gaze, holding Harry’s steady as he pulled the bottom out from his world. Harry was weightless, falling through a black empty void with nothing to grab, nothing to slow his descent. A waking nightmare filled with death and despair.

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Monday, July 14, 1997

Tom wiped his forehead with his sleeve, sweat collecting across his temples, pooling in the dips of his clavicle. He punched his sign out card and slid it into the holder on the opposite wall, making a beeline for the exit. He pushed through the double doors and inhaled the fresh night air.

He’d worked another double shift at the factory, a physically demanding job that left him bone weary tired by the time he stepped out onto the streets. Since leaving Wool’s he’d been trying to turn straight, avoiding petty crime to fund his way. It wasn’t a moral dilemma as much as a practical one, now that he was 18 and no longer a ward of the commonwealth he was no longer shielded by the law. If he was caught burglarizing a home or stripping a car the judge would likely throw the book at him, especially with his existing record.

But some days it was tempting, knowing the money he could make by engaging in a few minutes of law breaking compared to hours and hours of manual labor. Still, it had been six months and he was committed to challenging himself to making it a full year before he reverted to his old ways, hoping
the temptation would be lessened by then.

He wasn’t putting the effort in for himself as much as he was doing it for her. He paused at the corner, pushing the pedestrian crosswalk button as he fished the cigarette carton from his pocket.

_Hermione._

He blew a cloud of smoke into the night, the woman waiting to cross beside him wrinkling her nose in disgust and flashing him an annoyed look, as though he lit up just to provoke her. Then she caught sight of his profile, his eyes, and she flushed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear and looking away nervously.

Tom rolled his eyes, taking another long drag and proceeding to walk across the street before the crossing light came on.

He really couldn’t stand being around people. He never really had. He’d only found the company of one person tolerable. Desirable.

_Hermione…_

He filled the monotonous gaps in his day by thinking about her, much as he tried not to. Not that it wasn’t a pleasant pastime, but it was mostly a study in self torture. Not being able to see her each day, speak to her, touch her… some days it was unbearable. But he refused to cave. If he visited her at Wool’s now he’d never be able to stop. He was busy enough, working two jobs, picking up extra shifts and trying to sort out his living situation, there really weren’t enough hours in the day to see her.

But he wanted to. Badly. So much so that he’d found his feet traitorously walking the path to the orphanage on more than one occasion, catching himself only one street away from the rod iron gates one evening.

He didn’t want to appear weak, desperate for her company, didn’t want others to know the hold she had over him. He himself didn’t realize the magnitude of it until after he’d been without her company for several days, which turned into restless weeks, which turned into painful months.

Everyone else he encountered paled in comparison. He’d known she was something special, something different the first moment he’d laid eyes on her, tucked into her private corner of the activity room reading a book that hardly held her interest, avoiding the social constructs that the other children clung to. He saw a piece of himself in her, loathe as he was to admit it at the time. He tried breaking her first, provoking her, studying her.

She proved a formidable opponent and he soon decided he’d have more fun tutoring her in the ways of deviance and corruption than crushing her like all the others. She was his first pet project, something that he intended to be temporary, meaningless, easily discarded. But she challenged him at every turn, stood up to him when others scurried away like roaches in the light. She pushed him in directions he’d never before ventured.

So he decided to keep her. His pet project becoming an actual pet, someone to have at his beck and call to carry out whatever bidding was beneath him. That fantasy lasted all of two minutes before Hermione retaliated by avoiding him for three long, annoyingly endless days. It was the first time he was the one to break, the one to extend an olive branch. He didn’t apologize, he never apologized, but he used that moment as a turning point, treating her as something as close to his equal as he could stomach.
Fast forward nine years later and she was every bit his equivalent, possessing the sharpest mind and keenest intellect he’d ever encountered. Well, all except for one... the only other person to knock Tom off his footing.

Mr. Green.

Tom exhaled another torrent of smoke as he rounded the corner, sticking to the shadows out of habit. His eyes narrowed as he thought about his strange counselor turned mentor, the bizarre relationship they’d developed over the last sixteen months of his Wool’s residency.

Their sessions had occurred like clockwork, every Saturday morning from precisely 10 to 11am, Hermione waiting patiently outside on the school grounds for him to exit and take her by the arm or wrist as he led her to his cruiser in silence while she pestered him with questions he never answered.

Truth be told, he wouldn’t have known where to begin to describe their weekly encounters, and a part of him knew telling Hermione about them would expose her to the toxins Mr. Green emitted with each breath, his dark stain spreading to her, marring her flesh and tainting her. It was Tom’s duty to protect her from the evils of the world, and somehow he knew Green fit that category.

So he kept the nature of their discussions private, dragging Hermione away from the building before Green could catch sight of her. And he was sure to never bring her up during that one hour a week, keeping her existence, her meaning, under lock and key. She was the only topic off limits during those long, winding chats.

Everything else was game.

Tom’s most violent fantasies and urges. His proclivity towards the dark, damp, contaminated parts of society. What he dreamed of, what he desired, what he stole and what he felt when taking it. What he felt when he straddled the man in the street, his fists reigning down, the sound of bones breaking, cartilage crushing, the taste of blood on his tongue and the bright red stain on his hands. What it felt like to be pinned down, overwhelmed by the group of men who jumped him. The murderous thoughts that still plagued him since that day. And how he intended to harness that rage.

He wasn’t sure what game Green was playing, but Tom was certain from the start the man was playing at something. Tom just did his level best not to be anyone’s pawn.

Green never attempted to lecture Tom in the ways of peace and deterrence. He never passed judgment with his words or eyes. In fact, Tom was sure he saw a gleam of satisfaction light the older man’s gaze when Tom described detailed accounts of his violent encounters on the streets of London, his more risky forays into the city’s underbelly.

Mr. Green was not a typical youth counselor, that was for certain, but Tom never could determine exactly what his true designs for him were. And then he’d turned eighteen, and the sessions had ended as soon as Tom left the orphanage.

It was strange, when Saturday afternoons rolled around Tom found himself almost bereft of the man’s company. He was a toxic, poisonous gas that Tom had grown accustomed to over the last year, unbeknownst to him. Like Hermione, it took the absence of the man’s company to realize the full magnitude of its impact.

Of course, he’d take Hermione over Green any day, he’d take her over anyone, he’d take her…

*I’d take her in a multitude of ways…*

He shook his head, banishing the traitorous thoughts. He let his mind drift there far too often for his
pride to admit. He’d had to relieve the burning ache her memory conjured just that morning.

_Eighteen more months. Then she’s out. Then she’s yours again._

He flicked the cigarette to the side, ashes scattering into the night.

That was another fantasy that plagued him to high hell. What would happen once she was free of Wool’s, once they were both able to live their lives free from the constraints others shackled them with. It was a beautiful, terrible thing to imagine, not because he didn’t want it, but because he wanted it more than he’d ever wanted anything, to the point it made his chest ache and his breath shudder. The idea of something so perfect and all consuming being taken from him, denied to him, was crippling and unacceptable.

So he avoided thoughts of the future as best he could, merely bidding his time with menial jobs and saving as much money as possible, waiting patiently for a day that was fast approaching and yet light years away, an intangible mirage he couldn’t quite reach no matter how hard he reached for it.

He turned the final corner leading to the Underground station when he felt eyes upon him, making his stance go rigid as he slid further into the shadows along the sidewalk. He glanced around, seeking the telltale gleam of a predator’s eyes in the dark, wondering who would be foolish enough to target him. He’d already broken the jaw of a would be robber last month, taking the man’s knife in the process. Overpowering him had been child’s play, and quite a satisfying foray into his past dalyances. He almost hoped he got the chance to unleash some pent up tension tonight.

But he saw no faces focused upon him, people milling back and forth as they raced to the tube, deep in their own thoughts. Still… he knew someone was watching him. Years of surviving on the streets had sharpened his survival instinct into a sharp point, poised at the ready.

Suddenly Tom’s focus was drawn to the mouth of a nearby alley, roughly fifteen feet from where he stood. There was a homeless man with a sign sitting against the neighboring wall. Tom passed him without a glance, stopping before the cavernous opening, murder in his eyes.

“I know you’re watching me, and I must warn you, whatever you have planned is not a wise decision. I suggest you expend your efforts on more susceptible prey.”

The homeless man glanced at him in confusion, then, seeing the direction of Tom’s stare, turned to face the dark as well. There was a scraping sound, someone pushing away from the bricks, and the slow clip of soles padding pavement. Tom’s fists clenched at his sides, eyes alight.

_Idiot. Looks like I’ll be getting that fight after all…_

He licked his lips, tasting the sweet nectar of adrenaline flood his veins, the calm before the storm.

Then the faceless figure within the alley started to laugh… low, deep, hauntingly familiar.

Tom blinked, his shoulders dropping, fingers unfurling.

_It can’t be…_

The footsteps were upon him now, the street lights illuminating first the fine italian leather of his shoes, then the deep charcoal of his creased slacks, broad shoulders squaring out a tall frame, until finally the amused face of his former counselor came into view, hair perfectly swept back as always.

Tom opened his mouth but only breath came out.
“Hello, Mr. Riddle, it’s wonderful to see you again.”

Tom’s surprised expression fell, his eyes turning cold and calculated.

“Fancy seeing you here, Mr. Green. Is this the alley you typically buy drugs in?”

Green laughed again, shaking his head. “I assure you, I can afford for a dealer to come to me, should I desire such a thing. What about you, one your way home from the canning factory, I presume?”

Tom didn’t bother reacting. Of course Green knew where he was working. The man probably knew where he was living as well. Hell, he’d probably been inside. The shack beneath the underpass he’d taken up residency in over the summer was hardly tight in security.

“It’s not like you to waste time with questions you already know the answers to. What do you want, Green?”

The man came outside of the alley, standing before Tom, sparing a glance at the openly eavesdropping homeless man. He looked back at Tom, his expression unreadable, as it always was, much to Tom’s great frustration.

“I’d like to take you dinner and discuss a rather exciting business venture.”

Tom rose a dark brow, keeping his expression carefully neutral. “Business venture? Sorry, Green, I haven’t got the funds to invest in any new start ups at the moment. Try back in a decade.”

Green smiled, teeth gleaming in the light. “A job opportunity, Tom. And I assure you, with the money you’ll pull in you’ll be able to buy any start up you want.”

Tom blinked, trying to keep his reaction at bay. But he was intrigued, and Green knew it.

“I already have a job. One I’m proud of.”

Green’s smile deepened. “No need to play the part, Tom. You aren’t at Wool’s anymore. There’s no matron to please, no magistrate to impress. We both know your talents are wasted operating simple machinery, pushing buttons and pulling levers for hours on end. You need a challenge, crave a challenge, and this job is just that.”

Tom studied the man in silence, his heart racing.

So this is what all those counseling sessions were about. A year long job interview…

What the hell kind of job could it be?

Green’s smile grew fangs. His claws were sunk deep within Tom’s flesh, pinning him, holding him in his thrall.

“I know a wonderful little Italian restaurant off the beaten path, let’s sit down and discuss the details.”

Tom ran his tongue over his teeth, mind spinning.

“I see the wheels turning in your head, Tom. That’s what I like about you. You’re always thinking four moves ahead. I promise you, this will be worth your while.”

Tom released a breath, the metal hook catching deep in his throat, Green pulling hard on the line and tearing him free from the water, hauling him through the air, speeding towards some unseen destination, his fate unknown.
Tom put his hands in his pockets, tipping his head towards the street.

“Lead the way.”

**Monday July 11, 2005**

Hermione sat on her couch staring out the window, seeing nothing of the outside world, her entire focus inward.

She’d turned the TV on for noise, hoping to distract herself, desperate to spare her mind from the torrent of thoughts that had been plaguing her since yesterday. Since Saturday, really.

*When the murder occurred.*

*When Tom killed that man.*

*Tom’s a killer.*

*And I had lunch with him.*

*And am seeing him later tonight…*

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

She sighed deeply, running a hand through her tangled curls, tugging painfully at the knots.

*Good. I deserve a little pain. Maybe it will bring me to my senses.*

*You’ve never had any sense when it comes to Tom.*

She released her hair on a groan, averting her attention to the TV, trying to focus on whatever nature documentary she’d turned it on. She gazed at the images of fish darting through cool blue waters, a serene picture she let distract and calm her mind. She turned up the volume.

“*Come spring the bluegills set up their spawning beds. The bigger and badder the male, the better the nesting grounds. The breeding behavior of a male bluegill varies across the species. The territorial male is an aggressive sort, a natural predator that will defend and protect his mate at all cost, competing for nesting grounds and food, overpowering weaker males and marking his territory and mate as a warning to others…*”

Hermione blinked at the screen.

*Christ.*

She cringed, quickly changing the channel to the local news.

“*... awaiting official statements from the Commissioner, at this point we only have rumors and speculation to help us piece together the events that transpired. Of course we’ll-”*

She flipped it to another news station, blinking when she saw this channel’s reporters standing before a similar scene. She read the headline at the bottom, her heart skipping a beat.

*Malfoy widow confirmed dead at St. Mungo’s.*

She nearly dropped the remote in her haste to turn up the volume.
“... thanks, Patrick. It’s a rather sad state of affairs to be certain. Obviously the public is eagerly awaiting the details regarding Narcissa Malfoy’s death, especially since the news comes less than 24 hours since word of her husband’s demise was announced. The obvious question on everyone’s mind is whether the Malfoys’ deaths are linked, and if they are, whether there was foul play involved. Obviously with the Malfoys being a billionaire power couple their demise has caused quite a stir among the public. Their surviving son, Draco Malfoy, longtime media darling, has not yet released a statement, which of course raises an even bigger question as to whether an investigation is currently underway...”

Hermione listened in transfixed horror, watching the dark skinned reporter deliver his update from his spot in front of the hospital, police cars and ambulances creating a symphony of flashing lights behind him.

“... appreciate that, Lee. Can you tell us what we do know about Mrs. Malfoy’s death?”

“At this time all we know for certain is that an anonymous but confirmed source from within the hospital provided confirmation of Narcissa Malfoy’s death. Now some media outlets claim the source labeled it a murder, and of a grizzly nature, which of course sparked the flurry of activity we see outside the hospital. But News 4 is focused only on relaying the most accurate, up to date information, which is why we cannot confirm at this time exactly what the nature of her death was, only that she expired some time late last night...”

Hermione choked on her next breath, grasping her chest and leaning forward as her head spun.

Could it have been…?

Why would he target Malfoy’s widow? Had she seen something the other night?

He said he doesn’t leave loose ends...

Is this what he would have done to me if I went to the police?

This is what he could still do to me...

Wait! Slow down. Maybe she died of natural causes, they haven’t confirmed what occurred...

Don’t play dumb, Hermione. Why would fifty police cars and every major news station be outside the hospital for a simple heart attack?

Oh god…. Tom...

What have you become?

__________________________

Tom watched the scene play out across the screen, eyes lingering on her form as she paced her living room in obvious distress. He’d watched her listen to the news updates, her emotions playing across her face like a film projector. He tensed, wanting to go to her, hold her… or most likely, hold her down while he explained, made her see reason, made her understand.

He knew Hermione, her internal conflict would eat away at her until she imploded.

He needed to see her before she reacted on raw emotion. Panic drove people to do stupid things, and as intelligent as she was she was inexperienced in the ways of his world.

He inhaled sharply, eyes still fixed upon her like tracking beams. He came to a decision, one his
heart had made long ago but his mind was finally ready to accept. He would need to teach her, bring her under his tutelage once more. It was the only way to ensure her survival in the dangerous game he navigated through each day. The steel tooth trap his life had become.

_The only way I’ll be able to keep her._

Tom sensed the presence at his door before the knock sounded. He suppressed a growl, cursing the ill timing, knowing who it was and knowing why he was here. He glanced at her spiraling form one more time before shutting the laptop, stowing it away beneath the couch and crossing the room to answer the door.

“Green,” he said emotionlessly, turning and walking back into his living room before the man could respond.

“My, my, someone is testy today.”

“I know why you’re here. Scold me for last night and be on your way.”

“Tom, do you think this is a game?”

Tom blinked, still facing away from his handler. He knew the man was unmatched at reading the minds of others when in their vicinity, but for the first time he wondered if the man was truly psychic, if he could read Tom’s past thoughts…

He spun on his heel, not bothering to hide the anger on his face. Green would be able to detect his animosity regardless.

“I don’t think much of anything these days, Green. You give me an assignment, I fulfill it, I get paid, I get a new assignment… reminds me a lot of the work I did at the canning factory. _Monotonous._”

Green rose a greying brow, his eyes capturing Tom in a wire net. “You’re comparing your work as a skilled assassin to the work you did at the canning factory? Did you slice open people’s throats with the sharp edge of the lids? I hope you left less of a mess behind there than you did at the hospital.”

Tom started to roll his eyes before Green snapped at him. “Do not dismiss me, boy! I give you too much leeway, as you made painfully evident last night. What the hell were you thinking?”

Tom bristled, hackles rising, unused to being reprimanded and not enjoying the experience one bit.

“I was thinking I needed to kill the original target’s wife. Did I not accomplish that task?”

“You left a crime scene ten miles wide! It’s all over the goddamn news!”

“How is that my fault? Every kill I do would make it to the bloody six o’clock news if the Ministry didn’t keep it quiet for their own ends, the fact that information regarding this particular hit leaked because they couldn’t keep their sources under thumb is beyond my control!”

“Maybe if you hadn’t unleashed a bloodbath the information wouldn’t have been as apt to leak. Why didn’t you just inject her, induce a heart attack, something less suspicious?”

Tom raised a challenging brow. “I’m sorry, are you not satisfied with the work I’ve been doing? Would you like to dictate how I perform my kills from now on? Please, I would love to hear more of your input. When was the last time you worked in the field? Perhaps you can show me how to operate a musket.”
Green’s eyes flashed danger, warning, something Tom recognized but chose not to heed.

“I am the best operative in the organization, I get saddled with the most dangerous assignments, and I fulfill my mission every fucking time. I’m sorry if you don’t like the way I choose to handle certain things. We can’t always get what we want.”

Tom dared Green to rebuke his claim of being the most skilled, the most prolific of killers. He didn’t. Instead, his handler’s demeanor shifted, less hostile and more poised, but still just as lethal.

“Let’s get one thing clear, Tom. You do not run the show. You have never run the show and never will. I am in control here. You answer to me when I say, you do as I say, and if you break those rules you will be punished.”

Tom shifted, shoulders braced for impact.

*He wants a fight, I’ll give him a fight.*

Green looked amused, shaking his head. “I’m an old man, Tom. I stopped fighting with my fists long ago. Around the time I learned my mind was a far greater weapon. Something I see I still have yet to instill in you. No matter. You’ve shown you can’t be left to your own devices without coloring outside the lines. I’ll have to put a leash around your neck.”

Tom blinked. “What the hell does that mean?”

Green smiled. “It means you’re getting a partner.”

Harry lay in bed, fully clothed, watching the ceiling fan rotate above. His eyes crossed as he gazed through the spinning blades.

He reached blindly for the whiskey bottle laying beside the bed. He thumbed the cap, rolling the cool glass against his palm. He’d taken a shot about an hour earlier, after wandering his flat in a numb stupor for at least an hour before that.

Sirius had insisted on Harry returning to the house with him and staying the night. Harry had refused, unable to bare the company of his uncles at this particular moment. His world was in upheaval and if he had to spend the evening in their sympathetic, understanding company he’d be unable to stop from falling down the cliff he was teetering upon. No, the longer he could block out reality the better.

He glanced at the window, the curtains were drawn, a ring of sunlight glowing around the edges of the fabric. He wondered what time it was, whether he was better off staying in and drinking himself into a stupor or walking to the corner pub, drowning his sorrows in the company of others, allowing strangers to provide a much needed distraction he wouldn’t be able to find within these four walls.

He set the bottle down, running his hands over his face with a groan, his glasses discarded somewhere to his side.

The doorbell rang.

“Motherfucker.”

He wondered if Sirius had swung by to check on him. No, Sirius would respect his request for privacy. It was probably Remus, unable to leave Harry to his own devices while he was wrought with worry for his young charge.
The doorbell sounded again and Harry rolled to a sitting position with a resigned sigh. Putting on his glasses and trudging to the front door like his limbs were strapped with lead. He paused before opening it, mentally bracing for Lupin’s fussing, his mind already composing excuses to usher the well wisher out the door.

“Look, Rem,” he said as he opened the door, “I promise I’m fi-”

He stopped short as his eyes locked onto a silver grey beard, following the path up to an ice blue gaze.

“Mr. Potter. I’m sorry to drop by unannounced and hope I haven’t caught you at an inopportune time. May I have a word?”

Harry blinked, mouth agape, Dumbledore’s words bouncing through his head like a cave of echoes. He wondered if the shot from earlier was affecting him more than he realized.

“Mr. Potter? Might I step inside for a moment?”

Harry stood straight, his senses returning, the shock still palpable.

“Of course, sir, sorry I… wasn’t expecting… nevermind, please, come in.”

He shuffled back, allowing the man to step fully inside. He was so tall Harry wondered if he’d knock his head against the top of the doorframe, blinking at the stupidity of his own musings.

Shit. I only had the one shot, right?

Dumbledore smiled amicably, his gaze sweeping over the room briefly before resting once more upon Harry.

“Quite the bachelor pad you have, Mr. Potter.”

Harry closed the door, swallowing lightly. “Uh… you can call me Harry.”

“Ah, wonderful. And you may refer to me as Albus. Though I have a sneaking suspicion you will feel more comfortable referring to me by my surname, as most young people your age do.”

Harry nodded. “Yes, sir, I think I’d prefer Dumbledore.”

“I don’t want to take up much of your time Harry. I wanted to have a rather frank discussion about something quite time sensitive, is there a place we may sit and talk?”

Harry gestured to his couch, feeling out of place escorting the esteemed MI6 Agent through his living room. He prayed he didn’t have dirty clothes or towels laying out anywhere obvious. He hadn’t had time to do a wash in god knows how long, sometimes opting to buy new clothes because it was faster than visiting the laundry mat.

“I imagine you’re quite surprised to see me here following today’s events, and I’m sure you’d like some time to yourself to reflect, or to drink your demons away for one evening, so I will respect your time and get right to it…”

Harry swallowed, sitting at the edge of his seat, braced for whatever was coming.

“We think he’s been in operation for the last seven years with targets spanning over a dozen countries. He is highly skilled, as of yet remains untraceable, and as he’s started to show us most recently, enjoys showing off a bit. When you’re feeling more yourself, I would like to buy you
breakfast and discuss catching him. Do you know the diner across from the National Gallery?"

Harry blinked, Dumbledore’s words still ringing in his head, the question taking him off guard. He nodded mutely.

“Excellent. Meet me there tomorrow, 9am, I’ll wait for ten minutes.”

Harry opened his mouth but no sound emitted. Dumbledore took this for confirmation as he began to retake his feet, face once more beaming.

“As I said, it was not my intention to keep you long. I wish you a good evening, Harry.”

“Um…” Harry struggled to find his voice. “Yes, okay, thank you, sir.”

He followed Dumbledore to his front door, still blinking rapidly, trying to process the last five minutes, when the older man stopped short. Harry lurched to the side to avoid toppling into him.

“Harry… I…” he was looking away, a stricken look on his face. Harry drew his shoulders back, suddenly wary.

“I knew your parents quite well,” he began, finally locking eyes. “Both James and Lily reported into me for a time. Your father… “ he took a deep breath, “I was also in Dubai at the time of his accident, working on a related assignment. I wasn’t with him when it happened. I’ve always felt… responsible, for not being there to help, not helping prevent it from happening in the first place.”

Harry’s heart stuttered in his chest, his ears ringing. “I… I didn’t know you worked so closely with them. But what happened in Dubai, there was no way you could have known. It was an accident. A mistake. I doubt you would have been able to do anything had you been there, sir.”

Dumbledore watched Harry closely, that unnerving glint in his eyes again. “Mistakes happen, Harry. To all of us, no matter our best of intentions. It’s an unavoidable part of life, a damnable curse we can only hope to learn from, to better ourselves afterwards. I became close with your parents, trusted them both with my life at one time or another, and I see many of their best qualities reflected in you. Do not misunderstand, what occurred last night was a travesty, one that likely could have been avoided with more forethought and communication on your end. I’d like to think you’ll learn from the experience, and not let it define you.”

Harry took a deep breath, his chest alight with emotion following Dumbledore’s words. He cleared his throat, hoping his voice would hold steady.

“I won’t, sir. I won’t let it define me and I won’t forget a moment of it, for Narcissa’s sake, and for mine. I will learn from it, I will not let someone else die because of my mistakes.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Let’s hope you are able to hold true to that promise, Harry. And I hope to see you tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, sir.”

Harry watched Dumbledore leave with his mind still racing, abstractly aware that this was the second time today the man had tipped Harry’s world on its axis.

Hermione had spent nearly two hours pacing her flat, debating what to do next. She desperately wanted to see Tom, to question him directly about Narcissa Malfoy, to hear the vehement denial upon his lips.
What if he admits to it though?

Or even worse, what if he lies to me about it?

She swallowed, pulling absentmindedly at her hair, trying to tame her wild thoughts by means of running her hands obsessively through the disheveled tresses.

Maybe it's better if I leave, if I pack a bag and run.

What about school? Everything you've worked for?

I can transfer credits, start somewhere new.

What if he follows?

He spent eight years managing just fine without you, I think he’ll be able to get through eight more.

The thought made her chest ache.

Pathetic, pining for a killer. What’s the matter with you?

Is any piece of the boy I knew still in there?

Would if make a difference if there was? Would that make his victims any less dead?

She groaned, burying her head in her hands.

I don’t want to see him, don’t want to deal with him until I can sort this out myself. He’ll only cloud my judgement, as he always does.

Sure, Mione, tell him no, that’ll go over like a led zeppelin.

She swallowed thickly, her heart hammering in her chest.

This place is driving me batty, being isolated like this, the walls are closing in. I need to get out of here for a bit, I’ll think more clearly outside.

She nodded to herself, grabbing her phone and purse and fishing her house keys from the zippered compartment.

Just a walk around the neighborhood.

She opened her door.

And came face to face with Tom.

Her heart leapt into her throat and she slammed the door shut on instinct, cringing at the high pitched shriek she let loose unintentionally, but turning the deadbolt with great purpose.

She blinked, staring blankly at the wood in front of her face.

“Very mature.” he muttered from the other side, still audible to her ears.

“Wha- what are you doing here?”

“Wasn’t I perfectly clear regarding my intentions to visit you?”
She swallowed, pressing her palms flat against the door. “You said tonight.”

“I changed my mind.”

“I don’t want to see you yet.”

“Too late, you already saw me.”

She glared. “Dammit, Tom, you know exactly what I mean!”

“I do, yes. I just don’t care. Now open the door, Hermione.”

She shook her head, then remembered he couldn’t see her.

“No, go away, I don’t want to talk to you.”

“Then we’ll do other things.”

She felt heat creep up her neck, staining her cheeks.

“No, Tom. I’m serious, go away or I’m calling the police.”

There was a heavy beat of silence and she desperately wished she could recall her words, sensing the danger brewing on the other side.

“Hermione. I’m going to count to three. If this door isn’t open by then then I’m breaking it down. If I have to break it down I’ll attract the attention of any neighbor’s that are home, and you know what I’ll have to do.”

“Stop doing that!” she cried “Stop threatening violence against other people if I don’t comply with your demands! Filch, those people at the restaurant, it isn’t fair!”

“Neither is life, luv. But we’re stuck with what we’ve got. And right now you have a very real problem that you can’t talk your way out of. The only way to get rid of me is to open this door. You won’t be pleased with what happens if you make me do this the hard way. One…”

She shook her head.

“Two…”

“Tom stop!”

“Three.”

She sucked in a gasp, trembling fingers fumbling with the deadbolt and turning it open before her mind fully processed the movement. She backed away from the door rapidly as though it would explode at any moment.

It remained closed for several long, tense seconds before the handle slowly turned and the hinges creaked, swinging open to reveal a very amused looking Tom.

“I can’t believe you unlocked it.”

She blinked, fear rapidly fading in lieu of indignation. “You threatened to break it down!”

“I know I did. Still, I didn’t think you’d do it.”
She crossed her arms. “Well I have the fate of the neighborhood weighing heavily on me, since you threaten to kill everyone within a ten block radius if I don’t follow your every instruction.”

He smirked, stepping fully inside and closing her door behind him, locking the deadbolt. “Always so dramatic.”

She swallowed, eyes still fastened to the lock. “Tom, I need to ask you something important, and I want you to tell me the truth…”

He turned around, hands sliding into his pockets as he casually glanced about her living space. “Yes, I killed her.”

She blinked, her body jolting. “What?”

His eyes fastened to hers once more. “I assume that’s what has you in a such a scattered state, yes? Malfoy’s widow?”

She felt light headed, her body swaying in an invisible breeze. “You… you killed her? At the hospital? What… why? How could you…”

He sighed, walking closer. She backed up, matching him step for step until her back hit the wall. He continued to progress.

“Because, Hermione, it’s what I do.”

She felt tears cloud her vision, blurring her view of him. Her chest burned something awful, a raw, searing pain scorching through her chest cavity.

“I… I thought… I hoped…”

“You hoped this was all a big misunderstanding, a joke? Did you hope I only killed the bad guys, people who obviously deserve it? Or did you hope the last two days were all one big dream, that you’re going to wake up any moment now?”

He finally reached her, stepped into her personal space, pressing into her, heat scorching her chest.

“This isn’t a dream, luv. This is your life. This is who I am,” he brought a hand up to her neck, fingers wrapping around the slender column of her throat, his thumb gently nudging her chin up to lock his gaze with hers. “This is who you are.”

She tried to swallow, feeling the pressure of his fingers tighten further on her tender flesh. “Who am I, Tom?” she whispered, knees weak.

He pressed against her more fully, his pelvis pinning her stomach, muscular thighs against her hips, the breath slowly squeezed from her body.

“You’re mine, Hermione. You’ve always been mine.”

She closed her eyes, inhaling sharply, taking in a cloud of his heady masculine scent, the familiar notes from his youth mixed with something darker, spicier. She felt a great shadow consume her, his body blocking out the light, taking up all the room, crushing her, stealing her oxygen.

Something velvet soft brushed her lips. She gasped and turned her head away.

“I can’t-”
The strong fingers at her throat slid around to rake across her scalp, sending chills in their wake and grasping a handful of her thick curls, grabbing her head and turning it forward.

“Shhh,” his hissed against her mouth, “None of that now.”

She swallowed, pressing her hands against his chest but he remained unyielding.

“I tried to let you go once, did everything in my power to stay away…” his voice was pure gravel, ragged, angry. “But now you’re back, right in front of me, and the temptation is too great. I can’t let you go, not again,” his lips met hers a second time, rough, forceful, teeth scraping, marking, his tongue grazing her own before pulling back swiftly, eliciting a moan from her throat.

“You’re mine, Hermione, don’t you understand? You’re mine again, and I’m going to do all the things to you I wish I had done back then. When I’m finished you’ll finally see, finally see that there’s no fighting this.”

She watched him in a dazed wonder, his eyes a smoldering flame yet a fathomless dark. Then his hands were gripping her hips, pressing her forward and lifting, sliding her against his pelvis and roaming around to her bum, squeezing once, possessively, before moving to the backs of her thighs, pulling her legs apart and directing them to wrap around his middle. Her arms instinctively wrapped around his neck to maintain balance as he pulled away from the wall, taking her with him.

She clung to his tall frame as he strode towards the living room, his head dipping down to claim her lips once more. The kiss was primal, stealing her strength, her resolve. Her earlier fright and panic was buried beneath pulsating heat, concentrated at her core, tendrils of desire wrapping around her limbs, tightening their hold, binding her body to his. He pulled his head away, allowing her a brief reprieve in which to breathe, a necessary hardship that her overworked lungs struggled to perform.

Then his arms released her and she was falling. Eyes wide, mouth open on a shocked gasp, and just as her heart lurched into her throat expecting hard impact with the ground her back hit soft cushions and she bounced, once, and Tom was upon her again. He straddled her on the couch, thighs pinning her legs, hands grasping her wrists, hard chest pressing against the swell of her breasts. She exhaled against his warm, solid weight, eyes fluttering.

Hermione was a woman who prided herself on her intelligence, her independence, her ability to take care of herself and work through life’s problems without anyone’s help, little less a man’s. Mrs. Cole’s sage advice delivered on the stairs of the orphanage all those years ago had stayed with her, planting a seed of determination in her mind that she carefully cultivated and allowed to flourish over the last six years.

But now, pinned beneath a hungry beast dead set on consuming every inch of her flesh, Hermione felt decidedly delicate. His body was hard, unyielding where hers was soft and pliable. He was strong where she was fragile, commanding where she felt an instinctual need to obey.

His eyes had gone completely black, irises swallowed, and the ravenous look on his face told her he was well beyond words.

His hands released her wrists as he reared back, gazing down upon her with covetous wonder. He smoothed a palm beneath her shirt, gently brushing her bare stomach and making her inhale sharply. Then he was grasping the hem of fabric and jerking it up roughly, tangling her arms and hair before she sat up to tear it away completely.

She laid back down and gasped, something hard and unforgiving pressing painfully into her back. She reached a hand beneath her spine to fish for the foreign object and groaned when she realized it
was the remote. She accidentally pressed the power button, the TV springing to life beside them.

Tom wrapped a hand behind her neck, pulling her up and taking her bottom lip between his and biting, hard, making her whine in the back of her throat and wrap an arm around his neck for leverage while her other hand finally grasped the remote, tossing it aside. Her fingers pressed another button while doing so, the channel flipping from the local news back to the nature channel she’d been watching earlier.

“... the African black mamba is considered one of the deadliest predators on earth, this highly venomous snake is endemic to parts of...”

He pressed her back into the cushions, body stretching over her, knee nudging insistently between hers, parting her thighs. Hands encircled her waist, pinning her flat, lips pressing the sensitive flesh between her ear and jawline, sharply nipping, dragging down to her throbbing pulse point, tongue lapping at the rapid thrum.

Hermione gasped, his body a brick wall laid atop her, shortening her breaths, his weight hot and unyielding. She trailed her hands over his back, clawing at his shirt, desperate to reveal more flesh. He allowed her to pull the fabric up his back, his mouth parting from her neck to pass it over his head in a frantic struggle of intertwined limbs.

“...One of the world’s most feared serpents, known for its deadly speed and agility, easily outrunning its prey, its name insights fear in creatures big and small, for it is synonymous with death...”

He growled low in his throat as her blunt nails scraped along the nape of his neck and down his spine, muscles flexing involuntarily. He was a work of art, a finely chiseled sculpture, flawless, devastating, sharp lines and hard edges. She raked her nails down his chest, across a pebbled nipple, causing his entire body to jolt. Her gaze followed the trail her fingers left, his warm velvet skin pulled tight across unforgiving marble.

The pronounced bulge straining through his pants reached towards her. She attempted to swallow, throat dry, and instinctually licked her lips. His black eyes tracked the movement of her tongue, his body pulled taught like band about to snap.

“... the elusive serpent has very few enemies in the wild, putting the deadly beast at the top of the food chain... “

He fell upon her once more, his mouth consuming, draining, attempting to suction the soul from her body. She surrendered to the invasion, his tongue dominating hers, tangling with it, sweeping behind her teeth and along the roof of her mouth, pulling helpless moans from her chest and making her trembling thighs tighten around the thick trunk of his thigh instinctively, seeking pressure against her pulsating core.

Strong fingers gripped the back of her neck, holding her head in place for his mouth to devour, the other slid along her stomach to the fly of her jeans, undoing the button and lowering the zipper on one deft motion.

“... uses keen sight and scent to track its prey, tasting the air as it moves silently through the grass...”

Suddenly his hand left her neck and all heat left her body as he reared back entirely, gripping handfuls of her jeans and tugging hard, stripping her thighs bare, then her calves, moving back to slip the fabric over her bare toes, her shoes tangled in the crumpled pile of material.
His eyes locked with hers, rendering her still and helpless beneath him as his fingers curled into the elastic band of her underwear. She blinked, suddenly nervous and unsure, then gasping as he tore the fabric with his bare hands, ripping them straight through and discarding the scrap of fabric over his shoulder.

“... once it zeros in on its target, nothing will deter the highly intelligent serpent from claiming its meal...”

She blushed, uneasy at being so exposed. She tried to cover herself but he caught both slender wrists in his hands, reflexes lightning fast. Her heart raced as he lowered his face to her abdomen, hot open mouth kisses meeting the sensitive flesh, her stomach caving in to escape the onslaught. His teeth grazed her skin, leaving red marks in their wake, soothed by the lapping of his tongue.

His mouth moved lower, past her belly button and along the crease of her thighs and pelvis. She gulped, mouth opening and closing as she strained her arms, trying to free herself from his grip.

“Tom-”

She stopped short on a gasp, his teeth nipping her inner thigh, a silent reprimand. Then he was sliding his shoulders beneath her thighs, parting her legs more fully, his forearms braced along the tops, pinning her lower half in place, both wrists captured in his fists.

“... known for its aggressive bite, its venom is infused with a powerful cocktail of paralyzing toxins...”

She heard him hum low in his throat, the sound dragged over gravel and coal before she felt the steam of his exhale over her lowermost lips. She arched her back in a futile effort to escape his grasp.

The first lick made her gasp sharply, head flying back and eyes squeezing shut, body pulled taught. The second lick made her moan like a cat in heat, surrendering and lowering back into the cushions. By the third lick she was lost to the liquid heat surging through her, around her, out of her.

“... the neurotoxins attack the muscles, heart and lung function... “

Her muscles twitched uncontrollably as he sucked at her exposed clit, the bud pulsating to the frantic beat of her heart, each limb throbbing where his muscle and bone pressed hard against her. She squirmed, head lolling, mouth open and panting, kittenish mewls and wet suction filling the air.

His tongue laved her folds, forming a pointed spear he traced from the bottom of her slit and dipped inside her, causing her pelvic floor to contract sharply and pulling an animalistic groan from his throat. His tongue pulled back out, continuing its upward ascent.

“... the end is near, flashing it’s ebony covered mouth the mamba strikes, fangs penetrating deeply...”

He continued to tongue fuck her and suck her clit until she was a panting mess, eyes wide and staring unseeing at the ceiling as she thrashed against his iron grip.

She was at the edge of a precipice, gazing down into a black abyss, nothing to stop her descent. His tongue plunged in and out, in and out, deeply massaging her innermost walls before retreating for higher ground, his lips forming a vacuum seal around her clit. She cried out, sharp pleasure stabbing her lower abdomen, the muscles tightening painfully. Then his lips released the red bud and his teeth grazed along the raw, exposed nerve endings, his tongue roughly following the movements, and her eyes rolled so far back in her head her vision went black.
“… potent venom floods the cornered prey’s system, coursing through its bloodstream and rendering it helpless beneath the predator’s hungry mouth…”

At once all the energy centered within her exploded like a supernova, blinding her, scorching her flesh. Her mouth fell wide open on a silent scream as her back arched as far off the cushions as Tom’s hold would allow.

Her muscles contracted and released, contracted and released, trying to futilely to milk a foreign invader that was not there. The strain on her muscles hurt, the emptiness hurt. Then all at once the burning in her lungs became unbearable. She dropped back onto the couch and inhaled sharply, vision dim around the edges, limbs limp and exhausted.

“… if the prey attempts to flee or struggle, the mamba will follow its initial bite with a rapid series of strikes to incapacitate its victim…”

She moaned as he finally released her wrists, sensing the complete surrender in her sated body. Her hands dropped like dead weight to her sides, wrists marked red from his bruising grip. Her head rolled uselessly on her shoulders. There was still an insistent pressure at her clit. The touch was too much, too sharp, too painful. She swallowed weakly and placed a hand against his shoulder, pushing.

“Tom…” she didn’t recognize her own voice, strained and cracked as it was. She tried swallowing, her vocal chords a tangled mess. “I can’t…”

Tom’s black gaze lifted, latching onto hers and stealing her breath away. It contained such a smoldering heat and possessive hunger she felt tendrils of desire lapping from her womb to her core anew.

He slowly removed his mouth from her center, lips glossy from the mixture of their juices, broad fingers splaying out along her thighs and roaming upward in a blatant show of possession. Then his hands moved to his belt, the sound of leather scraping metal deafening to her ears. His lowered his fly and pulled his pants down far enough to release his-

Oh. My. God.

That’s not going to fit inside me...

His face transformed from blatant hunger to supreme smugness, his hand pumping his cock once, twice, squeezing a thin drizzle of precum off the weeping tip and onto her stomach, making her gasp and squirm.

“… victory in sight, the mamba wraps itself around its prey in a slow coil before consuming it whole…”

Tom lowered himself atop her once again, tongue dancing along hers and making her groan upon the taste of her own orgasm. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he slid his hand beneath her to press against the dip of her back, raising her flush against his body.

Hot metal pressed along the inside of her thigh. His broad tip kissed at her tight slit, causing her to moan into his mouth in anticipation. He pulled back to gaze upon her face, watching her expression closely as he breached her opening, pushing, stretching tender muscle.

Her saturated passage offered no resistance, only tight, hot pressure against his cock that caused his chest to rumble anew, mouth descending to the pale column of her throat, fangs plunging deep into the tender flesh, possessing her fully.
... the struggle has come to an end, the prey devoured, and the black mamba has once again proven to be one of nature’s most lethal predators.

Several hours later Tom slipped out of Hermione’s building, eyes hooded, movements languid, a sated, satisfied beast emerging from its lair. He crossed the street with graceful dexterity, his senses still waking up, coming to life slowly.

Had he not just expended so much physical energy he may have been alerted to the sensation of eyes upon him, tracking him as he steadily progressed down the sidewalk.

A dark gaze fixated on his movements, ruby painted lips curling into a knowing grin.

“My, my…” she muttered, voice raspy in the moonlight. She brought a cigarette to her mouth and inhaled deeply, letting the smoke linger in her lungs, enjoying the burn. She blew it out in a whoosh, admiring the view of him walking away.

“Tommy boy, how you’ve grown.”
**Marionettes**

**A/N:** Hello my lovelies! Are you enjoying my story? Please share your thoughts and comments afterwards, I read each one and squeal in delight to hear your reactions :D

Okay, has anyone watched Killing Eve? It’s. SO. Friggin. Good! This chapter pulls a bit from episode two for anyone following the series, I like to give credit where credit is due, however I’ve obviously put a very Potterverse spin on it.

And finally, a few little bunnies have expressed concern in comments and PMs that this Tomione train is headed off the rails. I just want to mention that one, this story has no rails, it’s more like a hang glider caught in a cyclone heading for the sharp cliffside, and two, it’s just starting out, I have a lot more backstory and future story to tell, characters and romances are still developing. Please keep all arms and elbows tucked inside the hang glider as we plunge headfirst into the jagged Tomione rocks ;)

As always, thank you for reading and enjoy!

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**Tuesday July 12, 2005**

Harry arrived at the diner across from The National Gallery precisely ten minutes before 9am. He knew from the moment Dumbledore left his flat the evening before that he wanted to attend this meeting. Needed to attend. He was desperate for a chance at redemption, the opportunity to continue pursuing this madman, the killer that slayed his witness before his very eyes.

To his surprise Dumbledore was already seated at a booth in the corner, staring out the window at the passersbys with detached amusement. Harry paused by the entrance, wondering if Dumbledore’s resting mood was always so elevated, and how he managed to sustain his cheer after a long career spent hunting criminals and undermining government conspiracies.

The man’s glacial colored gaze darted to the door, landing upon Harry and his smile widened. Harry took a deep breath, stealing himself, and darted around the impeding tables and wait staff until he was sliding into the leather seat across from him.

“Mr. Potter, good morning to you. You are early, how delightful.”

Is it?

“I didn’t want to keep you waiting, however it seems I’ve done that anyway,” Harry replied by way of greeting.

“Not at all, I spend most mornings here, enjoying the coffee and superb vantage point of the street. I never tire of watching people go about their daily routines, oblivious to the world around them. I think I envy them greatly for that.”

Harry blinked, sitting back more fully, unsure if a reply was needed.

Alas, Dumbledore lifted the steaming mug to his lips and took a sip, eyes watching Harry over the rim, great amusement in their depths.

“Uh…” Harry wet his lips, rubbing his palms against his pants, “I actually can’t stand crowds. I avoid public places as much as possible, outside of the job.” He blinked, physically jolted by his own
He scratched the back of his neck awkwardly, glancing about the crowded diner for a source of
distraction, any saving grace from the supreme weirdness of this moment.

“You seem uncomfortable, Mr. Potter. I imagine it is not easy sitting across the table from the man
who terminated you from your position not a day ago, preventing you from carrying out your life’s
work.”

Harry cleared his throat. “It wasn’t just your decision. You were just the one to deliver the news.”

“Be that as it may, I can appreciate the precarious position you are in. However as I alluded to
yesterday when I visited your residency, there is an entirely new matter I’d like to discuss.”

Harry nodded, eyes transfixed as Dumbledore reached beside him and grabbed something lying on
the booth.

“Harry, do you know that it is standard practice to sweep the computer hard drive of all terminated
employees?”

Harry blinked, blood draining from his face, skin turning clammy.

Shit. Fuck.

“Um… I didn’t really give it much thought, but I suppose that makes sense.”

“Yes, well I was hoping you could explain these to me.”

Dumbledore placed a black leather padfolio before Harry. Harry stared at it blankly for a moment
before tentatively reaching out, slowly opening the cover and cringing at the contents of the first
page.

“I…” he stopped short, eyes flickering to Dumbledore’s face. “I didn’t expect anyone to see these.”

“Why not?”

Harry sighed, flipping over the first page to stare at the remainder of the contents.

“It’s just… research.”

“Not relating to any of your active cases?”

“No.”

“Something you do in your free time, using the Ministry’s resources?”

Harry hesitated, but then figured fuck it, they can’t fire me twice.

“Yes.”

Dumbledore nodded, taking another slow, methodical sip from his coffee.

“Would you like to order something to eat, Harry?”

Harry rose a dark brow, shaking his head. “I think my appetite’s just gone out the window.”

Dumbledore leaned back, an air of calm emanating from his posture. “It upsets you that I’ve seen the
cases you’ve compiled?”

“I don’t think upset is the right word.”

“How does it make you feel?”

“I… I guess I’m just… I feel like you’d want an explanation as to why I devoted so much time to this.”

“Would you provide an answer to that question?”

Harry blinked, running his fingers absently over the dated crime scene photos. “I…” he paused again, briefly closing his eyes before deciding to lay his cards on the table. “It started with my dad’s file. With the Dubai mission. I dug up his research, his caseload, his contacts. And then I followed the trail, bodies starting surfacing, suspicious circumstances, certain details not adding up, facts being disproved years after the fact… and suddenly one hunch led to another led to another, until… this,” he gestured to the padfolio. “It doesn’t really amount to anything. There’s no definitive answers, no smoking gun. But I know there’s something more to it. I can feel it. So I kept adding to it, year after year.”

He took a deep breath, leaning back into the booth and holding Dumbledore’s shimmering gaze.

“Why did you unearth your father’s cases to begin with? They were handed off and closed out over a decade ago.”

Harry’s jaw ticked. “I wasn’t satisfied with the final reports.”

Dumbledore sat so still and silent Harry wondered if he was breathing. Then the man spoke, his words sending a chill up his spine.

“You think there was more to your father’s death than what the responding field officer and coroner’s report stated?”

Harry felt his chest tighten painfully, his heart lurching in his ribcage. “I think there was more to the story. I think someone swept the access under the rug. And I want to find that rug.”

The two men stared at each other across the bar for what felt like a short eternity before Dumbledore broke the intensity of the moment, gazing at the padfolio with a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth. Harry’s brows drew together in confusion, not finding any humor in the moment.

“Harry, I would like you to accompany me on a field trip.”

Thursday March 19, 1998

Cartagena, Colombia

Tom walked along the hallway, gazing at the pictures hanging on the wall.

Parasailing over crystal blue waters, climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, walking the Great Wall, dining upon a cliffside.

He studied the face of the man staring out of the photos.

“Always alone…” Tom muttered. “Though I suppose someone had to be holding the camera.”
He continued his slow pace into the living room, sighing deeply as he passed expensive sculptures and artwork on display.

“All this money, all that travel, and always alone.”

He came to a stop before the man tied to the chair in the center of the room.

“Please…” the hunched figure wheezed, still breathless from his struggle upon waking in such a position.

“I suppose working so closely with the drug cartel makes for a lonely lifestyle.”

The man tried to swallow, sweat pouring down his face. “I… I can pay you anything you want.”

Tom walked past him, eyes fixing on the open terrace, the rolling ocean and sound of foaming waves upon the warm night air.

“Yes, I suppose you could. Quite a place you have here. Very private. Lucky for me.”

“I can double whatever they’re paying you,” the man rasped, pulling futilely at his binds.

Tom put his hands in his pocket, still watching the dark water, breathing the scent of salt and cooling sand.

“Of course a private beachside mansion like this is bound to be an attractive nuisance for the less fortunate residents of the city. I imagine you’ve had to fend off several would be burglars at this point. I wonder if you became too lax in your security measures, though. Became complacent by the prolonged stretches of peace and quiet. Let your guard down on a seemingly typical evening when the wrong petty thief broke in to steal some priceless trinket and ran into the unsuspecting homeowner…”

The man’s struggles started anew, terror blossoming in his eyes. Tom slowly turned and started walking back towards him.

“I can picture the scene all too clearly, anyone could. A struggle ensues, the homeowner desperately grabs anything he can wield as a weapon…” Tom casually tipped an ornate vase off its pedestal, the glass shattering loudly, echoing off the vaulted ceiling.

“The would be thief panics in kind, lunging for the homeowner, leaving marks and lacerations across his face and body…” he stared pointedly at the line of blood leading from the man’s temple to chin. “The would be thief is able to over power the homeowner, binds him, but then panics upon realizing the wealthy stranger has seen his face.”

Tom lowered himself before the man, kneeling in front of his bound form, storm grey eyes meeting the wide open desperation of his prey.

“And in his panicked state, the would be thief becomes a very real killer, shooting the homeowner in the head, and then quickly flees the scene.”

“Please, I’m begging you!”

“Hmm… I haven’t heard anything I’d consider to be begging,” Tom said casually, standing tall once more. “I’ve heard bartering, bribery, of course the death threats from earlier, before I knocked you out. But no begging.”
“I’ll beg! Is that what you want? I’m begging you!”

Tom tilted his head to the side, gazing at the man as though he was an abstract piece of artwork.

“I’m still not sure that qualifies… simply saying the word.”

“What do you want? Tell me what you want! I’ve got one million in cash in my safe right now, I can wire you ten times that within the hour! I can make you filthy rich! Just let me go! Please let me go! I don’t want to die! Please, God, don’t kill me!”

Tom smiled, teeth gleaming in the moonlight. “Ah, see now that is begging.”

The man screamed at the top of his lungs, voice broken and raspy from the past attempts at calling for help. But it was of no use and the man knew it, he had purchased this private home for the very purpose it served against him now, so no one could hear his victim’s screams.

“I must admit,” Tom said causally, once the man had once more settled down into keening sobs. “I was nervous when I got this assignment. It’s my first real mission you see, I suppose there’s no harm in telling you this, considering the circumstances. But the moment I saw your name, Jonathan Avery, I felt suddenly in over my head. You’re so well connected, so well protected by the most dangerous people, I thought it was going to take weeks, months to infiltrate your defenses and slip past security.”

Tom walked to the quartz counter top of the bar, where his black metal briefcase sat, locked and ominous.

“But I must admit, I’m a bit disappointed with how easy it’s been. I was looking forward to the challenge, as much as I feared it. But I only arrived in the country last Sunday. And here we are.”

He pulled the case closer and snapped open the locks.

“Please… please kid… you don’t have to do this… let me pay you, please…”

“Gaining access to your security mainframe was child’s play. At least that’s what our tech specialist said, I’ll have to take his word for it as computers were never my speciality. Want to take a guess at what my particular speciality is?”

“Please…”

Tom opened the lid and began attaching the silencer to the end of the sleek gun.

“You saw the body of at least one of your security detail before you saw me, so I’m sure you can guess as to why I was chosen for this assignment.”

The man was thrashing wildly, tipping over his chair and crashing to the ground with a pained yell.

“No need for all that. I assure you that you’re doing far more pain and damage to yourself than I intend to inflict.”

“Listen kid-” he moaned from his sideways position on the ground, limbs still bound to the chair frame. “You’re young, this isn’t any kind of life for anyone, least of all a smart kid like you. I can pay you millions, set you up with your own private villa anywhere in the world. I’ll protect you from your employers-”

He cut off abruptly when Tom started to laugh, low deep and supremely amused.
“I don’t think that’s going to work out, Mr. Avery. Seeing as we have the same employer.”

Avery blinked, face awash in disbelief. “What? No… no. I don’t believe you. I… it isn’t-”

“Yes, yes, you’re shocked and awed. Now we really must get on with our evening, we wasted far too much time playing hide and seek earlier.” Tom leaned down and hauled the chair to its feet with a groan. Avery was still shaking his head, blood splashed upon his face and neck from his horizontal tumble.

“Who sent you? Who hired you?!”

Tom sighed, pulling the gun from his waistband. “Now, now, you’re ruining the surprise. I was supposed to deliver a final message you didn’t see coming, but now you’ve gone and spoiled everything. I’ll have to lie and tell them you were absolutely perplexed by the revelation.”

Avery blinked dumbly, mouth agape.

“Green says your stock has plummeted. Or wait… was it your stock has just increased? Damn, I knew I should have written it down… He said you’d understand the meaning. Tell me, which variation is it? It’s your stock has plummeted, right?”

Avery shook his head. “Fucking Green. That backstabbing son of a bitch! He’s a traitor! A snake in the fucking grass! He’s killing me now but he’s killing you tomorrow, kid, mark my words!”

Tom raised a dark brown, placing the tip of the silencer against the man’s forehead.

“Consider them marked.”

And pulled the trigger.

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**Tuesday July 12, 2005**

“Vienna?"

“Vienna.”

Tom flipped the postcard in his hand, hiding the image of the medieval St. Stephen’s Cathedral to gaze upon the scrawled words written in neat pen on the back.

“Miss you!”

Tom looked past the decoy message to the set of numbers and letters printed along the border, a manufacturer’s stamp by all appearances. He set the card on the counter.

“And who will be joining me?”

“You’ll meet them in Schwechat tomorrow, 10am. Don’t worry, you won’t be able to miss them.”

Tom’s jaw ticked. “I take it it’s someone I know?”

“I won’t speak on the matter any further.”

Tom inhaled sharply. “Fantastic, it’s someone I detest.”

Green tipped his head, peering at Tom sardonically. “You detest everyone.”
Tom rolled his eyes, stepping away from the breakfast bar and cutting a path to his liquor cabinet.

“That’s why I prefer working alone.”

“You have broken my trust, Tom. I suggest you use this assignment to earn it back and we’ll discuss your solo career.”

Tom scowled openly as he poured two fingers of vodka. “I’ve left much messier crime scenes than the one at Mungo’s. I fail to see what makes this particular instance so different.”

“Don’t play simple minded, Tom, you know how I detest it. In the past there has been cause for a certain level of mess, as you so eloquently put it. To send a message or to throw off the scent of an investigation. But in this instance you knew the surrounding circumstances called for a clean, unsuspicious kill. Her husband's murder was meant to be swept under the rug, now that it’s publicly known his widow was killed less than a day later in the same fashion the Malfoy investigation will be front and center of the media, our organization will be put under even stricter scrutiny until the hype passes,” he paused, watching Tom throw his drink back with casual grace.

“And of course,” Green continued, lips dripping scorn, “you don’t give a damn about any of that. As long as you get to have your fun, as long as you get to do it your way. Tell me, Tom, do you really think you’re so precious to our employer that you’re untouchable? Unexpendable? I found you rotting away in an orphanage. I scraped you out of the gutters and trained you myself. I could step back into the underbelly of this city and throw a stone and hit ten more just like you, filthy little miscreants desperate for a way out. Angry, violent little outcasts willing to channel all their rage and spite anyway we tell them to.”

Tom’s hand squeezed the crystal tumbler so tightly his fingers turned white, his expression murderous.

“You really think you could replace me so easily?” he ground out, each word a warning. “We both know there’s more to it than anger and an affinity for violence. Every boy wants to hold a gun but very few are willing to pull the trigger, even fewer willing to do so on command. Never mind having the aptitude to track and subdue targets kept under lock and key. And even if you were able to by some miracle find my replacement, you’d still have the little problem of killing me. I promise, no one will leave that scenario unscathed.”

His words dripped venom, eyes slitted coals glowing in the darkness of his gaze. Green merely shook his head, unmoved by Tom’s threat.

“We could go round and round like this for hours, Tom. And I have other, more important things to do today. The bottom line is you are under a probationary period until I say otherwise. This means you will follow my every command or face truly severe consequences. You will fly out tomorrow morning, you will meet your partner at the airport and you will carry out the mission without drawing the local news crew to the scene. Do you understand me?”

Tom seethed, chest rising and falling as he breathed deeply, fighting for control.

“Yes. I understand.”

He nearly choked on his resentment, the toxic poison filling his throat.

Green raised a brow, the underlying hostility not lost on him, but he ignored it with little concern.

“You will also be joined by Regulus. This assignment will require his skill set.”

Tom sighed, his death grip on the tumbler easing. He could tolerate Regulus. Barely. But he’d yet to
have any sort of direct confrontation with the man, he supposed that was as close to friendship as he
could hope for.

Green studied Tom in silence, his intuitive gaze raising the hairs on his neck and arms like a physical
touch.

“Are you sure there isn’t anything you’d like to tell me, Tom?”

Tom bristled, standing at alert.

“It appears my struggle lies not in limiting my self expression, if your latest warning is anything to go
by.”

Green cocked his head. “A crafty deflection as always. Makes we wonder what you’re hiding.”

Tom narrowed his eyes, trying to disguise his increasing anxiety as simple annoyance. “You are too
paranoid. Someone who constantly looks for sabotage will inevitably sabotage himself.”

The older man chuckled lightly. “Christ. That’s an awful one. Please tell me you didn’t hear it from
me.”

“Welcome to disappointment.”

Green sighed, moving towards the door to Tom’s flat, speaking over his shoulder. “I can tell there’s
something different about you, Tom. Today I noticed it especially. If you don’t wish to confide in me
then I suggest you do some soul searching while in Vienna. If you don’t shake whatever has come
over you then I will be forced to shake it for you.”

Tom took a steadying breath, carefully watching his handler disappear through the doorway and
narrowing his eyes.

She’s not the one I’ll be getting rid of, old man.

Dumbledore led Harry through the streets of London for a good twenty minute jaunt, walking at a
steady brisk pace and not showing any signs of fatigue despite his advanced years. Harry’s heart was
racing, not from physical exertion but out of unbridled curiosity. He finally slowed as they entered an
alley, carefully side stepping crates until reaching a metal door that blended in with the chipped
painting of the wall it shared.

Dumbledore drew a set of keys from his pocket and inserted them in the rusty lock, a loud click
echoing through the narrow space before the large door swung open on a screeching groan.

Dumbledore glanced at a patch of damp cement beside the nearby dumpster.

“I once saw a rat drinking from a can of Coke sitting in that spot. Both hands. Quite astonishing.”

He turned on his heel, walking through the doorway and disappearing into the shadows beyond,
leaving Harry to blink dumbly in his wake. He tore his thoughts away from the disturbing mental
image and quickly followed, the heavy door slamming shut behind him.

They stood at the bottom of a large spiral metal staircase, Dumbledore was already heading up. They
paused at the first landing to allow a portly man descending to pass them, his arms filled with a crate
of what looked like broken marionette dolls, their maudlin faces cracked and stained, mouths gaping
in obscene smiles, wooden limbs dangling over the side. Harry’s gaze lingered on the contents for
several moments until Dumbledore broke him from the stupor.
“There is a very unique blend of people who live and work in this building. You never know what you’ll see.”

Harry nodded mutely, following Dumbledore as they continued their trek upward, passing another landing and another set of doors before coming to a stop at the third and top floor, a single door before them, the red paint chipped so badly the wood appeared to be scarred and bleeding.

Dumbledore slid the accompanying key into the lock and pushed his side into the wood, the door jolted opening in stages.

“Old building, old bones. I suppose I can sympathize better than most,” Dumbledore spoke over his shoulder as he finally opened the door fully, stepping inside. Harry crossed the threshold behind him, eyes adjusting to the darkness until a set of bright fluorescent lights flickered above, obviously triggered by motion as neither men hit a wall switch.

Harry gazed around the studio space, his breath stopping short.

_Bloody hell…_

The room contained two desks facing each other with computers currently in sleep mode. Beneath the window was a short but long shelf topped with a printer, fax, and basic coffee maker. But what caught Harry’s attention was the main wall, covered in pictures, article clippings and pieces of case files, all bordering a large world map with pins and strings connecting various locations.

Harry recognized many of the photos, many of the faces and headlines. They were the same pieces of evidence collected in the padfolio.

“It’s like I’m standing in my brain…” he whispered, reaching out a hand to touch the map. “Did you do this?”

“I’m afraid I can’t take credit for this set up, merely for securing the location and paying the rent and electric bill,” Dumbledore said, tucking his hands in his pockets and casually glancing about the room like it was any other venue.

Harry studied the articles on the wall, his head still spinning, before he finally tore his gaze away and studied the man who brought him here.

“What is this place?”

“This is the official headquarters for the unofficial investigation to catch a killer, Mr. Potter.”

Harry blinked. He opened his mouth but his mind was moving too quickly to pick just anyone thought or question to voice. Dumbledore smiled, eyes twinkling anew.

“We believe there is an assassin operating across Europe, targeting a number of influential people. He doesn’t have a specific signature, but he possesses a certain style, and I do not know who or what is behind him but I do know he is not slowing down. He is outsmarting the smartest of us, and will continue to do so, unless we are able to get inside his head and think the way he does. I need people who are capable of this, and I believe you are one of those people, Harry.”

Harry glanced once more to the wall of evidence, eyes wide, adrenaline spiking, the thrill of the chase coming alive in his veins once more.

“Is this a sanctioned investigation?” He glanced once more to the senior agent in the room whose eyes were alight with something powerful, something Harry intrinsically recognized from years of
chasing his own obsessions up the tree and back.

“I’m a naturally suspicious person. After the career I’ve had, the life I’ve led, it comes with the territory. Fortunately, I’m given a budget to fund my paranoia. This investigation is a culmination of many things, but mostly just that, my imagination running wild once again.”

Harry took a deep breath, trying to process everything at once. But one thing still didn’t make sense, no matter how he tried to piece it together. “Aren’t there more experienced people you can tap for this? Why me?”

Dumbledore’s eyes seemed to glow from within as he pinned Harry with his full attention. “Your previous work for MI6 speaks for itself, even if it wasn’t for your extracurricular research I discovered. You have an ability to see things others don’t, to interpret the evidence in such a way that occlude others. Such as Mrs. Malfoy’s drug induced testimony, which everyone else was quick to dismiss. But not you.”

Harry couldn’t help but cringe at hearing her name, the horrific memory of her death still at the forefront of his mind. Dumbledore’s eyes turned softer. “Also because of your close affiliation with the killer already. You have personal stake in this case, a driving need to catch him that other Officers do not. You will not be able to rest until you know the person responsible for her murder is brought to justice, am I wrong?”

Harry swallowed past the building lump in his throat, shaking his head in lieu of replying out loud.

Dumbledore nodded slightly, eyes fixing on the evidence wall behind Harry as he continued. “I won’t lie to you, I am also tapping you for this investigation because you were fired yesterday, and the remaining powers at the Ministry won’t care what you do next, and I mean that in the nicest possible way.”

Harry looked to his feet, heat crawling up his neck.

“Less Ministry involvement means less red tape, more flexibility on our end. But mostly, I want you because of your parents.”

Harry’s emerald gaze snapped up, locking onto Dumbledore’s strong profile as he continued to casually study the photos and articles. “As I’ve mentioned already, I trusted your parents with my life, because they were smart, skilled and above all else, fiercely loyal. I see many of their best qualities present in you. You’re intuitive, head strong and brash, yes, but you are young still, and your tenacity also makes you resilient. You follow through no matter the cost, hunting down leads to their bitter ends. And you have a habit of always landing on your feet. I think that a highly beneficial skill to have, especially when hunting a trained assassin across the continent.”

Harry’s face showed the open disagreement he felt upon hearing Dumbledore’s words.

“I was fired yesterday, I hardly call that landing on my feet.”

Dumbledore laughed shortly, turning to pin Harry with his ice blue gaze. “What do you consider this offer to be?”

Harry swallowed, opening his mouth to ask another question when the door behind them started to open. Harry spun around, automatically reaching towards the holster he no longer wore. His hand tightened to a fist, falling uselessly to his side as a young woman appeared in the doorway.

She peered at the room’s two occupants with guileless blue eyes and a serene smile.
“Ah, Luna, I wasn’t expecting to see you here this early,” Dumbledore said pleasantly, grinning kindly at the new addition.

“I wasn’t expecting you either, Agent Dumbledore, though your visits are always a pleasure,” she replied, though her eyes were fastened upon Harry, no doubt alerted to his defensive stance.

Harry forced his shoulders to relax, sensing no threat from the stranger. She was a small thing, fairy like, with large doe eyes and long blonde hair with golden highlights, so near in shading to Narcissa Malfoy’s locks that it made his stomach twist painfully. But her eyes held none of the empty, lost vacancy that Narcissa’s possessed when Harry met her. Luna’s gaze was deep blue and brimming with keen intelligence, tempered by an air of tranquility that practically seeped from her pores. Harry found it physically impossible to be unsettled by her though he suspected he should be given her studious examination of him.

“Luna, may I introduce you to Harry Potter, I am hoping he will agree to join you in your research.”

Harry blinked. “You did all this?” he gestured to the wall behind him.

Luna’s serene smile picked up at the edges, her eyes jumping from him to the evidence, a look of excitement lighting her face. “I’ve been collecting material for several weeks now, though Daddy was the one who provided the map. And Dumbledore purchased the pins. And computers. And the room. It’s really more of a group effort, I’d say. Do you prefer coffee or tea?”

Harry blinked. Dumbledore chuckled.

“Mr. Lovegood is a close associate of mine. Luna is his young prodigy. She graduated from Ministry training with top scores, this fall she will officially begin her work in the field. Until then she’s agreed to assist me on this project while honing her already keen research abilities. Though I suppose it is rude of me to speak on her behalf when she’s more than capable of doing so for herself. Forgive me, Luna.”

She tipped her head to Dumbledore, her hair falling over her shoulder and back like a veil of golden silk. “Not at all, Agent Dumbledore. I am honored to hear you speak so highly of me.”

Her eyes shifted to Harry once more. “I’ve heard a great deal about you, Officer Potter, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Harry smiled back, finally feeling at ease in her presence. “The pleasure is all mine, Ms. Lovegood. Though I’m afraid I’m not an Officer any longer, please call me Harry.”

Luna’s smile didn’t flicker, absorbing the news of his termination as though hearing a weather report. “Daddy never gave much stock to office politics. Dumbledore wouldn’t have requested your assistance if he didn’t consider you a skilled Officer. However if we are to be working together I suppose referring to one another by our first names will save us much time in the long run.”

Harry couldn’t help but smirk, her intensely prosaic reasoning a refreshing change from the political bullshit he was used to wading through at the Ministry.

“Now Luna,” Dumbledore said patiently, walking closer to the room’s younger occupants. “Harry hasn’t agreed to this assignment yet.”

She tilted her head the other way, studying Harry from a different angle as though it revealed some hidden insight. And perhaps it did, for her next words rendered him mute.

“He hasn’t agreed aloud yet, but his mind is made up. He is intrigued by the evidence, driven to find
the answers we seek. He won’t be able to stop thinking about it now. It will be much more conducive to his mental health if he works on the investigation with us.”

Dumbledore chuckled and shook his head while Harry gazed at her in dumbfounded curiosity, wondering if she was a skilled behavioral psychologist or just psychic, deciding to add those questions to the ever growing list in his head.

But for now he simply turned his attention to Dumbledore. The older man’s eyes held a knowing glint but Harry needed to check something first.

“Can I bring others into the investigation, specialists?”

Dumbledore rose a graying brow, obviously not expecting that particular inquiry.

“You have someone specific in mind, I take it?”

“Two people, actually, both would be great additions to this project.”

The room was filled with a heavy silence for several moments before Dumbledore tipped his head, his expression part amusement and part resignation.

“I daresay I have a strong inkling who one of these so called specialists is, but I see no harm in looping them in, as long as you can keep out any Ministry involvement. At least for the time being.”

Now Harry smiled fully, glancing to Luna and then to Dumbledore, emerald eyes alight.

“Alright,” he said, gazing about the room. “Which desk is mine?”

Thursday March 19, 1998

Cartagena, Colombia

Tom lowered the muzzle of his weapon, eyes transfixed upon the thin bead of blood that seeped from the bullet wound. He inhaled sharply, blinking rapidly. His stomach twisted and he swallowed, mouth suddenly dry.

Without making any conscious decision he stumbled backwards to the counter, leaning heavily against it and trying to catch his breath. His lungs worked in short pants, as though he’d just run a sprint.

I’ve done it. I’ve actually done it…

His first kill.

Eight months of gruelling, meticulous training at the hands of Green and his associates all culminated to this moment, this decision.

Tom felt bile rise in his throat and staggered to the kitchenette, leaning over the sink just in time to spew his meager stomach contents into the basin. The acid burned his throat, teared his eyes. He gasped for breath, clutching the lip of the counter with gloved hands, arms shaking.

Get a grip. Clean this mess. This is unacceptable. What if they knew you were spreading your DNA around the crime scene? Idiot.

Tom turned the water on, using the sprayer to wash away the evidence, breathing deeply the whole
He had maintained his composure in front of the target, enjoying the feel of power and control that binding such a man afforded him. Tom didn’t have to do any additional digging to know the legacy of Jonathan Avery. A well connected member of the Columbian cartel, serving as their British liason for the smuggling of heroin. A rich, white collar, prideful criminal, responsible for many deaths and disappearances himself.

Tom expected to feel nothing upon pulling the trigger, a fitting end to a violent life. But seeing the corpse of his victim had triggered some... strange reaction, and Tom didn’t like it one bit.

_It’s just because it was my first. I’ll get used to it._

_I’ll have to. Otherwise I’ll be on the receiving end of a bullet._

He turned the sink off, using a hand towel to dry it out, then peered up and caught the reflection of his face in the window. His skin was pale, bloodless in the moonlight, his eyes looking haunted in the dim lighting.

_Bloody hell…_

He ran a gloved hand through his hair, trying to rein in his suddenly frazzled nerves.

_You already did the hard part, why the hell are you losing it now?_

_Because I actually did it…_

Tom swallowed thickly, moving back to the counter to disassemble his weapon and place it back in the case. His completion of the mission had been a foregone conclusion to Green and his men. Tom was highly skilled at weapons and combat, strategy and surveillance, all the major cornerstones of not just a hired gun but a trained assassin. He was still learning the ropes to be sure, but he demonstrated an ability to think outside the box, to corner his prey in ways that occluded the typical means. If the target didn’t expect something they couldn’t stack security against it.

There were many more ways to kill a man than with a gun, but Green had ultimately decided it the best course of action for Tom’s first solo mission, his first true assignment. He’s had Regulus’s help breaking through the security grid to disable Avery’s home alarms and mirror his phone, learning his schedule, but the physical aspect of the mission was all on Tom.

It was Green’s way of throwing him in the water to see if he’d sink or swim. He’d either prove himself capable and pull it off without a hitch, or he’d fuck it up and go down alone. Tom knew little about the organization he worked for by design. He only knew last names of his mentors and associates, all aliases, Green’s included. And no personal details beyond that, even the training locations were kept a secret from him as arrived blindfolded each morning.

Everyone believed Tom was ready, completing his training months ahead of schedule. Their confidence made Tom believe it too. Gaining entry into the target’s home, knocking his head of security unconscious, had all been as easy as the drills Green set up for him like obstacle courses during his training. So finally over powering Avery and tying him to the chair had felt no different than his test missions. It was easy to pretend this was another training scenario, another chance to be observed and graded, to prove himself worthy, better than the others.

Until it came time to pull the trigger. There were no blanks in the gun, no man in the corner with a clipboard, watching and awarding points, marking notes along the margins for Tom to review after. The moment he pulled the trigger he’d been reminded that this was real life, and that he’d really just...
taken a life.

Training was over.

He was a killer now.

He swallowed thickly, willing his stomach to remain calm. He killed a man, yes, but the victim was hardly an upstanding member of society. Not that Tom needed to justify it either way, he was assigned a target and he took them out, regardless of his employer’s reasoning. Still, he felt somewhat more assured knowing Avery was a known murderer himself.

There’s no justifying it, Tom...

Tom stopped short, spinning around the room in a tight circle, eyes scanning the shadows for the source of the voice. It sounded just like her...

I’m in your head, Tom. Always in your head...

He inhaled sharply, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms, studiously avoiding looking towards the body.

Shut up, Hermione.

It’s hardly my fault you imagine my voice every time you have some moral dilemma.

I’m not having a moral dilemma.

Then what would you call it?

I’m losing my bloody fucking mind.

She laughed, high and bright like silver bells. The sound calmed him, uncoiled his muscles.

No, you just find it easier to use me as the voice of reason so you’re not arguing with yourself all the time.

Sounds a lot like bloody psychosis to me.

He snapped the suitcase shut with force, angry with himself for conjuring her during this moment, uneasy exposing her to such violence even when he knew she wasn’t actually there.

Of course I’m here, Tom. I’m always with you, even when you’re doing despicable things. Especially when you’re doing despicable things. That’s when you need me the most...

To this day he wasn’t sure if her voice was his own conscience speaking or if he even had a conscience. Throughout his youth she’s always been the voice of reason, his measure of what was good and right and moral. He still went off and did whatever the hell he wanted, but he knew well enough to hide the worst of it from her so as to not break her faith in him. But now, being entirely without her for the last fourteen months… he was starting to lose sight of the horizon, of where the line was.

You don’t need me to tell you that killing a man crosses the line, Tom.

He wasn’t a good person, Hermione.

No, he wasn’t. But neither are you. You don’t have the right to be judge, jury and executioner. And
don’t pretend you killed him for any moral reason. You killed him on assignment, for money, to please your bosses.

It was him or me.

You chose this path. What happens when they tell you to kill someone who isn’t a known criminal? Someone less like you and more like me?

He swallowed thickly, picking up the briefcase and giving the room a thorough once over, still avoiding looking upon the body directly.

I suppose I’ll cross that bridge when the time comes.

And what happens when you cross over, and can no longer hear my voice?

His heart lurched as he moved down the dark hallway for the side entrance.

When I stop hearing your voice, I’ll have to seek out the real thing.

It was silent as he slipped out into the night, under the cover of darkness, until he heard her whisper his greatest fear so sweetly in his ear.

And what makes you think I’ll want anything to do with you by then?

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Tuesday July 12, 2005

Hermione walked between the rows of desks in a stupor. She gazed up at the dry erase board covered with equations and notations and heard Tom’s voice in her ear.

“Hermione…”

She swallowed, clearing her throat to pull herself out of her memories of last night. But it was no use, she rubbed absently at her wrists, hidden beneath a long sleeve top to hide the faint marks of his fingertips. She slowed to a stop by her teaching desk, eyes briefly closing.

The room was silent beyond the scratching of pens on paper and book pages turning as the undergrad students worked through their assignment. She couldn’t bare standing before the room and delivering a lecture, her mind too scattered, her emotions too close to the surface. She’d taken the easy way out and assigned a chunk of text for review while she meandered around the desks, offering help when needed.

The lingering quiete was a double edged sword, allowing her to mask her overwhelmed state but providing no distraction from the onslaught of memories.

She took a deep breath, remembering lying beneath Tom on the couch, the warmth of his skin fusing their flesh, one arm pressing against her back, lifting her into him as he pounded into her. He’d pulled out of her at one point, rearing back onto his knees and then sitting back, pulling her up against him until she straddled him, using his other hand to guide himself back into her swollen passage.

Hermione felt her cheeks flush crimson as she continued to face the dry erase board, mortified by her own thoughts in such a public venue. But she still felt the dull ache between her legs, even now. It had been so long since she last had sex, well over a year, her body was practically virginal beneath Tom’s rough hands.
She remembered the way he wrapped one arm around her hips, guiding her movements, the other arm pressed to her back, hand gripping her hair and tugging her head back to expose the column of her throat. He marked so much of her delicate flesh with his teeth it looked like she’d been mauled by a small animal. She’d worn a long sleeve turtleneck sweater to her tutoring session, definitely a fall garment that looked so out of place among the light summery clothes the other students wore she thought she’d look less suspicious had she just left the marks on display.

She replayed the searing kiss at the end, when his movements became more stuttered, more frantic, when he took over her hips entirely with his strong hands, the feeling of him sinking deep for one final push, the feeling of him pulsing within her walls, the sound he made from the back of his throat, the groan being torn from somewhere deep inside his chest.

And the immediate feelings of shame and panic that flooded her system in the moment that followed.

It was like waking from an erotic dream that had started out a nightmare, while it ended on a pleasant note it did nothing to erase the earlier images, the desperate need to wake up and seek out the safety of reality.

She’d batted Tom away, pushing at his chest and scrambling back, cringing at the feeling of him slipping out of her, the trail of liquid that followed, stringing along her inner thigh. She felt dirty, tainted.

I can’t believe I just did that! I can’t believe I let him touch me...

Tom looked startled, obviously not expecting her instant retreat, but then his eyes shuttered, the emotion gone, the heat from moments before snuffed out by the bucket of ice water she’d thrown over the scene.

“Hermione…” he began, but his voice lacked the note of longing and seduction. Now it was a warning.

She shook her head, grabbing one of the couch throw pillows and holding it before her like a shield.

“Please, Tom, just leave.”

He studied her carefully, still stretched out against the cushions fully exposed, no shame or blush marring his features. “We need to talk.”

She swallowed thickly, eyes squeezing shut and tears slipping free from the corners. She continued to shake her head. “There’s nothing to talk about. It’s like you said, I know what you are now. You kill people, you killed the Malfoys. I can’t-” she trailed off, unsure how to complete the thought.

I can’t be with you.

I can’t stop myself from loving you, lord knows how hard I’ve tried.

But I can’t be with you...

She opened her eyes, staring blankly at the TV, forgetting it was still on. She shook her head, picking up the remote by her foot and shutting it off, staring blankly at her reflection in the black screen.

“I need for you to please leave.”

Her eyes remained forward but she sensed the anger radiating off of him.
“I’ll leave as soon as I’m sure you won’t do anything foolish.”

She couldn’t help it, her eyes cut to him on instinct, hurt filling her gaze. “You’re threatening me.” She didn’t bother making it sound like a question.

He rolled his eyes. “Christ, Hermione, how many times do you need to hear me say it? I’m not going to hurt you. But I’m not the only threat out there.”

She tugged absentmindedly at the frayed edge of the pillow still pressed into her lap, mind racing. Tom sighed deeply, running a hand through his hair and adjusting on the couch, leaning back into the cushions and pulling his pants up, not bothering to refasten the fly.

“If you try and go to the authorities you’ll be dead before ever making it home. We have people everywhere, and plenty of officers in our pocket. You’ll endanger not only yourself but the lives of anyone you tell. And no—” he said, sensing she was about to speak, “That’s not my way of threatening the neighborhood, as you put it, that’s the reality of the work I do, of the people I work for. I’m not the only hitman on the payroll.”

Hearing him describe him job so casually, like it really was maintenance at an office building, made her rub her temples and bow her head, sensing a stress headache about to come on.

“And for what it’s worth…” he trailed off on a sigh. She sensed he regretted starting that sentence, and became painfully curious.

“For what it’s worth?” she prompted, still not looking his way.

There was a long beat of silence before he spoke. “When I threatened those people earlier, the restaurant, the school, it was because I knew the easiest way to get you to comply was by endangering others. You’ve always been a bleeding heart. But I didn’t intend to kill them. I wouldn’t have.”

Her eyes snapped open and landed on him, hopeful.

“It would have created too big of a trail to clean after.”

She blinked, leaning away. He read the emotion on her face and rolled his eyes again.

“And it would have been immoral…”

She opened and closed her mouth. “Immoral?” she finally spat out, color warming her cheeks, her disbelief at his callousness making her forget her stark nudity. “Immoral? You just murdered an innocent woman in her bloody hospital room! How can you sit there and pretend to have any sort of moral compass?”

He pinned her with a withering stare. “Do you need me to say something as cliche as there’s no such thing as innocent, everything’s subjective, or will that only rile you up further?”

She inhaled sharply through her nose.

“I see it only riles you further…”

“Is it really such a joke to you?”

He drew his brows together. “Is that what you think? What you think of me?”

“What else am I supposed to think, Tom? I haven’t seen you for eight years! Nothing, not a single
“I told you, Hermione, it wouldn’t have been safe-”

“And whose fault is that?” she snapped, hands clenched into claws in the fabric of the couch. “Why did you have to become a hitman, Tom? Why couldn’t you have gone straight?”

“I tried dammit! I tried that and I was killing myself-”

“So you decided to start killing others?”

His eyes gleamed, jaw flexing on the words he was biting back.

“Don’t sit there and try to justify your profession to me, Tom! I might have turned the other way when it came to the petty crimes you committed when we were kids but this…” she shook her head. “This is something else entirely…. This… I can’t look the other way this time.”

She buried her face in her hands, heart stuttering painfully in her chest. The silence was absolute, all consuming. She closed her eyes, feeling another tear track its way down her cheek when he spoke.

“I want out, Hermione.”

She jolted, turning to face him with wide eyes. He held her steady in his gaze, his expression unreadable.

“What-” she snapped her jaw shut, swallowing lightly before trying again. “You, you want out of what?”

He watched her carefully. “I want out of this life. I joined for the money, for the sense of power and control. I have plenty of money, but I have no control. I never did. There’s always someone pulling my strings. I realize that now more than ever.”

She pivoted her body towards him, tucking the pillow beneath her chin to hide her bare chest. Tom smirked and leaned to the side, grabbing her shirt and handing it to her.

“Thanks,” she whispered, blushing as she pulled it over her head. She knew it was ridiculous to feel shy now, following what they just did, but the dynamic had shifted and she felt overly exposed.

She knew her underwear was a lost cause so she settled the pillow over her lap as she faced him on the couch.

“How can I believe you, Tom?” she asked sadly. “How do I know you aren’t just saying that to mollify me? You killed someone last night.”

Tom took a deep breath, eyes rooting her to the spot. “You know me better than anyone, Hermione. Even all these years later and you still read me like a book at the restaurant, saw right through my act.”

She chewed the inside of her cheek. She wanted to believe she knew him as well as she used to. But a lot of time had passed. And while she saw through his shy bashful persona at lunch, she also believed him when he said he’d kill Filch, the other restaurant patrons, and even her neighbors if she caused a stir. He wore too many masks, had too many years of practice in deceit to know for certain.

She looked down. “I want to believe you. I do. But it doesn’t change the fact that you killed a woman last night, and I walked in on you after you killed Lucius Malfoy. I still see his body when I
close my eyes.”

She wiped her wet cheeks with the backs of her hands.

Tom moved a hand towards her but then paused with it raised halfway, fingers curling in and arm dropping to his side. She was relieved he didn’t touch her, though she also wished he had.

“Hermione…”

Only Tom could make her name into a powerful incantation, it never sounded the same way twice when uttered from his lips. Sometimes it sounded like a warning, other times like a prayer, a supplication from deep within his soul. In their youth he would apologize for his transgressions with only the one word, some powerful force of magic seizing her and erasing her anger. She sensed he was tapping into that power now, preparing to tear down her defenses with careful words, careful gestures.

She shook her head, inhaling deeply. “Not this time, Tom.”

His body went rigid, no doubt sensing a greater struggle ahead than anticipated.

“What if I told you the Malfoys weren’t the upstanding citizens the media made them out to be?”

Now he was bartering, always his mode of operation when intimidation and half formed apologies didn’t accomplish the task.

“I don’t care what they did. They didn’t deserve to die. That wasn’t for you to decide.”

Tom blinked, a haunted look passing over his eyes, there one minute and gone the next. But he still looked thrown off, startled. She raised her brow. He opened his mouth and hesitated, eyes looking towards the window.

“I used to hear your voice in my head. On missions.”

Hermione leaned back, too surprised to respond.

“When I first started out I had trouble… assimilating. I didn’t want anyone to know I was having difficulty. If they thought I was having second thoughts they would have killed me. So I would have these conversations in my head… with you.”

He still wasn’t looking at her, his face stoic but his eyes held a far off, forlorn look that made her desperately want to reach out and comfort him. She’d seen him act this way before, when he first confided in her about his mother, his past before Wool’s. He couldn’t make eye contact with her then either, and when she tried to touch his hand the spell was broken and he’d pushed her away in an angry fit, storming off and avoiding her for the next two days.

Now she wasn’t sure what to do, pantless as she was on the couch, everything felt a bit surreal.

He sighed, blinking a few times and seeming to snap out of whatever memory he was caught in. He glanced at her.

“You were the angel on my shoulder, whispering in my ear, telling me I didn’t have the right to be judge, jury and executioner no matter what my targets were guilty of.”

Hermione opened her mouth but then promptly closed it.

*That does sound like something I’d say…*
Tom smirked. “It made it easier, pretending you were there, even if it was just to scold me.”

She curled her hands into fists beneath the pillow to resist reaching out. He glanced down, following the motion. His expression turned serious again.

“But then one day your voice wasn’t there anymore. And all I had was the silence. And the job. I knew it would swallow me whole if I didn’t start looking for a way out. A way back to you.”

Her heart stuttered as he reached out a hand, slowly as if to not startle her, and grasped the celtic knot resting at the base of her throat. He held it between his fingers a moment, gazing upon it, and then let it fall. The metal felt charged, electric against her skin. She looked up, desperate to search his eyes for the truth. To see if this was just another mask.

He met her gaze, and all she saw was Tom.

Not the killer, not the seductive lover, but her Tom. The boy who caught the acorn, who offered her his hand of friendship almost as a dare, who came to her defense on the streets of London when she felt helpless and terrified, so certain he’d already abandoned her.

She felt tears cloud her vision. “You left me.” she whispered, a lump forming in her throat.

Tom’s head dipped as he watched her, eyes intense. “I know. It was the worst decision I’ve ever made.”

She raised a brow. “Worse than deciding to kill people?”

He nodded. “For me, yes.”

She crossed her arms over her middle, closing her eyes to try and sort through her emotions but finding it a herculean task. She opened her eyes to stare out the window instead.

“You really want out?”

There was no hesitation on his part.

“Yes, I do.”

She sighed deeply, her mind filled with images of a boy from her past as she slowly turned to face the man at her side.

“What can I do to help?”

What can I do to help…

“Um, Ms. Granger?”

Hermione blinked, jolted out of the memory by the sound of a timid voice at her back. She spun around, cheeks burning when she saw at least five students with their hands raised, looking at her like she’d grown two heads.

“Oh!” she said, dashing over to the student who’d called her attention. “Sorry guys…”

She cleared her throat awkwardly, leaning down to help answer chemistry questions. At least that was something she knew she was capable of.
Hermione tapped a pile of papers against the desk to neaten the stack, eyes gazing out at the rows of empty desks in front. She heard the sound of a gentle knock on the doorframe and spun around with a gasp.

“Oh, sorry, Mione, didn’t mean to startle you,” said the new voice, palms raised in supplication as they entered the room.

Her heart leapt into her throat as she watched him approach at a casual pace, hands tucked into his pockets, gaze appraising her.

_Fucking hell, just the person I want to see…_

Cormac McLaggen was as handsome as ever, silver grin firmly affixed to his face. As aesthetically pleasing as he was to the eye he wasn’t any less of an annoyance at the moment.

“Haven’t seen you in a while, how are you?”

She stared pointedly at the pages in her hand, focused on tucking them into the manilla folder. “You saw me on Thursday, Cormac.”

He tilted his head to the side, examining her from an angle. “Ah, that’s right. I asked you to dinner and you said you had plans. Let me guess, you have plans tonight as well?”

Hermione inhaled slowly, tongue lifting to the roof of her mouth.

This one is persistent.

“I’m just really busy. It’s a hectic time in my life and I don’t think… dinner… is a good idea for me right now.”

To his credit, Cormac handled her rejection with casual ease each time. He merely chuckled and nodded. “I understand your meaning, though I hope you aren’t being literal. Skipping meals will only add to your stress, I’m sure.”

She paused her motions. “I didn’t say I was stressed.”

He studied her, brow raising. “Right… just busy.”

She felt warmth tinge her cheeks, looking away from him and scooting her chair back to stand.

“Slughorn mentioned you had an interview with a grant donor tomorrow.”

Hermione blinked.

_Oh my god. I’d nearly forgotten!_

He smirked, a dimple appearing in his cheek. “You must really have a lot on your mind, and here I thought you were just making an excuse to not have to go out with me again.”

Hermione shoved her belonging into her bag and kept her eyes averted, feeling the heat steal its way across her chest. “Cormac, I don’t- it’s not you…” she stopped short, feeling moronic.

_It’s not you, it’s me, and it’s the trained hitman I’m sorta in love with but also terrified of. You know what I mean?_

He held up a hand. “It’s okay, Mione. Really, I promise I didn’t come here to hit on you. Well, I did.
But I mostly came to wish you luck tomorrow.”

She smiled at that. Cormac made her feel uncomfortable most of the time because of his blatant flirtations but when he wasn’t asking her out he could be quite tolerable.

“Thanks, Cormac. I appreciate that.”

His smile widened.

“But I still can’t go out with you.”

He laughed, looking genuinely amused versus put out. It made her smirk at the ludicrously of it all.

“Fair enough. I can’t fault you for stringing me along, can I?”

She rolled her eyes, adjusting the strap of her bag across her shoulder and fishing for her school badge.

“You heading to the station?”

She nodded. “Euston, yeah.”

“Could you stand for some company?”

Hermione sighed, idly playing with the strap of her bag. Under normal circumstances she would decline the offer, despite Cormac’s claim that he read her rejection loud and clear he usually tried to pull a mile out of any inch she gave him. Chances are he’d ask her out at least one more time before they reached the Underground.

But on this particular occasion she didn’t look forward to walking the streets alone. She knew she’d be surrounded by strangers but she didn’t rely on any of them to raise a brow if something happened to her. After witnessing pedestrians look the other way when Tom got jumped by those men all those years ago she didn’t put a lot of faith in good samaritans.

“Come on then.”

She shook her head in amusement at the excited trot he made across the room to hold open the door for her.

“Milady…”

“Dolt.”

He threw his head back and laughed again as he kept pace beside her down the hall.

Hermione couldn’t for the life of her figure out why Cormac pursued her so relentlessly. Originally she’d decided it had to be the thrill of the chase, since she turned him down point blank from the first moment he tried to set up a private tutoring session, intent clear in his eyes.

So about a year ago she decided to just go out with the guy, if not to simply shut him up about always refusing his offer then to show him that they really weren’t that compatible, if he was actually looking for something beyond a quick shag.

Cormac had been a perfect gentleman on the date, almost stiff in his mannerisms, making her think he was really nervous about something throughout. It was a stark contrast to the carefree, vivacious flirt she was usually faced with at school. The date was awkward and ended with an even more
awkward half hug and peck on the cheek at her door. She’d assumed the date was as off putting for
him and that come Monday he’d be onto the next challenge.

No such luck. If anything Cormac pursued her harder after that fateful date. She couldn’t begin to
understand the mechanisms of the boy’s head.

*Then again, I’m not very good at reading any guy’s head…*

She sighed, pushing the thoughts away. Cormac glanced over at her.

“Want to talk about it?”

She continued facing forward. “No.”

He nodded. “Fair enough.”

They exited the building and her breath stuttered in a half gasp, half cough.

Tom was leaning against the building facing the chem department, hands casually tucked in his
trouser pockets, eyes firmly fixed upon her.

She felt a thrill of adrenaline flood her system, her mind going back to the last time he cornered her
on campus, the red lights of the stairwell making his features seem demonic as he surged towards
her. She blinked, pushing the memory aside and trying to calm her racing heart.

“Friend of yours?”

Hermione looked beside her, almost forgetting Cormac was there.

“Oh… um… yeah…”

He raised a brow, glancing from Hermione to Tom and then back again. “Want me to stick around?”

She opened and closed her mouth, her spine going rigid as she saw Tom stand from the wall and
start approaching at a casual pace.

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuckity fuck.*

“Um, no, I’m good, thanks, Cormac.”

But by now Cormac wasn’t listening, eyes honed in on the approaching dark figure.

“I’ll see you later, Cormac!” she tried desperately, her eyes pleading with him to leave.

He pointedly ignored her and she watched in abject horror as his posture shifted, standing taller,
spine straightening, shoulders back, chest out and eyes narrowed.

*Oh my god. Please let a sinkhole open up and kill me.*

“Hello, you must be a friend of Mione. I’m Cormac,” he spoke clearly, like a sports announcer,
holding a hand out as soon as Tom came to a stop in front of them.

She watched in equal fascination as Tom mimicked Cormac’s posture, not quite as obvious about it
but blatantly clear to Hermione’s eyes. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, chanting *sinkhole
sinkhole sinkhole* in her mind.
“Cormac,” Tom said simply, as though pronouncing a foreign word for the first time. He looked down at Cormac’s offered hand and she was sure he wasn’t going to take it. But then he snaked an arm around her waist before she had time to react and pulled her into his side. She choked on another gasp and watched with annoyance as Tom shook Cormac’s hand with the other, his voice now perfectly jovial and fake. “Can’t say Mione’s ever mentioned you to me. Are you in the graduate program?”

She tried to step out of his hold but his arm flexed around her, once, a silent warning, and she rolled her eyes and stood rigid in his forced embrace.

“Um…” Cormac looked clearly taken aback by their closeness, and Hermione felt a strange tinge of guilt before quickly banishing it away. She had no reason to feel anything where it related to Cormac, most days she wouldn’t even label him a friend, she owed him no explanation. Still, she didn’t care whose company they were in, she didn’t appreciate the dominate display of ownership Tom was portraying.

“Yeah,” Cormac finally continued, tearing his eyes away from Tom’s arm at her waist. “I’ve been in the same program as Mione since undergrad. Course I’m nowhere near her in grades.” He added the last part with a smirk directed solely to her, and she felt Tom’s arm dig more painfully into her side, thought she suspected it was unintentional as his focus was solely on the other male.

“That’s our Hermione, bloody brilliant. Has she ever offered you tutoring sessions?”

Hermione glanced up at Tom, eyes narrowed.

_Hermione is standing right here, idiots._

Tom ignored her. Cormac did as well. Some silent battle of wills taking place with her as a side prop.

“No, not yet,” Cormac said with a grin that showed the dagger between his teeth. “But I think she’s coming around to the idea.” Hermione blinked, feeling like she was watching actors in a play but didn’t have a script to follow along. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name,” Cormac finished with a beatific smile.

“I didn’t give it,” Tom said with an equally charming grin. “I’m a very good friend of Hermione. Name’s Tom. It’s been a pleasure, but we’ve got to run I’m afraid,” he finally glanced down at her, ignoring her scowl and instead sliding his hand from her waist to her arm and then down to her wrist. She was certain he was going to grab it and felt her heart leap into her throat when he instead interlaced their fingers.

It was the first time he’d ever willingly held her hand. Sure, it was clearly to piss off Cormac, but it didn’t lessen the tightening in her gut.

Hermione stared at him blankly for a few second before she caught sight of Cormac in the corner of her vision. She quickly shot him an apologetic look- what she was apologizing for she wasn’t certain, but she felt the need to do so anyway.

“Bye, Cormac, thanks for walking me out.”

Cormac swallowed heavily, eyes transfixed on her and Tom’s interlocking hands for a touch longer than socially acceptable. She cleared her throat to regain his attention and he snapped out of his daze, looking a touch confused, hurt, and embarrassed.

“Right,” he said, blinking a few times. “No problem. See you later, Mione.”
She nodded and smiled and then bit her tongue as Tom began pulling her in the opposite direction. She waited until they rounded the corner of the building before trying to forcibly take her hand back. Of course he merely held on tighter, swinging their arms forward and back like two lovers on a late night stroll.

“What the hell was that?” she hissed.

“I was about to ask you the same question. Who is he?”

“You know who he is, you just met him. What the hell are you doing here Tom?”

“How do you know him?”

She rolled her eyes. “You know that, too! You just asked him! He’s in my program. Now tell me what.”

“You know what I’m asking, Hermione.” His voice was low, dark, eyes fixated forward as he led her down the pedestrian walkway.

She inhaled sharply, temperature rising. “He’s just a guy from my program.”

“He likes you.”

She opened her mouth to deny the claim but then promptly closed it, seeing no reason to lie about something so trivial. “Yes, he does.”

“He’s rather good looking.”

“Would you like me to give you his number?”

Tom brooded for several seconds before releasing her hand. She blinked, feeling bereft of his warmth for a full two seconds before his arm snaked out again and pulled her into his side as he continued to direct her off campus.

“Bloody brat,” he muttered into the wind.

“Are you going to tell me why you’re here, Tom? I thought you said it was dangerous for us to be seen together in public.”

“I don’t have much time and needed to see you.”

She stumbled on the sidewalk, his words jolting her, his arm keeping her steady and vertical.

“What’s happened?”

She almost dreaded hearing the answer.

“I have to leave for Vienna early tomorrow. I have to spend the night preparing.”

She blinked, the blood draining from her face. She twisted in his grip, pulling free and staggering to a stop. Tom glanced back in surprise, she suspected taking him off guard was the only reason she was able to break free.

“What’s happening in Vienna?” her voice sounded strained to her own ears, making her cringe.

Tom fixed her with a steady gaze. “Hermione…”
She reeled back. “No.” she shook her head, continuing her backwards path, nearly tripping over the uneven pavement.

“Hermione stop,” he reached out for her, reflexes fast but she’d been expecting it and twisted her body away, narrowly avoiding his grasp.

“You’re going on another assignment!”

Tom glanced around them, they were attracting a few stares not because of her words but because of the appeal of watching a lover’s quarrel.

“Hermione, calm down!” he whispered sharply.

She swallowed, eyes narrowing. “You told me you wanted out. You said you were tired of this life, and not twenty four hours later you’re going to ki-”

She was cut off abruptly by his hand clamping over her mouth. She turned her face away but his hand followed while his other arm looped around her back, pulling her in close so his head could dip in, lips at her ear. “Hermione, don’t do this here. Do not make a scene. We’ll talk about this at your place-”

“Mhff!” she screamed beneath his palm, biting at his fingers and earning a shocked “Fuck!” before he steeled his reaction, eyes blazing.

“No, Tom!” she spat, mouth free, “you aren’t setting foot in my flat! If you leave for Vienna I’m done! I want nothing to do with you ever again!” She felt tears forming in her eyes and angrily wiped them away with her sleeve, stepping out of his grasp.

She felt eyes upon them but was too enraged and devastated to feel proper embarrassment.

Tom was seething, fists clenched at his sides. She knew the only reason he didn’t reach out to grab her again and drag her away was because of their growing audience.

“Okay…” he said slowly, voice level, she could tell he was trying to change tactics mid fight, it made her more furious.

“No, it’s not okay,” she hissed, making an effort to keep her voice down but refusing to step in closer. “You have a choice to make, Tom. You can come home with me and stay, or you can fly off to god knows where and never see me again.”

Tom swallowed thickly, his adam’s apple bobbing. “I don’t have a fucking choice!” he hissed back.

She crossed her arms, feeling the tremble in her limbs and hating herself for getting so worked up so easily. “You said you wanted out. That was a choice. Or was that a lie? Are you even going to make an effort to stop?”

He laughed, low and deep and cruel. “You have no idea what you’re talking about, Hermione. Not one fucking clue. These aren’t people you turn your back on. I can’t say no, I can’t take a sick day. I do want out, but I can’t announce that to them. If I refuse a job then I forfeit my life.”

She blinked, his image blurring beneath the gleam of tears. She opened her mouth to respond when she noticed a group of women across the street openly watching their exchange, one with her phone out and Hermione’s heart lurched, fearful they were taking video. She glanced back to Tom and shook her head.
“I’m done talking about this. I’ve said all I’ve needed to say. If you leave for Vienna, don’t visit me after. I mean it.”

Tom was taking deep breaths, his chest moving but the rest of his body so still it looked frozen, robotic. But if looks could kill then Hermione would be reduced to a pile of ashes, blowing away in the wind.

His jaw ticked, she sensed he was going to say something truly awful, or he was about to lie, which would be even worse. She shook her head, stepping back further.

“No. There’s nothing more to say. The decision is yours. If you leave then I don’t want to see you ever again.”

She spun on her heel, ducking her head to hide the tears, practically sprinting to the cross walk, to the familiar crowd of people, strangers she could hide amongst. She could only hear the sounds of traffic and the blood rushing in her ears, but she still knew Tom wasn’t following.

The sole occupant on the outdoor terrace at the cafe across the street watched the scene play out in supreme amusement, a steaming cup of coffee in one manicured hand and a cigarette in the other.

The cherry burned brightly on her long inhale. She couldn’t hear them, but their body language spoke volumes. She released the smoke on a deep laugh, watching the girl storm away, trying to hide her tears, Tom staring after her with rage and passion marring his features.

She hummed to herself, eyes bright beneath hooded lids, tracking the girl’s hasty retreat like a cat watching a bird through the window. Her smile gleamed beneath the setting sun.

“Aren’t you just delicious.”
Harry trotted up the spiral staircase with great concentration, a flimsy cardboard cup holder in his hands containing four coffees.

He knew how two of the three people he was meeting took their beverage. He’d had to use his best guess for Luna, using the coffee selection he saw upon yesterday’s visit to the new headquarters as a guide. She’s been the primary resident up until today so he assumed she’d stockpiled the cabinet with her own food and drink preference. He made a mental note to ask the group what kind of snacks they wanted.

And I should get a water cooler.

No, bottled water.

Shite. Take a fucking breath, you haven’t even gotten them all in a room together.

He desperately wanted this to go smoothly. He wanted to prove not only to Dumbledore but also to himself that he was capable of seeing this investigation through to its end, even without the Ministry at his back. And he wanted to prove he was capable of choosing a reliable team based on skill and strategy and not his heart.

True, he’d have a hard time arguing what his true motivations were based on his choice of at least one of his team members, and he’d be lying if he said personal reasons didn’t play any factor, but he also firmly believed his two chosen members added a great deal to the investigation. He was fully prepared to devote himself entirely to making sure they had the resources necessary to find the killer.

When he got to the bleeding red door he hesitated, trying to strategize the best way to slip inside without use of his hands.

“Shite…” he muttered, attempting to balance the tray on his forearm while fishing the key from his back pocket. Once he had it in the lock he remembered how the door stuck in the frame, requiring a bit of muscle to shoulder open. His eyes watched the coffee cups teeter in their holder, holding his breath to delay the inevitable caffeine explosion.

Suddenly the door flew open and Harry fell forward, tipped off balance. His shoulder hit the wall and he felt the coffee disappear from his arm, but to his confusion the cups fell up instead of down.

He steadied himself with his hands braced against the frame and blinked owlishly at the slight figure in front of him, serene smile upon her face and beverage tray in her hands.

“Good morning, Harry. How thoughtful of you to bring drinks. They’ll pair very well with the donuts.”

Harry smiled, a slight blush staining his cheeks from his near face plant. “Thanks, Luna. Good reflexes. Donuts?”
She responded by turning gracefully on her heel, blonde hair swaying behind her as she walked further into the office. Harry shut the door, glaring at the rusty hinges that caused his accident.

“Ah, Harry. Good morning.”

Harry jolted, turning to face the new voice. “Dumbledore. Good morning. I wasn’t expecting you today.”

Dumbledore sat on the corner of one of the desks, his signature smile upon his lips.

“I won’t be staying long, I just wanted to drop by and ensure your team has everything they need to proceed. I thought it might be helpful to be on site for any questions you may have as you find your footing. And I brought donuts.”

Harry blinked, glancing at the bright pastry boxes sitting atop the other desk.

“Oh. Well, thank you.”

“You’re very attentive, Harry,” Luna spoke from behind him. He spun to face her, smiling when he saw she was sipping at her coffee.

“I got it right then?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Bloody hell this place looks murdery.”

Harry straightened at the new voice, hearing it loud and clear from the other side of the door. He shifted nervously and then folded his hands behind his back to prevent himself from fidgeting.

“Bloody thing’s stuck… Christ I just know I’m going to find a pile of bodies inside.”

Harry rolled his eyes, doing his level best to suppress a smirk. Luna continued sipping idly at her drink, eyes resting placidly on the door while Dumbledore remained unmoved.

Finally the door lurched open, hitting the opposite wall and ejecting the new addition across the threshold at a stumbling velocity.

“Wha- what the hell… Hey, Harry.”

Harry smiled. “Hello Sirius. Thank you for joining us.”

“Of course, kiddo. Looks like a real party.”

“Wait until you hear the theme.”

Sirius nodded to Luna, eyes openly curious, but before Harry could introduce them Sirius’s eyes landed on Dumbledore and his posture turned defensive.

“Albus?”

“Hello Sirius. I’m very happy to see you here.”

Sirius raised a dark brow, eyes cutting back to Harry. “And what exactly is going on here?”

Harry opened his mouth to reply but closed it upon hearing new footsteps on the stairs, the sound
traveling easily through the open doorway.

“It seems our last member is arriving,” Luna said brightly.

Harry cringed at the sound of something thudding against the landing below, followed by a string of low curses. The railing began to shake once more as the footsteps resumed. Light brown hair appeared first, followed by a creased pale forehead, and then a set of warm brown eyes wide with confusion.

“Neville?” Sirius asked, turning to face Harry once more. “What’s going on?”

Harry smiled, hands sliding into his trouser pockets.

“Come on in, Nev!” he called out, beckoning the last member of the team forward.

Neville cleared his throat awkwardly. “Er… hello, Harry… Sirius… oh, Dumbledore,” he straightened, cheeks flushing, then his eyes shifted to Luna and the rest of his face soaked in red.

“Well, this is everyone,” Harry said, glancing at each face in turn.

“Fantastic,” Sirius said, watching Dumbledore from the corner of his eye. “Now perhaps someone can tell us what the hell is going on.”

Harry smiled. “Congratulations, you’ve been chosen to hunt down Europe’s most dangerous assassin.”

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**Saturday July 24, 1999**

**Casablanca, Morocco**

“Do you believe in god?”

Tom choked on the tequila in his throat, slamming his shot glass down and coughing loudly into his fist.

“What?”

“God. The man upstairs. Big white beard, billowing robes, lightening bolts.”

Tom raised a dark brow. “I think you’re referring to Zeus.”

His compatriot looked befuddled for a moment before throwing his head back on a laugh.

“Eh, maybe so… but then again, God created all things, including thunder, so I suppose it’s all the same.”

Tom smirked. “Lightening.”

“Huh?”

Tom sighed, shaking his head and waving over the bartender at the opposite end of the bar. “Never mind,” he muttered, gesturing to his empty glass.

“But seriously, you believe?” the man asked, words slurred but eyes steady.
Tom watched the buxom bartender fill both their glasses with amber liquid.

“I’ve never given much thought to Him, He’s never given much thought to me. Seems to work out just fine for us both.”

Tom tipped his second glass back, relishing the trail it burned down his esophagus, the warmth it ignited in the pit of his stomach.

“A heathen. I like it!” the man raised his shot in mock cheers before slamming it down just as quickly.

Tom casually scanned their surroundings, aware that the female bartender was stealing glances his way every few minutes, as well as quite a few women and men scattered around the crowded bar. The celebration was in full swing, the live band setting the dance floor aflame, everyone looking for a warm willing body to grab and grind into. Tom took a deep breath, inhaling a humid cloud of body odor, liquor, and perfume. His eyes watered, senses overwhelmed.

“A heathen with fine taste in art,” Tom said with a silver grin, returning his focus to the man at his side.

“Yes, absolutely! The finest taste in art, an utter genius!” the man shouted exuberantly, eyes glazed and cheeks aflame with drink. He swayed on his feet as he waved the bartender down yet again. She was too eager to comply, eyes already fixated on Tom.

“I know what you’re doing, Travers,” Tom leaned in to speak directly into his companion’s ear, a drum solo taking place on stage not fifty feet away and making the floor rumble with bass. “You’re getting me completely smashed so I’ll buy your entire collection for three times the asking price.”

The bartender filled their glasses a third time, winking at Tom and sashaying away. Travers burst into a wild fit of laughter, nearly knocking their drinks over in the process. Tom laughed along beside him, honed reflexes catching the man’s elbow before he made contact with the glass.

“Christ, I wish I’d have thought of that! Bloody brilliant plan!” Travers shouted over the music, a grin splitting his face. “But alas, my only motivation was to get hammered myself! Of course, if you’d like to make a generous offer, I’m all ears!”

Tom smiled in reply, picking up and handing the new shot to Travers and clinking his own glass against his. “Fine by me! Let’s go take a look after this drink.”

Travers blinked, hesitating with the liquid at his lips. Tom watched him carefully over the rim of his own glass. “Wait… seriously? Tonight?”

Tom smiled, setting his empty glass on the counter. “Why the bloody hell not?”

Travers laughed, shaking his head and downing his liquor before clapping Tom on the back. “I was just fucking with you, mate! Tonight we drink, tomorrow we discuss business!”

The band was finally winding down the song, their surroundings less deafening during the interlude. Tom made a show of glancing around the bar. “I’ve had my fill for the night, you’re more interesting company than anyone else I see here.”

Travers pinned him with a disbelieving look. “Are you kidding, mate? Every bird and half the blokes in this place have been eye fucking you since we arrived!”

Tom laughed. “I’m not looking for that kind of evening. All I want to spend money on tonight are
paintings.”

Travers nearly fell over laughing. “I don’t blame you! Impossible to tell which ones are working girls. Though I suppose we all end up paying for sex one way or another in the end, don’t we?”

Tom smirked. “You become very philosophical when you drink. I envy that. Now let’s close our tab and head over to your fucking gallery.”

The band started playing again, drowning out whatever reply the man delivered. Tom leaned in closer to hear and Travers placed a hand on his waist, pulling him in. Tom blinked but quickly hid the surprise behind the mask he’d been wearing most of the night.

*Interesting. I can work with this.*

“Are you sure you want to head over tonight? It’s nearly midnight!” Travers shouted by Tom’s ear, barely audible over the music.

Tom placed a hand on Traver’s shoulder, giving it a light squeeze. “Let’s get the fuck out of here!”

Tom pulled back to see the excitement steal across the man’s features, though Travers quickly tried to hide it beneath an air of indifference, shrugging slightly as though he didn’t care either way. Tom closed out their tab and led the way out of the crowded bar, exiting through the back alley.

They staggered and laughed their way through the streets to Travers’ art gallery near the cathedral. Tom had a high tolerance for alcohol and felt only a light buzz, acting far more affected than he was. Still, at this rate Travers was likely to walk off most of his buzz as well. Finally they arrived, Travers unlocked the accordion gate and pushed open the ornate door to the gallery, punching in a code to disable the alarm as they entered.

The studio was small but well stocked, a vast assortment of style and media adorning the walls from ceiling to floor. Travers locked up behind them and then turned on the lights. He kept stealing looks at Tom over his shoulder, suddenly seeming nervous, and began rambling about the art on display.

Tom mostly tuned him out, though he followed along beside him and gazed upon the various pieces. His mind wandered to the many trips to the V&A in his youth. Hermione loved that museum more than any other place on earth. Hermione loved that museum more than any other place on earth. Hermione loved that museum more than any other place on earth. She’d spend hours studying the paintings, the sculptures, the textiles, and he’d spent hours studying the wonder on her face. The priceless treasures and artifacts paled in comparison to the beauty that lit her expression when she was well and truly happy.

It’d been two and a half years since he’d seen her.

It felt like another lifetime.

His fists clenched at his side, willing the images of her face, her smile, her laugh, back into the far corners of his mind.

*Don’t bring her here. She doesn’t belong here. Seeing this. She’d be so ashamed. Don’t let her see.*

He heard her voice far less frequently than he used to. And she always sounded so resigned, so disappointed, he stopped trying to channel her, to reason with her. Sometimes the silence was better.

“... a local dealer, but I never could stomach the man. Really you’re better off with something from-”

“This one looks familiar,” Tom interrupted, eyes fixed on a large painting in front of them. He wasn’t sure why the artwork spoke to him, but it pulled at some far memory, some strong sense of *déjà vu*
that he couldn’t shake no matter how he tilted his head.

“Oh, that one’s from my private collection,” Travers said, rubbing the back of his neck.

Tom blinked, glancing at him. “You painted it?”

Travers swallowed. “Um… yeah. It was a private commission when I first got out of art school. I got it back about a year ago.”

Tom raised a brow. “Got it back?”

Travers eyes took on a sad quality, fixed on the painting as they were.

“Um… the person I created it for… died.”

Tom tilted his head, now studying Travers. “A lover?”

Travers blinked, body jolting as he turned to face Tom. “Um… yeah.”

Tom nodded, looking back at the artwork, the sense of familiarity not fading. “I’m sorry.”

Travers shuffled his feet, a bit clumsily, no doubt from the lingering effects of tequila.

“We weren’t… I mean it wasn’t… it was a secret. Our relationship. He didn’t want others finding out, his reputation was pretty… he was in politics. It would have been… complicated if word got out. So he asked me to paint him something he could look at each day and think of me, even if I couldn’t be there with him.”

Tom absorbed his words, staring at the bright patches of color and fluid lines, an abstract painting to be sure. This was what Travers painted when he thought about his lover. He wondered what kind of emotion he wanted to draw out of his partner when he gazed upon it each day. Longing? Desire? Sadness? Anger? Did Travers resent being kept a secret, being remanded into hiding? Or did he find the prospect exciting, a forbidden romance?

Tom swallowed heavily, eyes transfixed upon the canvas. He wondered what kind of painting Hermione would have made for him. The thought was so ludicrous it almost made him smile, if the surrounding mood wasn’t so somber. He could only imagine her reaction if he asked her to paint him something to remember her by. She’d have fallen out of her chair in shock.

*I’d have fallen over with laughter, you mean.*

He closed his eyes, savoring the interruption of her voice, soft and distant, but definitely there, buried deep within his mind.

*What would you have wanted to see more, Tom, my finished work, or the act of creation?*

He swallowed, picturing her kneeling on the grass, a blanket spread out before her with a blank canvas in its center, paint pots and brushes scattered along the edge, sunlight glinting off her hair and a look of determined concentration upon her face. The derived image stirred such a sense of longing he nearly staggered on his feet.

“You ever been in love?”

The question caught Tom so off guard it shattered the serene image, Hermione falling from his mind’s eye in pieces, each shard wedging into his heart.
Tom blinked, silently collecting himself. He opened his mouth to spin a clever lie and further his ruse but his tongue wouldn’t cooperate. “Yes.”

“What happened?”

The tequila must have been affecting Tom more than he realized, because he continued to speak without a filter. “I lost her.”

Travers’ face fell. “Did she…?”

“She didn’t die.” Tom shook his head, tearing his eyes away from the painting. “I did.”

Travers raised a curious brow but didn’t ask questions, his expression turning nervous once more as Tom directed the intensity of his focus upon him. Tom tucked his hands in his pockets and closed the distance between them.

“I’m still not over him,” Travers said suddenly, swallowing.

Tom didn’t blink, coming to a stop a few inches away. “I’m not over her.”

Travers searched Tom’s gaze for a moment, seeming to recognize whatever lay in its depths. “It sucks, doesn’t it?”

Tom nodded. “Yes, it does.”

The silence stretched out and Travers rubbed the back of his neck. He glanced to the painting again, a tribute to a dead love, with a stricken look. At that moment something in Tom’s memory clicked, he wasn’t sure what had triggered it, but he knew with certainty why he recognized the artwork. He’d seen it before.

Were you the one holding the camera? A hidden love he couldn’t allow to appear within the frame? Or did you come after the pictures? The reason he finally settled in one location, the reason I was able to finally track him...

Tom swallowed, mind racing but heart rate steady. He always felt a strange wave of calm settle into his bones before a hit, but it wasn’t any sort of peaceful serenity. It was the cold stillness of death, his new mistress coming to wrap herself around him, intertwine her hollow bones with his, directing his limbs in a lover’s dance of blood and destruction.

Travers inhaled sharply, glancing at Tom in embarrassment, tears filling his eyes. He wiped at them with reddened cheeks, laughing sheepishly. “Christ. I can’t believe I’m doing this…” he swallowed thickly. “I just haven’t talked about Jon in so long… since no one knew about us, I never really got to… ah fuck, why am I still talking? I need to shut up.”

He continued to laugh without humor, tears still flowing. Tom studied him like he did the painting, looking past the obvious to discover some hidden depth, some inner meaning.

He’s not looped into the same shit his lover was. He’s not the type. I’d be able to tell a mile off. He doesn’t even have private security...

But it’s got to be connected. He must have seen or heard something he shouldn’t have.

Poor fool.

Tom continued to study his mark without emotion until Travers managed to reign in his emotions.
enough to blink without tears falling.

“Really, I’m very sorry about that. You came to buy artwork, not to keep company with a watering pot.”

Tom smiled, shaking his head. “Please, don’t be embarrassed. And if it makes you feel any better I didn’t come here with any intention of buying artwork.”

Travers jolted, a brick red blush staining his cheeks and traveling down his pale neck. He opened and closed his mouth a few times, pupils expanding and constricting, eyes darting down Tom’s broad frame and then back to his eyes.

“I… I thought maybe… well I’d hoped…” he stopped to clear his throat, fidgeting where he stood. “I hoped maybe you were interested, but I didn’t want to-”

“I’m sorry, William, I didn’t come here for that either. Please don’t be offended, you’re very attractive and I enjoyed your company, but I’m not interested in men. And as I stated a moment before, my thoughts are still consumed by another.”

Travers blinked for several moments, eyes comically large. “Oh…” he finally seemed to settle on. “I… ok.”

Tom sighed, tilting his head sympathetically to deliver the bad news.

“Unfortunately, I’m here to kill you.”
The man beside him choked loudly on his own breath, slumping into Tom’s side.

Tom sighed deeply, eyes closing. Green had decided to further punish him by making him fly coach. The flight wasn’t long but it was more about exercising control than anything else. Green was letting him know he controlled every last detail in Tom’s life and could pave his way with shit just as easily as gold.

Tom thought back to the other times when Green flexed his muscle, showing Tom just how uncomfortable he could make things for his young charge. Of course Tom had usually done things to provoke his handler, and usually with the sole purpose of provoking him. Tom always liked to test limits, push boundaries, see how far he could stretch the line before it snapped.

The only reason he’d worked with partners in the past was as a form of punishment. Green tried to frame it as skill development, learning to leverage the abilities of others, play off their strengths in the field. But really it was to show Tom just how awful things could get if he didn’t play by the rules.

Of course Green knew saddling Tom with a partner was a sure fire way to torture him. Tom detested most people and hated having to rely on anyone for anything, least of all when it came to life and death situations. It was a test in patience and resolve, and always ended with Tom’s chosen partner detesting him with a passion. He wasn’t exaggerating. Every partner he’d worked with had tried to kill him. The first had held a knife to his throat after breaking into his hotel room one night, the second had tried to shoot him in the hotel lobby after returning from a mission, the third had tried to bludgeon him during the mission. Tom just had a certain effect on people he supposed.

Still, if he had to be saddled with one of his past partners he’d take either of the second two idiots over the first. Tom scowled, wondering how sadistic of a mood Green was in.

What a sad state of affairs when I’m actually hoping for either Rabastan or Rodolphus’s company. Anyone but-

Don’t think about her. She’s an infection, if you give her room to spawn she’ll overtake your thoughts.

But it was too late. He’d entered the realm of the forbidden and saw her dark gaze upon him. Her painted red lips formed a wicked smirk, setting his blood to boil.

The errant toddler kicked his seat once more, to Tom’s great relief, and the visage of her face dissipated like black smoke in the sky.

Harry leaned against the desk facing the window, gazing into the busy street below.

Neville and Sirius had claimed the main desks, Neville by necessity and Sirius by seniority. And necessity, joking that his knees hurt and the young ones could afford to stand. It was easy enough pulling extra chairs to the other side of the desks, Harry automatically shared his space with Sirius, not giving much thought to the action as he’d spent the entirety of his career working alongside the man.

This left Luna to sidle up to Neville’s desk, which also happened to be the desk she was using during her weeks of solo research. She didn’t seem fazed by the new additions, or by sharing her workspace with the perpetually nervous man.

Neville on the other hand hadn’t looked directly at Luna since he first walked in and was introduced
to her. His blush hadn’t fully faded since shaking her hand and Harry wondered if his friend acted this way around all women or if it was just Luna in particular. He realized he’d never spent much time socializing with Neville outside of work, and on the few instances he could recall they’d grabbed a drink at a local pub to watch the local football match among mostly male friends. He was suddenly incredibly curious what Neville’s dating life was like, but spared those thoughts for later, his current concern the delegation of tasks.

Dumbledore had left shortly after Harry had made introductions, for Luna’s sake, and explained the purpose of their assignment. Sirius’s agreement to help had been a foregone conclusion for Harry, never once thinking his mentor would turn his back on a case even after losing his job, his tenacity much like Harry’s own driving instinct. Luna was obviously already on board and invested, so really the only wild card was Neville. The thought of Neville being associated with anything wild made Harry smirk.

Truth be told Harry hadn’t hesitated in selecting his former boss and mentor and his longtime associate and friend. He believed in both their abilities whole-heartedly because he’d seen them both in action first hand. Sirius was a successful, decorated Senior Intelligence Officer who would have not only the skills Harry needed to continue this investigation but many useful connections and resources throughout Europe.

And Neville was the most skilled technology specialist he’d ever met, his talents completely wasted at the Ministry. Neville had been put on electronic filing and coding detail when he could single handedly hack the Pentagon. It baffled Harry why Neville’s skill set was so undervalued but he suspected it had something to do with his mother.

Alice Longbottom was a skilled Senior Agent as well, working alongside Sirius and Harry’s own father for a time. Her husband Frank was also an agent, killed during a mission when Neville was just a babe. She’d been fiercely protective of her only child ever since, and Harry suspected her desire to shield him had greatly inhibited his career. He went through training the same time as Harry but had yet to complete the field hours necessary to serve as an Officer.

But his lack of experience in no way impeded his computer skills. If anything it gave Neville more time to hone his abilities. And Harry knew his friend was dying to work on something with more meat, something he could get excited about. Harry hoped this case would meet that criteria and that Alice wouldn’t catch wind and intercept. He’d been purposely vague on the phone with both Nev and Sirius, it was a good rule of thumb to keep certain details off the wires, but he also wanted the chance to get both men in front of the work to really spike their interest.

But now that both men were on board Harry feared his biggest hurdle would be maintaining leadership on the project with Sirius at his side. He’d so long reported into his mentor, considered him a substitute father, that he was having trouble wrapping his head around the fact that Sirius now reported to him.

Dumbledore had made it clear before departing that he was merely funding the private investigation, Harry was the de facto leader and the group should refer to him for guidance while privately reminding Harry that he could come to him anytime regarding the case.

The last hour had been spent bringing everyone up to speed and settling in to the new work space, determining what restaurants were nearby (Sirius), what kind of internet speed the building was wired with (Neville), which local bar had a big screen (Sirius) and whether the building’s other occupants were freak shows or smugglers (also Sirius) to which Luna assured them she’d met the majority of residents, including marionette man, and insisted they were all “lovely and fascinating characters”, to which Harry and Sirius exchanged amused looks while Neville continued to
studiously avoid her gaze.

Now things had quieted down, Neville was in his element, focused on a computer screen, his eyes reflecting the monitor light like an otherworldly being. Sirius leaned back in his chair, thumbing through the case files Luna had compiled of possibly related murders, and Luna herself was working on something that looked suspiciously like an arts and crafts project, scissors in one hand and tape in the other, snippets of articles and photos spread across a poster board.

It was quite interesting seeing her work style. She was obviously a very visual person, opting to create her own graphics when none were available. Harry would have to modify his approach to incorporate her preferences.

He turned his focus back to the window, watching people pile up along the crosswalk, waiting for the light to turn. He watched them bustle about with detachment, half his mind reliving everything he’d experienced since Sunday.

He needed to get a foothold somewhere, find some lead to pull, a trail to follow…

_Narcissa was my best bet. And they knew it, so they had her killed._

Whoever _they_ were. But there was most certainly a _they_. The person responsible for the Malfoy murders, and Harry was certain it was the same person, was not killing for their own amusement. At least not entirely. They were a paid gun, or a knife in this case. And finding them would certainly lead to some bigger organization, perhaps even more assassins.

So very much was riding on this investigation, it made Harry’s head spin.

_Focus. Start small, work your way out. What do you have to work with now that Narcissa’s gone?_

He sighed deeply.

_Nothing. Her testimony would surely have been a smoking gun. If only she’d been sober enough to…_

Harry paused, rewinding his memory to the brief encounters he’d had with her. His mind wanted to go straight to her death, the blood, the panic, he had to forcibly push the memory down and dig for his earlier interactions.

_In the interview room, when she started talking about the demon. Wait, no, she didn’t call it a demon then. What the hell did she call it?_

_A snake._

_A snake…_

He pictured a live, slithering serpent winding across the floor, twisting around his ankles. The image sparked another memory, of overseeing her hospital transport…

“Fuck.”

“What was that?” Sirius glanced up from the papers in his hands.

Harry blinked, rubbing at his face. “Shit, sorry, didn’t mean to curse.”

“Please don’t apologize on my account,” Luna said sweetly, eyes still on her work. “I don’t mind. My favorite swear word is munter. I’m not quite sure what it means but it’s very fun to say.”
Harry opened and closed his mouth, unsure how to respond.

Sirius grinned from ear to ear. “Christ, I like her.”

Harry’s train of thought grabbed the track once more and he spun to face the others. “Narcissa mentioned something to me during her interview and again during her transport. I’d nearly forgotten about it in the mess that followed…”

Luna placed her scissors down and focused on Harry, eyes neutral. He focused on her because he sensed Neville and Sirius gazing at him with sympathy in their eyes upon his reminder of the bloody murder he’d witnessed.

“She referred to the killer as a snake,” he continued, “but then she mentioned a girl. Said the snake got the girl, too.”

The room fell silent in the wake of his comment, until finally Sirius spoke up. “There were no other victims on site.”

“Maybe he led a second victim to another location. I can pull reports on related homicides in London since Saturday night,” Neville offered.

“Maybe she wasn’t referring to another murder,” Luna said, attracting Harry’s attention. “Maybe she was using symbolism to describe the killers encounter with her husband and another witness.”

Harry’s eyes lit, he enjoyed brainstorming out loud and Luna was proving to be a good sounding board with her own ideas.

“A second witness…” Harry repeated out loud.

“If that were the case wouldn’t they have come forward?” Neville asked.

Harry’s eyes narrowed, staring at the discarded pastry boxes but not really seeing them. “It depends. If there was another witness maybe they got scared and ran, maybe they’re afraid to come forward. Or maybe the killer really did get to them. Either way it’s only speculation. We won’t know for sure until we talk to everyone in attendance.”

Sirius paled. “Fucking hell, Harry, you want us to talk to each sodding guest?”

“And every employee. And please, language.”

“The pretty bird doesn’t mind.”

“Her name is Luna.”

“I don’t mind being called a pretty bird.”

Harry sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Fine, everyone say whatever the fuck you want to say, just keep in mind we don’t have an HR department to lodge complaints with and I don’t want to fucking hear it.”


“Ron and I compiled a list of everyone on the guest list and the staff working the event,” Neville spoke up.

Harry nodded, ignoring the sudden guilt that hit him at hearing his other friend’s name. Ron was
literally the only person left of their immediate team once Harry and Sirius left, so he’d been transferred to the same unit Dean worked in. Harry felt responsible for what happened to both Ron and Sirius, but Ron was still gainfully employed and Harry didn’t want to jeopardize that by tapping him for this investigation. Unlike Neville, Ron’s career was on an upward trajectory, pulling him into this would only be a conflict of interest and Harry would never put him in that position.

But that meant lying to Ron via omission, he couldn’t allow his friend to know about the private investigation and risk it getting back to Crouch, or anyone else at the Ministry. Ron was trustworthy but also a bit chatty when nervous or in his cups and information tended to pass his lips unintentionally. The last thing Harry needed was for Dumbledore’s privately funded project to be shut down before it had a chance to get off the ground.

“That’s great, Nev. Could you work with Luna to create a physical list we can post to the wall? It’ll be easier to assign the names out in groups and visualize who we’ve got left to speak with.”

Neville visibly swallowed, nodding shallowly and keeping his eyes firmly fixed to Harry’s collar, ignoring Luna’s smiling glance.

Bloody hell, Nev. I’m going to have to say something to him, I don’t know how he’s going to get any work done when he can’t even breathe within ten feet of her.

“We need to prioritize that list,” Sirius groaned, flipping his pen end over end and catching it again. “It’s going to take forever to speak with everyone even if we all participate in interviews. And the longer it takes the more people will forget, or create new memories of that night to share.”

Harry nodded, grateful for Sirius’s presence. In the hour since the team was formed they’d managed to avoid stepping on each other’s toes despite the shift in power. But Sirius still spoke with an air of authority that Harry instinctively yielded to after years seeking the man’s counsel.

The new dynamic would be tricky but Harry believed without a shadow of a doubt Sirius supported and would do his best to follow Harry’s leadership. They just had to get used to Harry holding the reins.

“Should we also run a list for St. Mungo’s?” Luna’s melodic voice rang through Harry’s head like a bell, alerting him to something… something at the edge of his thoughts, at the far recesses of his memory… he tipped back in his chair, balancing on the back two legs as he tried to capture the elusive feeling.

“There weren’t any witnesses there, luv,” Sirius said, tapping the pen against his thigh. “Except our Harry here. The nurse on scene was already interviewed a dozen times over, she didn’t see a thing. Neither did Remus.”

Luna blinked her large doe eyes, tipping her head and examining Sirius from an angle. “Surely the perpetrator had to enter and exit the building somehow. He may have passed someone on the way, even if he was in disguise—” she stopped short on the sound of Harry toppling to the floor, losing balance as he tipped back too far.

“Nice, kid. You alright?”

Harry ignored Sirius, scrambling to his feet with a wild look in eyes. “Holy fuck!”

“You really threw the language bit out the window, huh?”

Harry shook his head. “Luna’s right, there is a list, a short list. I can’t believe I forgot. That night was so…” he trailed off, shaking his head again. “With everything that happened and then getting
chucked right after I forgot that there was someone else on the floor that night. A janitor. He was there minutes before... he…” Harry swallowed, eyes losing focus.

“Heard?” Sirius prompted. “He what?”

Luna was already leaning forward in her chair, attention rapt, seeming to recognize the spark in Harry’s emerald gaze.

“Christ… I think…” Harry inhaled sharply. “I think I met the killer.”

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**Saturday July 24, 1999**

**Casablanca, Morocco**

To his credit, Travers took the news of his impending demise quite well. He didn’t sputter or flee, didn’t put up a fight or beg for mercy. Instead he laughed.

And laughed and laughed and laughed.

He laughed so hard it became contagious and Tom found himself chuckling along, the tequila still singing through his veins.

“Oh! That’s… that’s bloody brilliant, mate! ‘Kill me’! Fucking hell, I didn’t see that one coming!” he gasped through spent laughter.

Tom shook his head with a broad grin. “They never do.”

Travers exploded further, grabbing his side and staggering.

“I must say,” Tom smirked, “you’re handling the news terribly well.”

Travers nearly choked on his tongue, eyes tearing anew with uncontrollable mirth. “I suppose I should start running, huh? Get a head start?”

“It wouldn’t make a difference.” Tom laughed, eyes fixed on his prey. “It certainly didn’t for Avery.”

Travers made a choking sound somewhere between a gasp and a laugh, his expression flipping like a switch to abject shock. “What did you just say?”

Tom’s grin sharpened. “I said the head start I gave Avery made no difference. Of course he didn’t use his to run, he used it to get his gun out of the desk drawer. Obviously I’d already combed the house and removed the magazine. Regardless, he seemed to be a man of leisure, I doubt he would have made it far even if he made a run for it.”

Travers blinked rapidly, backing away and bumping the wall, knocking a painting askew. “What? Why are you saying these things? That’s… that’s awful to say… you need to leave.”

Tom stood at his full height, tucking his hands in his pockets once more. “Now you’re having a much more typical reaction. A shame, I was looking forward to the change in pace.”

Travers shook his head frantically. “Get out!”

Then he started looking around the studio, eyes wide and frantic, muscles tensed to run.
Like out of the killing handbook…

Tom sighed, his earlier mirth replaced by boredom. “I guarantee that whatever escape plan you’re about to execute will be a waste of energy. You’re better off trying to talk your way out of this versus trying to outrun or overpower me.”

Travers swallowed heavily, eyes flickering across every surface of the studio and back to Tom so quickly Tom was shocked he didn’t have vertigo.

“Please… please just stop, please just leave!”

“You’ve already asked me to leave, obviously that tactic isn’t working for you. Try another.”

“Why are you doing this? Who are you?”

Tom glanced casually at the painting Travers created. “I’m the man who killed your lover and was sent to kill you. My first name really is Tom. With all the lies I usually have to memorize I find it easier to keep my first name.” He faced Travers again, noting the pale clamminess of his target’s skin. He already looked dead.

“You killed Jonathan?” he whispered, tears tracking down his face once more.

“I did indeed.”

A choked sob tore from Travers mouth before he was able to stifle it. Tom sighed, fighting the urge to roll his eyes.

“Did… did you torture him?”

Tom blinked, taken off guard by the question. “No. I didn’t. I don’t torture. Well, not usually.” He stopped himself before he got lost on an alcohol-induced tangent. “Did no one tell you how he died? No, I suppose his bosses covered it all up before the truth made its way to you. I shot him. In the head. A clean, painless kill. Well, I had to hit him over the head to get him tied up, but head wounds bleed more than they hurt. I assure you, it was a much more merciful death than what he offered his victims.”

Travers was wracked with shuddering sobs throughout Tom’s recount of events but he fell silent at the end. He looked up with obvious confusion in his bloodshot eyes.

“Didn’t you know?” Tom asked, tipping his head. “I admit I can’t picture someone like you warming up to a killer. I mean look at how you’re reacting to me.”

Travers shook his head. “You’re lying. Jonathan would never…”

Tom raised a dark brow. “Did you know about the heroin? The human trafficking? The kidnapping and extortion? Or did you think he was a very successful travel agent?”

Travers opened and closed his mouth, tipping into the wall to catch his balance.

“Oh. You did think he was a travel agent…”

“H-He worked for the Embassy, h-his platform was-”

“World peace? War on drugs and human rights violations?”

Travers continued to stare numbly, arms shaking where they braced his weight against the wall.
“Avery was a very dangerous man that went to any lengths to get what he wanted, those who opposed him often ended up badly beaten and maimed, though their loved ones were subjected to much worse. I am sure he whispered sweet nothings in your ear and took you on exotic vacations with five star accommodations, but if you weren’t utterly terrified of the man I promise you didn’t know the real Jonathan Avery.”

Travers let out a shuddering breath; expression frozen in abject horror, though Tom wasn’t sure the cause; the threat Tom represented or the truth he’d just revealed.

“I dare say you were lucky to not have known the truth, as you’d have been deeply traumatized long before I came along. However you obviously know something you shouldn’t, otherwise I wouldn’t be here.”

Travers shook his head, swallowing weakly. “I- I don’t know anything, I swear!”

Tom nodded, taking a casual step closer and causing Travers entire body to jolt. “I believe you. But unfortunately I’m not the person you need to convince.”

Travers went back to looking around the room, eyes fixing on the door across the long stretch of hardwood.

“You’ll never make it,” Tom said, glancing to the door as well. “You’re only chance of getting out of here alive is if I let you do so.”

Travers breathed heavily as though he’d already started running. “Are you going to shoot me?”

Tom made a show of patting himself down. “Seems I’ve left my gun at the hotel…”

“He stopped short at Tom’s abrupt laugh. “Christ! Maybe you and Avery were a perfect match.”

Travers blinked, pressing flat against the wall as though hoping to move through it.

Tom shook his head. “Fuck. That was rude. My apologies. I’m a bit tipsy. I hadn’t planned on drinking, but as I said before, I honestly did enjoy your company. Especially after the target I had last week. Fucking hell, I can’t describe to you how terrible that woman was. A human sized toad with lipstick. Literally summarizes the entire experience.”

Tom started to slide slowly along the wall, tipping canvases and frames as he progressed.

“I’m rambling. What I meant to say is that I had planned on letting you live, so I suggest you stop trying to sneak off before you piss me off and I change my mind.”

Travers froze, standing so still he didn’t appear to be breathing.

“Good lad.” Tom strolled over to a raised pedestal with a sculpture illuminated by lights. “The plan was to strangle you and then set the gallery on fire with your corpse inside. I needed to make smoke inhalation look like the cause of death so I was to avoid using weapons. However, seeing as the only remains to be found will be charred bones, that leaves us a bit of room to work within.”

He tilted his head, trying to determine what the sculpture was. From one angle it looked like a couple embracing, from another it looked like a sailboat.

Huh.
Reminds me of cloud gazing, I’d see a circle and she’d see the Last Supper, dinner plates and all...

Tom swallowed, pushing the thought aside. He turned to face the room’s other occupant. “I’d have to dump another body in here, a man roughly the same size, the local authorities will write it off as accidental death caused by an electrical fire as long as there’s no strong evidence that says otherwise.”

Travers’ shoulders shook. “H-How would you get another body?”

Tom shrugged one shoulder. “I’m quite sure we passed at least two dead bums on the way from the bar.”

Travers continued to stare in horror. “You’d really let me go?”

“That’s the way I’m currently leaning.”

“W-why?”

Tom rolled his eyes. “Why do people always ask me that?”

Another whimper sounded and Tom sighed. “That was meant to be a joke. I don’t know why, William. Maybe I feel bad because I killed your homicidal lover, maybe I just really like your painting and am a patron of the arts. Or perhaps I’m just drunk.”

*Or maybe I’m willing to go to desperate measures to hear her voice inside my head again.*

“But my actions don’t matter nearly as much as yours will. You see, if I let you live, then by all intents purposes you must still appear dead. That means come sunrise William Travers is dead, burnt to a crisp in his art gallery in Morocco, and the man who lives within your skin must assume an entirely new identity until his actual dying day. If word gets out that Travers is alive my organization will send someone else to kill you, someone who isn’t a patron of the arts with an affinity for tequila. Do you understand?”

Travers swallowed heavily and nodded. Tom grinned.

“Excellent. Then we should get to work. Oh, and before I forget, I’d like to purchase your painting prior to setting this place ablaze. It’s perfect for the den.”

Wednesday July 13, 2005

Hermione pulled another shirt from her closet with excess gusto, causing the neck to stretch out where the fabric became caught on the hanger.

“Dammit!”

She huffed a frustrated breath, tugging the top free and then holding it up to the light to get a better view.

“Ugh! I never have anything nice to wear!”

She threw the shirt to the ground, on top of the steadily growing pile of discarded garments. She’d been at this for the last hour, tearing through her closet and drawers for an appropriate outfit for her meeting with the grant donor later today.

Nothing worked. Nothing looked nice enough. Her wardrobe was cheap and plain and there was no
way she was going to impress the donor anyway so why bother going it wasn’t like she deserved the grant she didn’t deserve anything good she was an awful person with awful clothes and an awful life and it was never going to change-

Hermione blinked.

Jesus. Get a grip.

She ran her hands through her hair, briefly digging her nails into her scalp in frustration before running her fingers through the tangled curls.

I need to shower, do my hair, my makeup, my nails are wretched but I don’t have time to polish them. But what do my nails matter when I’m sitting across the table in torn jeans or sweatpants…

You aren’t having a melt down over your clothes and you know it.

I don’t have time for this. I’ve been arguing with myself since last night, now it’s time to actually get off my ass and solve the problem.

And which problem would that be, princess?

The outfit problem, you dumb cow. Call Padma and ask to borrow something nice.

Like you could fit into any of her clothes. You barely squeezed into Parv’s uniform-

The outfit I wore the night Tom murdered-

Stop it! Call Padma now!

Fucking hell I’m losing my bloody mind.

“I got it, Harry!” Neville yelled, eyes bright and face flushed with excitement.

His abrupt outburst made Luna jump and knock a stack of papers to the ground. Neville looked mortified, apologizing profusely and bumping his head on the table when he leaned down to help her pick them up.

Harry couldn’t help but smile, not at his friend’s clumsiness but at his obvious enthusiasm for the work. Barely two hours into the investigation and Neville looked more invested and excited than Harry could ever remember seeing him at the Ministry.

Harry bent down to help pick up the last couple papers. Sirius watched the scene play out from across the room with supreme amusement. Harry sent him a warning glance, a silent command to keep his jabs to himself, Neville was finally thriving and Harry didn’t want to taint the environment with anything that would hurt his self-esteem, even if the jokes were meant good naturedly. Sirius rolled his eyes but returned his focus to the files spread across their shared desk.

Luna thanked the boys for their help and continued her path to the evidence wall without her smile wavering once. She always seemed to be in a good mood, much like Dumbledore, but unlike the senior agent Harry didn’t find her company unnerving.

Luna seemed perpetually at peace even when researching the grisly details of a homicide case. Despite the initial oddness it was easy to relax in her presence because he could tell she was genuine. However Dumbledore’s constant cheer seemed to be masking something beneath the surface that Harry could only glimpse when the man wasn’t on guard, which he nearly always was. Harry
supposed you couldn’t get to be in Dumbledore’s position without learning to hide your true self beneath several layers of protection, but it was still frustrating talking to a version of someone instead of the real thing.

Neville was still blushing when Harry pulled up a chair beside him.

*I’ll have to spend some one on one time with Nev, help build his confidence…*

It was odd to think in terms of a leader, especially since Harry’s main objective was to solve the case, not to develop his reports. But Harry figured a stronger team meant a faster breakthrough. Also it was painfully evident Neville had been sequestered in the bowels of the Ministry for far too long, denied a strong mentor like Harry had. Neville was finally able to develop and Harry felt responsible for helping guide him.

“What have you got, Nev?”

Nev cleared his throat awkwardly. “I, uh, I got the employment records for Mungo’s custodial staff. They have pictures attached to the employee files, so we can scroll through and see if your guy was really a janitor or not.”

Harry swallowed heavily. “Moment of truth.”

Harry glanced up when he sensed movement. Sirius was pinning him with an intense look, Luna had also turned around to stare at the back of the computer. Everyone was deeply invested in this potentially monumental piece of evidence.

Neville’s hand trembled slightly on the mouse as he brought up the pictures, obviously equally nervous about the outcome.

“Okay, here’s the first employee, they go in alphabetical order. I’ll just click through, let me know if you want me to slow down or go back or—”

“Thanks, Nev. Go ahead.”

Harry licked his lips, sitting on the very edge of his seat, pupils dilated as he examined the first employee photo. Not a match. The second face wasn’t even close. The third was an entirely different race. The fourth caused Harry’s heart to jolt upon seeing a man of similar build with thick dark hair, but upon second glance he realized the face was too long, the nose too crooked. And so on it went, Neville scrolling through the photos at three second intervals, the room filled with a deathly silence except for the faithful click of the mouse and the rapid thumping of Harry’s heart. He was certain the others could hear it, too.

“That’s it.”

Harry blinked upon Neville’s words, glancing at him with a wild gleam in his eyes. “You’re certain? You found everyone?”

“Everyone currently on the payroll. Unless they fired him and removed him from the system between Sunday night and today, but that’s highly unlikely.”

Harry sucked in a deep breath, a tremor of adrenaline rushing through his system.

“Harry?” Sirius asked carefully. “Are you telling me you came face to face with the killer in the bloody men’s room?”
Harry felt his entire body tense in anticipation, he wanted to run and give chase this very moment, his instincts in overdrive. “I bumped into him. Literally knocked shoulders. He was right there… the entire time, he was right there.”

Harry glanced at each of them, desperate to express the magnitude of this moment, the importance of what this meant. Neville looked terrified, as though the thought of touching a killer was the same as swimming with sharks. Sirius wore a mixture of messages Harry could easily distinguish after years of watching emotions play across the man’s face. The main two were anger and worry, no doubt imaging how Sunday night may have played out had Harry confronted the killer directly.

Then Harry looked to Luna and saw the excited gleam in her blue eyes, the triumphant exhilaration that he knew matched his own. She understood what Harry was feeling because she felt it, too. It was a simple message with infinite meaning.

We’ve got you now, you son of a bitch.

Harry locked gazes with her for another beat before Sirius spoke and pulled him out of his momentary lapse in reality.

“Do you remember what he looks like?”

Harry nodded. “Every detail.”

“Good. We’ll pair you with a sketch artist, I’ll make a call.”

“I can draw the killer.”

Three heads swiveled to gaze upon the slight blonde, still standing in front of the evidence wall, pictures of bloody crime scenes and bloodless corpses surrounding her like a halo of death.

“You’re an artist?” Sirius asked, dark brow touching his hairline in skepticism.

Luna tilted her head and returned his gaze. “My official title is Intelligence Officer, however my skill set covers many different specialties. I’ve assisted with the sketch unit on occasion. I think it prudent for me to attempt the drawing first as it will save time and keep outside involvement to a minimum.”

Sirius blinked. “Uh… yeah, ok.”

Harry felt a swell of excitement split his face in half, the grin hurting his cheeks. “You’re a dream, Luna. Do you have a sketchpad?”

Monday July 26, 1999

“This is lovely.”

“If you say so.”

“You could try to make an effort, Tom.”

“Hmm. Splendid weather we’re having.”

“I appreciate the thought. It must have been difficult returning to London after spending the weekend in Morocco.”

“Indeed. I may take an actual holiday there sometime.”
“Sounds like the country left quite the impression on you.”

Tom shrugged one shoulder. “I wouldn’t say that. I enjoyed the sun and the sand, about summarizes it.”

“Ah, I see. Anything else?”

Tom smirked. “The tequila.”

“I’m not surprised. What about the company? Was it agreeable?”

“It wasn’t disagreeable enough to be a problem, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“Excellent,” Green said, sipping from his mug and watching Tom over the rim, pale gaze intense and unreadable as always, “Anything else of note?”

Tom grabbed for his own drink, taking a deep sip to disguise the tremor in his hand. “I made all necessary notes in my report.”

Green nodded, fingers deftly tracing the handle of his mug, eyes unblinking and fixed upon Tom’s like a homing beacon.

*Fuck. I know that look.*

Green smiled, fangs flashing beneath the inset lighting of the kitchen. Tom took a deep breath, crossing and uncrossing his legs beneath the counter, eyes averted to his tea.

“Look,” he began, quickly wetting his lips to buy himself an extra second of time. “I can explain.”

“I’m absolutely dying to hear it. No pun intended.”

Tom’s jaw ticked, eyes lifting and narrowing. “I don’t understand why he was assigned in the first place. He’s a no one, a nothing. The only connection he had to anyone of note was terminated by me over a year ago.”

“And since when is the suitability of our targets determined by you? Did I give you the impression that you had a choice in assignments? Little less in whether or not they may live or die after you’re in the field?”

Tom sat back, hands flat on his thighs to resist banging his fists on the table. “I was under the impression our assignments fit a certain criteria-”

“No you weren’t. If you thought for a moment what you did was acceptable you wouldn’t have gone to such lengths to hide it from me. Do you know what the outcome would be if our employers found out you allowed a target to live, especially after exposing your true nature to them?”

Tom’s mouth remained closed, jaw clenched.

“I know you quite well by now, Tom. Some days I think I know you better than you know yourself. Which is very fortunate, as I was able to determine before you even left for Morocco that this assignment may affect you differently than the others. I tagged along, just to be certain you didn’t do
something foolish, but looking back I think a part of me expected you to do something foolish. And perhaps therein lies my greatest mistake, over indulging you.”

Tom inhaled sharply, chest tightening. “Are you fucking joking? Since when have you ever indulged me on anything? You won’t even let me choose my own mode of execution!”

“You are young yet, Tom. With age comes experience, with experience comes ability. I set you up only for success.”

“You set me up to take the fall alone if something goes wrong. I don’t even know your first name. Not that it matters, as I know Green isn’t your real surname anyway.”

“If that were truly my intention then I would have left you to fend for yourself against my superiors once your failure came to light. I wouldn’t have trekked halfway around the world and brought myself out of retirement to complete your kill if I wanted to see you fail.”

Tom seethed with rage, eyes narrowing. “At least I would have finally met your superiors. Over a year and I still have no fucking clue who it is I work for-”

“You work for me, Tom,” Green snapped, eyes hard. “That is all you need to know, all you need to worry about. You do as I say and only as I say. Otherwise you risk making both of our lives obsolete.”

Tom leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, gaze narrowed and smoldering. Green shook his head with a sigh. “Sometimes I forget you are still just a boy.”

If he was looking for a reaction he certainly got one. Tom exploded like a powder keg at the forbidden word, grabbing and throwing his mug full force to shatter against the wall, tea exploding like blood splatter. He was halfway over the table when the gun appeared between his eyes, effectively freezing him in place.

“Now look what you’ve done, Tom, you’ll never get that stain out of the wall.” Green clicked the safety off as he spoke, hand and weapon held steady.

Tom continued to radiate steam but sank back into his chair, breathing deeply to calm his nerves.

“Don’t call me a boy,” he ground out.

“Only a boy would throw a tantrum over being called such.”

“Do you make a habit of pulling guns on children, then?”

“Not until recently. I have a feeling I’ll need to brandish my weapon at least once more before the lesson instills.”

Tom’s jaw ticked, hands curling into claws around the edge of the counter. “And what lesson is that?”

Green rolled his eyes. “Christ, I’ve owned house cats with more sense.”

Tom focused on the gun, the only thing stopping him from continuing his mission to throttle his handler.

“I am in charge here, Tom. You do as I say and never deviate from my instructions. That is the lesson. Do you understand?”
Storm clouds brewed in Tom’s gaze, still fixated upon the hard metal of the gun. “Crystal.”

“Good,” Green lowered the weapon casually, grabbing his mug with the other hand. “Unfortunately I still need to punish you.”

“Pulling a gun on me isn’t punishment enough?”

Green took a sip. “We both know threats of violence have no impact on modifying your behavior. Luckily I have just the thing.”

Tom swallowed; sensing something truly awful was about to come.

“You’re going to be working with a partner for your next assignment.”

Tom blinked.

A partner?

 Fucking hell.

“Please just shoot me, in the shoulder or something.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Tom. This is a good exercise in group skills. You need to learn to play well with others, and this way you’ll be held accountable in the field without me having to sacrifice my weekend. It’s a win-win.”

Tom continued to stare in numb horror. “You can shoot me in the leg, that will really teach me-”

“Your next assignment is in Edinburgh,” Green interrupted, pulling a postcard out of his case and sliding it across the table.

Tom picked up the cardstock and studied the rolling green fields of Scotland pictured across the front. “This is bollocks.”

Green took his feet with a smile, reaching down to grab his case and coming eye level with Tom. “So is staging your target’s death to let them run free and then lying about it.”

Tom’s eyes narrowed, watching Green’s retreating figure. “This is worse.”

Green paused in the doorway, glancing over his shoulder. “By the way, I like the new artwork in the den. It’s rather intense. Abstract.” He smiled knowingly, “It suits you.”

Wednesday July 13, 2005

Tom’s long strides ate up the narrow stretch of the jet bridge. He was so eager to get off the blasted plane he’d nearly forgotten about the fact he was meeting his partner in the next few minutes.

Almost.

He quickly descended from the gate through baggage claim to the passenger pick up area, groaning inwardly with each step. His mind was still plagued with stress over Hermione, the uncertainty of their relationship, the things he planned to say and do to her when he returned. He was so consumed he nearly missed the tell tale feeling of eyes upon him.

He quickly scanned the scattering of faces for a trace of familiarity, braced for the absolute worst,
and felt his shoulders relax upon seeing golden eyes set beneath a dark brooding brow.

Regulus’s scowling face was a sight for sore eyes.

On any other occasion Tom would be just as put out over their reunion but considering he’d been expecting Ursula herself to slither out of the ground on her undulating tentacles he couldn’t help but breathe a quick sigh of relief.

“Reggie,” he nodded in greeting as came to a stop before the communication and tech specialist.

Regulus openly cringed at the nickname but offered no scathing remark in reply. That’s one thing Tom liked about Regulus, he didn’t feel the constant need to challenge him in a dick measuring contest like so many others.

“Riddle,” he said simply, already turning on his heel and leading Tom away from the crowd and towards the large parking structure.

“I thought we had a third joining us.”

Regulus’s shoulders tensed, just a fraction, but he might as well of taken out a billboard ad announcing his unease. Tom raised a brow, staring at the back of his associate’s head with a growing sense of dread.

Regulus had always teetered along the edge of trust fund kid and hippie, dressing in fine high-end clothing that was designed to look worn and down trodden… vintage, Tom supposed the kids were calling it. His black hair had always been long, long enough to tuck behind his ears, but in the year since Tom last saw him the ebony locks had grown enough to pull back with a leather tie.

He’d also grown a full beard, though it was neatly trimmed and shaped to contour perfectly beneath his sharp cheekbones and rigid jaw line, professionally groomed on a regular basis no doubt. His image screamed I can’t be bothered with caring about how I look but upon closer inspection it became clear Regulus spent a great deal of time crafting his appearance.

“Green tell you anything?”

Tom casually bit the inside of his cheek, eyes narrowing as he thought through all the possibilities of why Regulus was stalling.

Fuck, I’ll play along; I’ve certainly got nothing better to do while I’m here anyway. A few head games are sure to pass the time.

“About the target or about our elusive third partner?”

“That’s a no then.”

Tom smirked. “I’ve missed you, Reggie.”

“Still a shite liar. What a shame, I was hoping you’d be able to keep up this time round.”

“You’d think with a face like yours you’d be used to disappointment by now.”

They continued into the lower level of the parking garage and from his space behind his companion Tom saw the way his shoulders briefly drew back, muscles tensing, and he smiled to himself as Regulus let out a low chuckle.

“You think I’m laughing with you… poor sod, just you wait.”
Tom’s smile fell, his mouth opening on instinct to ask what the hell that meant, even though he had sinking dread in his stomach telling him he knew exactly what Regulus meant…

Then they rounded the corner and a black sedan with tinted windows came into view, the only car along the long stretch of empty spaces. The car was obviously theirs, but the vehicle wasn’t what drew his eyes like moths to a flame.

Tom slowed his approach minutely, but it was enough for both people to notice, Regulus and the newest addition to their group, sitting on the nose of the sedan like a hood ornament. Her legs were crossed, torso leaned back, propped up on her elbows and peering out at him from heavy hooded eyes that gave him a very thorough scan.

Her outfit was skin tight, thigh high boots ending in a spiked heel, eyes heavily made up to appear even sultrier, more sinister. Her lips were their signature red, so closely resembling blood he half expected it to run down her chin in rivulets.

Looking upon her for the first time in all these years made his chest constrict painfully, as though a blade were already lodged inside. His senses went on high alert, tracking her every blink, every twitch of her manicured fingers, his tongue tasting her scent on the stale air of the garage basement, a sickly sweet poison that turned his stomach.

Finally he came to a stop before her, still maintaining eye contact, not willing to take his eyes off her for a second.

“Hello, Tommy.”

Hearing her nickname for him drew up long suppressed memories, a thrill of adrenaline racing along his spine, defenses at the ready. He opened his mouth to say something scathing but his brain wasn’t cooperating, still half consumed with thoughts of another woman. So all he managed to utter was a very resigned-

“Fuck me.”

Bella’s face lit up like a neon sign, lips curling into a grin that reached her black eyes.

“Don’t worry, luv, we’ll have plenty of time for that later.”

“The mouth is a bit fuller, the bottom lip… yeah, perfect. The eyes are dead on. His brows were a bit thicker, just a touch…”

Luna flipped her pencil and erased a small portion, deftly sweeping away the rubber debris and making short, quick strokes that brought the image to life, gave it breath and a beating heart. Harry watched with open amazement as she interpreted his verbal description into tangible reality. She was skilled for sure, her hand steady and eyes focused, not uttering a word since volunteering for the task.

Sirius and Neville had long since given up pretending to work on other things. They both pulled up a chair and sat behind Luna, watching her creation come to life under Harry’s careful direction. If their lingering assessment bothered her she made no indication, her pencil moving to the sound of Harry’s voice without pause.

Harry leaned over, glancing at the recent edits and feeling his lungs depress, all the oxygen depleting from his body, sucked out of the room in a single whoosh.

“Bloody hell…” he muttered, eyes transfixed on the paper in her lap. “That’s him.”
Sirius stood and walked directly behind Luna’s chair, peering down at the drawing with great intensity, turning his head in either direction as though a change in angle would reveal some new detail.

Neville quietly cleared his throat as he leaned over her shoulder, as though trying to politely warn her of his approach. “Wow, Luna…” he said, voice sounding rusty from disuse. “You’re really good at that.”

She glanced over her shoulder and beamed at him. “Thank you, Neville.”

The simple words had a profound effect. Harry expected Neville to blush and stammer his way to foot in mouth disease before sprinting for the cover of his desk. Instead Neville held her gaze for another beat and smiled back, his eyes lighting with genuine excitement.

Harry also smiled, happy to see the momentous occasion inspired similar feelings of enthusiasm and anticipation in his team.

They had a sketch. They had his face. And soon, they’d have him.

Hermione sat fidgeting in her chair, obsessively running her hands over the flare of skirt spread over her lap, narrowing her eyes at the floral print and hoping it was appropriate for this meeting.

She’d ended up borrowing a dress from Lavender, they were closer in size, at least in width. Lavender stood a few inches taller than Hermione so a pantsuit was out of the question. Instead Padma had come over to her apartment with a handful of selections from all three girls’ closets, no doubt as an excuse to linger in Hermione’s company to check up on her. She hadn’t seen or spoken to her friend since her brief and harried visit Sunday morning, which felt like two lifetime’s ago.

Still, despite Padma’s not so subtle prying, Hermione felt grateful for the help in making her look presentable for the interview.

If anyone understood the importance of meeting with a grant donor it was her friend. Padma herself came from a very wealthy family that paid for her schooling and housing. When Hermione first learned this she’d been automatically off put, her mind lumping the girl with the rest of the overly privileged students she’d encountered during her schooling. But she quickly learned that despite the Patils wealth, there existed a bevy of other problems within the family dynamic that made Hermione harbor zero envy.

The Patils were of a modern mindset in that they not only supported their daughters’ education but they insisted they have one. They agreed to support the girls financially as long as they stayed in school. Which is why they refused to give Parvati a dime. Padma’s twin had decided after completing upper school she wanted to take a break, travel, see the sights, learn new cultures and discover a piece of herself along the way. Their parents were not on board, cutting her off entirely from a financial standpoint as long as she refused to go University.

The result was Parvati secretly lived with Padma to avoid the expense of rent and worked a multitude of dead-end, part time jobs to afford all her other bills. It caused a large rift in the family, and Padma had confided in Hermione more than once that she feared Parvati resented her for being the one with their parents support. Hermione did her best to avoid the topic, both directly and indirectly triggering it. Still, she was grateful for the girls volunteering their outfits to support Hermione’s efforts to not look like a homeless grifter for one afternoon.

She knew her wardrobe wasn’t *that* bad, her appearance hardly grotesque, but with everything else
going on in her life- at least since last weekend- she was hardly feeling herself.

And of all the days to lack confidence, to be thrown off my game, it's the day I need to impress some wealthy yuppie to sponsor my research... fan-fucking-tastic.

She swallowed the bitter pill and ran her hands over the binder sitting before her, filled with her research findings and proposal. She’d been up all night practicing her spiel.

No, you were up half the night waiting for Tom to arrive. And then obsessing over the fact he never arrived. And then cursing yourself for pinning him with an ultimatum you now have to keep or risk condemning your soul to eternal hell flame.

Dramatic bint. You know don’t believe in all that, though Mrs. Cole would be ecstatic to hear you repeat one of the many biblical quotes she so loved to threaten us with.

What would my old matron think if she could see me now? Everything I’ve accomplished, strived for, thrown into upheaval for the boy- the man- she warned me to stay away from.

Christ. She was right about him all along, wasn’t she?

Hermione cringed, thankful she was still alone in the meeting room. She probably looked schizophrenic, talking to herself in such a way. Even though she kept the conversation internal it was obvious her mind was tumultuous. She glanced up and spotted a pitcher of cool, clear water, condensation formed along the base, empty glasses stacked to the side.

Thank god for that…

She leaned forward and quickly poured herself a drink, taking long deep sips and willing her mind to calm, to allow the cool liquid to suffuse her rising dread, wash away the panic.

She drained half the glass before pulling back, inhaling sharply, eyes closing as she counted backwards from ten.

She barely made it to five when she heard the sound of the door opening across the room, her eyes snapped open just in time to see a man enter.

Hermione plastered a smile on, rising to her feet and nervously tucking a neatly groomed curl behind her ear.

“Hello, Ms. Granger, is it?”

“Yes, it is. And you are Mr. Whitmore I presume? Lovely to meet you.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” he flashed a charming smile while shaking her hand firmly from where he stood across the table.

Hermione couldn’t help but admire the man standing before her. Simply from an aesthetical standpoint, that is. He was decidedly too old for her, and even if he weren’t it wouldn’t have made a difference as her heart and mind were already consumed by another.

What took her by surprise was that Mr. Whitmore looked nothing like what Hermione had pictured as she spoke with him on the phone. Their conversation had been brief but Hermione had looked him up after, not seeing any photos but learning about his career to better prepare for this interview. She was expecting a man in his late thirties, perhaps early forties. This man appeared a well maintained late fifties, perhaps even early sixties if he worked out regularly.
Or perhaps you’re a terrible judge of age. Some people go grey in their twenties for Christ’s sake! Now stop gawking like a befuddled school girl and act like a serious Chemist!

Hermione cleared her throat as if to sweep the inner voice under the rug, primly taking her seat once more, smoothing the skirt out beneath her.

Whitmore continued to smile, his eyes fixed firmly on hers, the depth of his stare mesmerizing, almost unsettling. She found herself trapped, unable to break his gaze, her heart rate increasing.

She continued to smile as pleasantly as she could manage, though the effort was becoming decidedly greater. She fidgeted in her seat, laying her palms flat on the table to avoid wringing her hands together.

“Thank you very much for joining me today, Ms. Granger. May I call you Hermione?”

Hermione swallowed lightly, her throat feeling dry and tight. “Of course.”

He nodded, his perfect coif of salt and pepper hair reflecting the overhead lights as brilliantly as his eyes did, gleaming beneath a row of dark lashes.

“Excellent,” he continued, leaning back and unbuttoning his expensive suit jacket to reveal the crisp pressed shirt and silk tie beneath. “I can’t tell you how long I’ve looked forward to this day. I’ve known about you for quite a while, though I wasn’t sure I’d get the opportunity to meet you.”

Hermione felt her heart lurch unexpectedly, his words causing the hairs to rise along her forearms. She moved her hands to her lap, hoping to impart some warmth back into the limbs. The room must have an overactive air conditioning unit.

“That’s very kind of you to say,” she scrambled for the appropriate response, something humble but not overly self-deprecating. “I hope I don’t disappoint.”

His teeth gleamed in the light, drawing her gaze. His smile was… she struggled for the right description. The only word that came to mind was hungry.

“But this isn’t Tom. This is a bloody interview for a bloody grant…”

Yet each rapid throb of her veins pumped the same message through her bloodstream. Danger, Danger…

“I’m very good at reading people,” he continued. “It’s a bit of a gift, though some have come to think of it as a curse. I have a strong feeling you’re going to be a member of the second camp.”

Hermione sucked in a sharp breath, her legs numb, frozen, unable to push her chair back and carry
her from the room. She raised a hand to the table to try and push away but the limb felt clumsy, strange, like she was lifting someone else’s arm.

She gazed anxiously at her fingers. They seemed to wiggle and dance even though she was certain her fists were clenched. Her eyes slowly traveled up to look at Whitmore but on the ascent they fell on the glass of water at her side, then the pitcher of water still displayed at the center of the table.

Finally, her gaze completed its journey and fell on the face of the man she now knew with absolute certainty wasn’t Whitmore.

“Who…” her tongue felt too big for her mouth. “Who are you?”

He smiled as amicably as before, but his eyes held a fierceness that would have stolen her strength more quickly than whatever drug was coursing through her system.

“I’m someone with a very vested interest in your future, Hermione. Though admittedly, not from a grant standpoint.”

She blinked slowly, feeling tears trek down her cheeks and drop from her jaw to her chest, disappearing beneath the collar of her dress.

“T-To-“ she felt her head sway, tipping her balance to the side, slumping into the table to avoid falling out of her chair.

“Tom. Yes. I have vested interest in his future as well.”

Her lower half was completely numb, her vision rapidly fading at the edges, blackness closing in.

“And as someone with such interests, I must inform you that I simply cannot allow for you to distract him any further.”

Her surroundings shifted as she fell to the ground in a heap, her body numb, vision all but gone, but she was still able to hear his final words before the black abyss stole her away completely.

“Rest assured that you’re getting the far better end of this, Hermione. Tom will always think fondly of you, long after you’re gone. As for me, well, he’ll hate me forever for what I’m going to do.”
A/N: As always, I love my beautiful readers. Your support motivates me more than you know. And remember, every time you review a unicorn shoots rainbow laser beams from its eyes. And I write faster ;)

I want to reiterate from my chapter one notes that Regulus and Sirius are NOT related, neither are Bella and Narcissa. I just desperately wanted to use these characters but they didn’t fit my plot puzzle as family members. No tricks, I promise they really aren’t relatives.

And fifty points to your House if you picked up on the Umbridge reference last chap! Yes, Tom killed her. Tom killed her good.

Alrighty. Enjoy, my lovelies. I had to split this chappy in half because it was ungodly long. But I promise it’s still extra spicy. It also made me realize I’m a touch disturbed. Aren’t you excited to read it now?

Sunday August 8, 1999

Edinburgh, Scotland

Tom picked a card out of his spread and moved it to the end of the row.

He glanced up across the table at his only remaining opponent. The massive figure took up half the table, his forearms looked like honey baked hams, his shoulders a mile across. His long hair hung around his face and blended into the deep auburn of his beard. He looked half wild, part man part beast, a wolverine in man’s clothing.

Tom drew his focus back to his hand, watching his assigned partner out of the corner of his eye. She was sidled up to the bar, a short cocktail dress riding high on her thighs as she leaned over the counter to laugh at something the bartender said. The men at the nearby tables stared blatantly at her backside as they sipped liquor and smoked cigars.

He kept his blank mask in place, scowling internally. Bella had been a waking nightmare from the moment they met. He’d only known her for ten days but it might as well have been ten years. His sanity was wearing thin. Hers was completely out the window.

How they were both employed by the same organization baffled Tom. How she passed the same training he did was a mystery, that someone trusted the crazy bint with a gun was a threat to national security. Bella was a loose cannon, didn’t head authority, abandoned plans and opposed strategy as if she was purposely trying to sabotage the mission.

At first Tom assumed she was trying to do just that, acting on orders from Green to drive the lesson he was trying to impart on Tom home. But as the days progressed Tom came to the chilling realization that Bella was simply… being Bella, and this was the person he depended on to have his back when shit hit the fan.

He was as good as dead.

Their second night in Scotland she broke into his adjoining room and tried to stab him in his sleep, laughing maniacally as he wrestled the blade away, then proceeded to strip naked and attempt to mount him. He’d thrown her into the hall completely starkers and barricaded his door, laying awake
the remainder of the night listening to her laughter through the wall.

Their sixth night he discovered a corpse in her bathtub, ruining Tom’s quiet evening as she obviously had no intention of discarding the man’s body herself. Even more picturesque, it was evident she’d been playing with the body for several hours. He could only imagine what she subjected the poor sod to beforeoffing him.

And just last night she disappeared while he was finalizing their plan only to return an hour before sunrise clearly blitzed out of her mind. He suspected she was high as well as drunk but couldn’t pinpoint exactly what was in her system, nor did he particularly care, as long as it had a short enough half life to allow her to be functional for their mission.

He just had to get through tonight, and then he’d be rid of the cursed banshee forever.

He’d face a firing squad before being saddled with her again. As far as punishments went, Green obviously knew exactly what he was doing when he paired them.

Tom sat at the poker table engaging in two games, battling his opponent with cards and battling himself with remaining aloof to Bella’s presence. They weren't supposed to know each other after all, but he was on edge, waiting for her to throw their plan to the wind to do whatever the fuck she felt like.

She’d been instructed to wear a distracting outfit, she arrived in a scrap of material so small he was certain is was meant to be a top, barely extending beyond the line of her underwear. Everytime she sat down or leaned over she flashed her lace undergarments to the room. Tom had raised a brow upon seeing her in the hotel lobby and she’d smirked, insisting it was a cocktail dress. He’d been hoping for something with a touch of class, that left a little more to the imagination, after all they were dealing with high power men who could easily pick up a street walker any day of the week, but she assured him she knew what she was doing and to worry about his own half of the mission.

He’d bit back the retort burning his tongue and merely held the door open for her, half hoping the mission failed so he’d have an excuse to shoot her and pin it on one of the armed guards at the venue.

They arrived barely two hours ago, Tom had been situated at the main table for the majority of the night, only stepping away to stretch his legs and freshen his drink, as well as get a read on the other guests. He normally wasn’t nervous going into missions, assured in his own abilities and skill set. But he wasn’t used to relying on others, the string of his fate wrapped around another’s finger. And of course it only added insult to injury that the finger belonged to a crazed psychopath.

He wasn’t certain if Bella was truly psychotic or just mentally ill, he didn’t particularly care, he just wanted her to mind the plan and then disappear from his life forever.

He took a steadying breath as he heard her cackle from her place in the periphery of his vision. He felt his eye twitch involuntarily. His opponent watched Tom with careful calculation, no doubt thinking Tom was reacting to his hand. Tom was careful to create a set of fake tells to direct the other opponents to their demise. But this opponent was highly skilled, obviously seeing past the ruse and proving a rather difficult adversary.

He also happened to be their target for the night.

Tom had a sinking suspicion this was going to be an evening to remember. Not only was his partner a thorn in his side but his prey was a hulking beast with honed observational skills. Lovely.
“Another shot, luv!” Bella cried out from the bar, drawing gazes from around the room, Tom’s included.

She was balanced atop the barstool on her knees, leaning over onto the counter on her hands, her dress up around her hips and her underwear doing little to mask the swell of her sex.

Tom cringed, beyond masking capabilities. His head swiveled back around when he hear a growl emanate from across the table. His opponent was also watching Bella, eyes narrowed. But he didn’t look stricken by lust. He looked enraged.

*Interesting. I know why I want to throttle the insane bint but why does he hate her so?*

Tom watched the man with careful detachment, taking full advantage of his momentary distraction. He was without a doubt the largest man Tom had ever seen in person, little less up close. When he entered the underground venue Tom had sized him up to be at least half a foot taller than himself, and Tom was quite a tall man already at 6’2”. Tom sported a lean muscled frame, most of his exercise taking place while in the field, his home gym only used when he went prolonged periods without assignment, which was rare. He didn’t see the point in bulky muscles, what practical purpose did they serve? Unless someone was a gladiator and relied solely on brute strength on a daily basis he didn’t understand the appeal. This man was not of the same mind set, his muscles had muscles and those muscles had muscles… Tom had no idea where the man found clothes that fit. He must have them custom made, his measurements obscene.

He certainly spent the majority of his day bench pressing cars and small boating vessels no doubt, a physique like that didn’t occur anywhere in nature without a little chemical help. Tom would be shocked if he wasn’t injecting steroids like a heroin addict. But what Tom found most interesting was the contrast of his personal grooming. He put a great deal of time and effort into his body but couldn’t be bothered to run a brush through his shoulder length hair, or clip his beard. His nails were trimmed short but caked with dirt and debris. He looked like a wild mountain man, cut off from modern conveniences for months, years, able to scale a mountain side with his bare hands, rip a tree from the ground, roots and all. But had access to the local gym.

It was so ludicrous Tom nearly laughed. But then Bella cackled anew, the sound of glass shattering quick to follow, and he closed his eyes on a deep sigh instead.

When he opened them he saw his opponent grumbling to himself, eyes still averted in Bella’s direction, and Tom clenched his fist beneath the table.

*Bloody hell, she can’t even do the one thing she does naturally. The only task I assigned her. Is she purposely being difficult or is she always like this?*

Tom had given her a simple directive, something he was sure she’d attempt to do regardless of the mission objective; to capture the target’s attention through seduction. Bloodshed and sex went hand and hand for Bella, as he’d seen first hand on that fateful second night when he’d awoken to a knife at this throat.

And he’d seen her interact with others throughout the city on the few jaunts he’d been forced to make with her. She relied heavily on her sex appeal to get a leg up, literally in some cases. Such as the night he lost her on the way to scout the venue, only to again find her on his way back to the hotel, engaged in rather violent alley sex with a random local.

Tom had only caught the final moments but had been so taken aback by the blood smearing their faces and the bricks he’d been rooted to the spot, trying to determine if she needed his assistance, if this was a trist gone too far. But then she met his eye over the rutting man’s shoulder and a feral
gleam shined in her black eyes. Holding Tom’s gaze she smiled and sank her fangs into her prey’s exposed shoulder, blood blossoming from the wound and trailing in two lines down the pale skin of his back, staining her lips and dribbling down her chin.

Tom had watched in morbid fascination as the man cried out in pain and completion, swaying on his feet with the force of his release. Bella had swiftly pushed him away, eyes still fastened on Tom as she pulled her pants back up and wiped at the blood on her face, smearing it across her pale skin, staining his memory like the black poison she emitted with every breath.

He’d assumed she’d use her deadly siren call during the mission as well. But if anything she was flirting outrageously with every man but their target. She hadn’t spared the man a single glance, much to Tom’s frustration.

*No matter. You anticipated this. You have a backup plan that doesn’t involve her.*

*Deal with Bella later. Focus on completing the mission now.*

His opponent’s dark eyes snapped back and locked on Tom, his expression still pinched and shoulders drawn, obviously frustrated. Tom was more intrigued by the second. He kept his air of calm as firmly affixed to his face as he could and casually removed a card from his spread and tossed it to the table, eyes affixed to his opponent as the dealer dealt him another. He picked it up and finally broke their intense stare down to see what he’d gotten.

His heart lurched, his pulse throbbing, but allowed no other reaction to break free from his armor. He slid the card into place and glanced across the table once more.

“All in.”

Tom pushed his tokens into the center of the table, chips falling into a heaping pile.

His opponent inhaled sharply, some spark appearing in the depths of his dark gaze, the pupils swelling the brown of his irises.

Then the beast smiled, a wolfish grin if there ever was one, the canines sharper than usual, pointed and gleaming in the smoky light of the room.

“All in.”

And his massive hand reached out to push his bounty to the center as well.

The room had fallen deathly silent, even Bella’s constant chatter had stopped. All eyes were affixed to the final hand, the final showdown, only one victor would remain.

His opponent threw his cards down first, people nearby leaned in to see the hand. The dealer peered down and then spoke loudly to the room.

“Mr. Greyback has a straight, diamonds, ten high.”

A few murmurs followed, a couple women in low cut dresses whispered to one another behind their fans, eyeing Greyback with obvious intent, working girls hired by the house no doubt. A man sitting nearest the beast clapped him on the back with a drunken laugh, then quickly withdrew his arm when the wolverine flashed him a murderous look.

Tom kept his face blank, tossing his own cards to the table, feeling all the eyes in the room avert to him. He kept his gaze steady, locked on his opponent.
“Mr. Black has a royal flush, hearts. The winning hand of the evening.”

The room exploded in chaos.

People gasped and started speaking at full volume, someone dropped a glass and it hit the floor on a shatter. He heard Bella cackle from the other side of the room but lost sight of her in the surge of people, everyone standing from their tables and grabbing their belongings, backing away from the main table with fear in their eyes. The dealer sat stiffly, poised to flee, eyes wide and fixed firmly on Greyback.

Tom didn’t move a muscle, maintaining his casual sprawl, leaning back in his chair and resting his forearms on the table, one hand reaching for his whiskey to take a long sip. He gazed at Greyback over the rim of the glass, watching the play of emotions on his brute face. It was quite a thing to witness, even as it caused every alarm bell to ring loudly in his head.

Greyback’s face was turning steadily redder, his eyes narrowed dangerously. Tom set his glass down and pushed away from the table.

“Fine show, gentlemen,” he said with a nod to Greyback and the dealer, the remaining players had long since scattered to the far corners of the room.

Tom stood, buttoning his fine suit jacket and peering at the pile of tokens. “I’ll collect my check at the front.”

Greyback pushed back as well but kept his hands braced on the table, staring murderously at Tom.

“What’s the rush, Black?” his voice was as heavy and sinister as his appearance. “Why don’t you stay for a drink? The owner lets the winner drink on the house.”

Tom smiled. “It’s been a long evening, you proved a far more worthy opponent than I’ve faced in ages. I think I’d like to call it an evening.”

He turned and walked towards the entrance, putting his back to the enemy was difficult for him but also a necessity. He could have easily stayed and tossed back a few drinks with his target, he’d certainly done it before, usually for the purpose of subduing his prey. But going by Greyback’s mass Tom suspected it would take an inordinate amount of alcohol to affect him, and Tom didn’t have that kind of time or patience. Lingering at the bar would only prolong the already trying evening, and also open more windows of opportunity for Bella to screw something else up.

No, he needed to get Greyback to follow him outside. Alone. And the more abruptly Tom left the more likely that was to happen.

He briefly glanced at Bella on his way to the front, she met his eye. He expected her to be three sheets to the wind, she’d certainly been drinking everything placed in front of her since they arrived. But her black gaze was clear, intense and predatory. Tom raised a brow, silently asking her what the hell she was up to. Her answer was a slow, seductive grin that stretched her red painted lips from ear to ear. She looked decidedly insane, but also quite determined, a rather lethal combination. Tom just wasn’t sure who she planned on directing that focus on.

He decided to leave before she made up her mind and sabotaged the mission even further.

He stopped at the front desk to collect his payment. The bookie was a bald, shifty eyed fellow that sized Tom up and down with obvious scorn. As he scribbled out the check that Tom could care less about the evening’s host appeared at his side.
“I’m happy Fletcher is getting you all squared away, but I’m sorry to see you leave so soon. You’re certain you won’t stay for one celebratory drink?”

Tom pretended to consider the offer, reluctantly shaking his head. “Sorry, Bagman. As much as I’d love to linger in this smoke filled den of criminals, I have more appealing company to keep this evening.”

Ludo laughed, leaning against the desk and trying to casually examine Tom. Tom ignored his obvious scrutinization.

“I was hoping to learn more about you, Mr. Black. It isn’t everyday a first time guest beats out Greyback. He’s a bit of a legend in these parts.”

“So I’ve heard. Though it isn’t his poker prowess that people seem to whisper most about.”

Bagman laughed nervously, rubbing his neck. “Oh, yes, well… he does have a rather lengthy reputation I suppose. Of course I don’t discriminate against guests. My doors are open to all.”

“I’m well aware, Bagman, that’s why I sought out your establishment after all. However I really must be going now.”

He accepted the check Fletcher held out and smiled beautifically at the bookie’s sneer.

“I hope to see you again, Mr. Black! Win back some of the money you’re walking out with tonight.”

Tom tossed a carefree smile over his shoulder. “I have a feeling it won’t be in my possession for very long.”

Bagman raised his eyebrows, clearly confused by the comment but laughed in response to the humor dancing in Tom’s stormy gaze, obviously thinking it some joke he didn’t grasp the punchline of.

Oh, you’ll grasp it soon enough. As soon as you see the wolfman himself storm out these doors in my wake.

Tom tucked the useless check into his jacket inner lining and pushed open the heavy metal door, stepping out into a dark musty alley that served as the hidden entrance to the underground gambling hall.

It may have been summertime in Scotland but the weather was far from what Tom would consider balmy, especially with his frequent excursions to the southern hemisphere. A cool breeze stole past and sent a chill up his spine. He buttoned his jacket and proceeded to step around trash and debris, not wanting to mar his expensive Italian shoes.

He started down the path he had mapped out during his prior jaunts through the city, ensuring he’d have plenty of privacy and darkness for cover. Greyback would just assume Tom was a foreigner with shit directional sense and more than a spot of bad luck, picking the worst routes possible, leaving himself vulnerable to attack.

Or maybe he’ll suspect I’m up to something. He showed surprising prowess during the game. Saw through my bluffs. Maybe taking this path will put him on guard.

Christ, that’s all I need. 300 pounds of pure muscle and a fully functioning brain.

He realized with a bitter hint of irony that it would have been desirable to take on this particular target with a partner. Someone that played to Tom’s strengths, made up for his weak spots.
Someone who decidedly wasn’t Bella.

*Then again, you don’t get along with people. I doubt you’d have liked anyone who they assigned, sane or not.*

He passed a stack of storage bins, noting absently as a stray cat hissed and darted past. His mind wandered to another time, another alley, long and dark and similar looking. He hadn’t been alone then. He’d had Her in tow behind him, gasping and panting as he pulled her along, making him smirk inwardly at her frustration, her never ending questions, her loyalty. She always followed, no matter where he dragged her. She had always been there, right behind him, or right at his side, always within arms reach.

*The only person I’ve ever been able to rely on. The only one I could trust.*

*Next month is her birthday. She’ll be free…*

He inhaled sharply, taking in the scent of mildew and sewage, clearing his throat to avoid gagging.

*Next month she’s out…*

Tom tucked his hands in his pockets, side stepping more garbage as he reached the mouth of the alley and stepped into the equally dark street, illuminated only by a flickering lamp post at the far end where it connected to the main road.

*Next month she’s out.*

*And there isn’t a damn thing I can do.*

He felt a sharp pain in his chest, a chronic ache as of late. His thoughts were always plagued by her, but he’d been able to bury himself in his work, in travel, in building a new identity, a new life, any distraction he could cling to. But the last few weeks had been unbearable. He’d started a countdown in his head, ticking off the days each morning when he woke, thinking about her each night as he lay in bed. Dreaming of her, unable to escape her even in sleep. Her impending eighteenth birthday was throwing his world into upheaval.

It was the day that he’d been waiting for since his own ejection from Wool’s. A day that was supposed to mean the beginning of their lives together. Now it was a day he’d be half a world apart from her, the beginning of two futures never allowed to intersect. The reality of the situation was a black hole absorbing all light, depriving him of oxygen and rational thought. He’d fantasized about going to her, waiting outside the orphanage to watch her from the shadows. But he knew his resolve would crumble like dust the moment she was in sight and he’d blow his cover, approach her, grab her and run.

And they’d never be able to stop running. Green would never let his young prodigy slip through his fingers. He may be able to talk his associates out of executing Tom on the spot but they’d never let Hermione go knowing the truth about their organization. Tom would put her life at stake if he told her the truth, and as desperate as he was to be with her, as selfish as he was to his core, he’d endure a lifetime of pain and suffering before he subjected her to a moment of it. He chose this path, he couldn’t force her to follow.

Admittedly, when he first enrolled in the organization he wasn’t exactly thinking about the long term ramifications. He was blinded by the power, the thrill, the money. He’d spent his entire life scrounging for everything he had, then fighting to keep it, protect it, only to to endure the entire process again the next day, and the next, year and after year, until the chance at any worthwhile
future became nothing but fantasy.

He was so tired of being demeaned, disregarded, labeled and cast aside. He wanted to make something of himself, create a new identity, a name that meant something. He wanted others to envy him for once. He knew how to inspire fear in others, but never awe. He wanted to know what it felt like to look down on someone, specifically those that had pinned him down in the trash and dirt for his entire life. He wanted to take his revenge on the men and women who controlled the world he lived in, who treated him like a rusty cog in a defective machine. And one night, while sitting in a small Italian bistro eating pasta, Green offered him everything he’d ever wanted, ever dreamed of, perfectly wrapped with a bow.

Tom had been helpless to say no. He was still exhausted from his double shift at the factory, sweat still clung to his back beneath his heavy uniform, muscles still sore, fingernails still caked with grease. He thought of his debilitated flat beneath the loud underpass, all the crime in the area, all the screams and gunshots he heard each night, all the times someone tried to rob him on his route home, all the bills he had stacked on his counter and the measly checks he brought in from his job.

He thought about the first day he was brought to Wool’s, the way Cole looked at him as though she knew he was a worthless good for nothing deadbeat like his father before him, the way the officers handed him off without a parting glance, happy to be rid of the burden.

He thought about all the petty crime he’d committed out of necessity and thrill, all the magistrates that lectured him from their ivory thrones, all the rich kids at school who mocked him, laughed at him, all the shit and bile and blackness he’d waded through for the last eighteen years of his existence.

He didn’t think of Hermione.

Didn’t think on the one point of light, of hope that shined on his bleak existence for seven of those years.

He didn’t think about what accepting such a job would mean for her, for them.

He didn’t think of it until it was too late. Until he’d seen too much, knew too much. And then he realized that in trying to build a better future for himself he’d ruined his chance of ever having the future he wanted.

He’d destroyed his own life in one moment of blind greed. And the more he lingered on the thought the more he hated himself. And the more he hated himself the less motivated he was to complete his missions. Less motivation meant more mistakes, mistakes meant death. And if Tom was anything, he was a survivor. Even on his blackest days, he never lost the will to live.

Afterall, if he was alive, then there was still the chance, however small and unrealistic, that he could find a way to be with her again.

*Next month she’s out...*

Tom’s spine went rigid as he heard the unmistakable scrape of footsteps from the other end of the street. He slowed his pace, glancing over his shoulder and seeing a deep inset of shadows, impossible to discern objects within. But his instincts screamed at him, loud and clear, that someone was watching him from within those shadows.

*He’s moves with surprising dexterity, I thought I’d hear him from two streets over.*

*But then again, you weren’t exactly paying attention like you should have been.*
Get your head on straight, idiot. Do you want to die tonight?

Tom smirked cruelly at the shadows, turning back around and continuing his leisurely stroll. He was still worked up about Hermione, though. Anger brewed beneath the surface, anger with himself, but he decided to channel the raw emotion towards his target, as he usually did. Killing people was surprisingly therapeutic.

He heard the footsteps approach from behind, loud, thunderous, no attempts at stealth.

*He is used to winning his battles with brute strength. He’s never needed to sneak up on someone, he just needs to get one good shot in.*

Tom smiled, adrenaline flooding his veins, thoughts of Hermione scattering to the wind as his other persona took over, the side that basked in bloodlust, in the thrill of the chase, the satisfaction of the kill.

Tom tipped his head back and started whistling, a merry tune from some show he’d seen on the telly as boy, sitting on the stained, torn carpet of the motel room he and his mother called home. The small TV played mostly snow, the picture jumping, antenna bent. He sat so close to the screen his nose nearly touched the glass, the static electricity making his hair crackle, goosebumps flare along his arms. He turned the volume so loud it was deafening, barely drowning out the sounds from the parking lot. His mother’s shrill screams, a man’s booming shouts, gunfire cracking like thunder through the night.

The tune sounded light, cheery, but to Tom it was a battle cry, a dare, his way of preparing himself mentally for what was to come.

“Most men don’t start whistling when they hear my approach.”

Tom finished the last verse of his song and cracked a brilliant grin, still walking slowly, facing forward as he directed his words into the dark cover of night.

“Is that so? Should I guess what the normal response is?”

“They start screaming, or begging. Then they run.”

Tom chuckled. “I suppose I’m not most men.”

“I already knew that.” The deep voice was gaining on him now, long legs eating up the asphalt with ease. “From the moment you sat down at the table I knew you weren’t like the others.”

Tom came to a stop between two small alleys, still a good ways off from the main road. He slowly turned. The flickering lamp post created a strobe effect, making shadows dance and the otherworldly figure of Greyback flash before his eyes in frames, like an old black and white film.

“I’m flattered.”

Greyback stood merely four yards away, his massive shoulders sloping into his tree trunk arms, ending in curled fists.

“Who are you?”

Tom smirked. “My name is Thomas Black, I’m from north London, I work in transportation logistics for a pharmaceutical company, Edinburgh is one of my new territories. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”
Greyback narrowed his eyes, his face pinching. “Hilarious. Now tell me who you really are.”

“You caught me. I don’t really work for big pharma. I just tell women that to make them think I’m swimming in cash. I actually head up logistics for a coastal seafood company, they’re looking to expand their fisheries up north.”

The wolverine bared his teeth, a growl rumbling menacingly from his broad chest. “Enough! I’m done playing games!”

Tom’s smirk fell but his eyes still danced with amusement. “Fair enough. I’m a hitman sent to kill you. Happy now?”

Greyback blinked, posture shifting minutely to reveal his surprise before his expression shuttered once more.

“Who sent you?”

“My bosses.”

“They have names?”

“If they do I’m not privy to them. I could tell you their aliases but I doubt you’d find that helpful as we all adopt names from the color wheel. Not the most creative bunch, mind you. I’m just relieved Black was still available, otherwise I’d be stuck with Chartreuse, and I can’t abide the French.”

Greyback raised a brow. “You talk too much.”

“I’ve been told that before, usually before I kill someone.”

“I won’t be the one dying tonight, Black.”

“I’ve been told that as well. Usually before I kill someone.”

Greyback’s face turned ruddy, he took a menacing step closer. Tom held his easy stance, hands in his pockets, gazing upon the man with casual detachment.

“Do I get to know why I’ve been sent my own private assassin?”

Tom tipped his head, eyes carefully marking the shrinking distance between them. “You know what, I didn’t think to ask.”

“Seems a shame you’re going to die without knowing the reason for your little suicide mission.”

Tom smiled, wicked and gleaming in the dancing light. “Don’t worry about me, Greyback. I have a little trick up my sleeve to even up the odds.”

As Greyback swung his meaty fist full force at his head Tom nimbly ducked and swirved, hands coming out of his pockets in clenched fists, his dominate right hand sporting a pair of brass knuckles with a curved blade at the end. He hit Greyback with a left uppercut and then lashed out with the right, slicing into the meat of Greyback’s wide bicep. Blood quickly bloomed across the pale fabric of his sleeve.

Greyback blinked in astonishment, touching the wound with a large hand, staring angrily at the crimson wetting his fingertips.

“You’re a cheater. Is that how you won tonight?”
Tom laughed, retaking his defensive stance. “I think we both know I beat you fair and square. Though I’ll admit receiving that Jack at the end was pure luck. I knew winning would be a sure fire way to get you alone, your pride would never stand to let me walk away the victor. But in case I failed I had a few back up plans in place.”

Tom ducked another swing, using the momentum to roll across the pavement before springing to his feet behind Greyback. He swung with his right but the mountainess man showed a surprising quickness as he dodged the shot.

“You mean that whore you planted at the bar?”

Tom blinked, barely dodging the next hit. Greyback laughed. “Oh yes, I knew she was with you.”

Tom scowled, angry at being discovered before he intended. “How?”

“She kept stealing glances at you during the game, doing little stunts to gain your attention. A normal man would have glanced her way. You on the other hand only looked at her when my head was turned. I knew you had to have known her.”

Tom raised a dark brow, crouched low and ready to dodge or strike. “Fascinating. I admit I was impressed by your ability to read me throughout the game. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“People are always underestimating me. I welcome it. Makes them easier to kill.”

He pounced for Tom with a deep growl, looking every bit the wolverine he so resembled. He managed to get a handful of Tom’s jacket. Tom rolled, loosening his arms and slipping out of the garment, leaving Greyback to stare dumbly at the fabric in his hand while Tom made a shallow slash along the man’s rib cage.

He howled in pain, throwing the jacket aside and pressing a hand to his side, eyes murderous. Tom smiled again, panting slightly, rocking back and forth on his feet, poised at the ready.

“I saw you glance at her, too,” he said, carefully gauging the man’s dark eyes. “Looked like you hated her more than I do, and I promise you, that is quite a feat.”

Greyback drew in deep breaths, face a deep red, hands soaked in his own blood.

“And you didn’t spare the other women in the venue a single glance. Despite their best attempts at flirtation. Makes me wonder if you don’t harbor a certain resentment for the fairer sex. Considering your profession.”

“Shut your fucking mouth!” He sprang full force, Tom laughed as he leapt to the side, but his shoulder got clipped and he spun on the impact. Greyback barely touched him but packed such a wallop Tom had to use the nearby wall to steady himself.

“Hit a nerve did I? Let me guess, you traffic women because you had a shite relationship with dear old mum?”

He cradled his injured shoulder, it felt like it might be dislocated, and slipped down the wall to avoid having his skull crushed by another deafening blow. Greyback howled in pain as his fist crashed into the bricks, bones breaking and skin tearing open, more blood staining his hands.

“Tom scrambled awkwardly to his feet, hit right arm not cooperating. “That’s hardly an excuse, Greyback. I also had a shite mother and look how I turned out. Oh, wait...” he smiled sardonically, basking in his opponent’s rage.
“You don’t know a goddamn thing! Now stand still so I can rip your fucking head off!”

Tom laughed on a wheeze as he clumsily backed up to avoid the next shot. He wasn’t used to exerting so much physical energy during his kills. His scuffles normally lasted only a fraction of the time. But he was having so much fun winding the man up. The rage was clouding Greyback’s focus, making him less efficient.

“Let me guess, mummie didn’t give you any attention? Or did she abandon you altogether?”

Greyback snarled, blood soaking his shirt, dripping along the pavement, his feet a bit more sluggish, but his fists didn’t slow down. His eyes gleamed feral in the strobe light, teeth bared to tear out his prey’s throat.

Tom smirked, deftly slipping his brass knuckles to the functioning hand. “Or is it the other way around? Maybe mum gave you too much attention, the kind mother’s shouldn’t bestow on their little boys.”

“Shut your fucking mouth already!”

Tom kept a steady gaze on the approaching figure as he backed up. His eyes scanned their surroundings for any advantage, and so preoccupied was he that he missed the discarded wood plank laying on the ground directly behind him. His eyes flared as he lost his balance and lurched to the side to catch himself against the dumpster. Greyback sprung and hit him with a solid blow to his kidneys, punching all the air out of his lungs and filling his head with the sound of ribs breaking.

The pain was red hot, searing his nerve endings, blinding him. He lost his grip and slipped down the side of the dumpster, feet skidding along the wet garbage. He sucked in a strained breath, seeing Greyback rear overhead, both fists poised to strike down on his head, surely enough force to cave in his skull. Tom’s mind reeled, images flying through at rapid speed, a blur of memories. He flinched, braced for the fatal impact, eyes closing as his thoughts settled on a single image.

The last time he saw her. Standing in front of his cot, arms wrapped around her middle, tears streaking her cheeks, eyes pleading. How badly he wanted to go to her, hold her, take her with him. It took every ounce of strength to let her go. To walk away. To say goodbye. His eyes traveled over her slowly, taking in every detail, a part of him knowing this would be the last time he saw her.

To prepare for this moment. So when I died I could have a clear image of her in my mind... I just wish she wasn’t crying. I wish I remembered her smile.

A strangled grunt sounded above him. Tom’s eyes snapped open on instinct, realizing with belated detachment he wasn’t dead yet. He watched in confusion as Greyback reared back, eyes bulging, and lost his balance, staggering.

Then he noticed the slim figure hanging around the man’s thick neck, dangling down his back like a scantily clad cape.

Tom blinked, rubbing at his eyes, almost blinding himself with the blade. He grunted, slipping the brass knuckles off and tossing them to the pavement as he slowly took his feet, watching in abject fascination as Bella wrapped all four limbs around Greyback from behind, putting him in a choke hold.

Her laughter filled the dark alley.

Greyback shuffled back and rammed back into the wall. Bella cried out in pain and released him, sliding down the bricks in a crumpled heap, bare knees cut and bleeding, hair a windblown mess,
lipstick smeared across her mouth.

But fuck she was a sight for sore eyes.

Tom regained his senses, fighting through the blinding pain and picked up the wood plank he’d tripped over moments before, cracking Greyback over the shoulders. The wood broke, splintering into fragments against the wall of muscle, and Greyback spun around with a roar, face blood red and lungs pumping wildly. He made a dive for Tom, Tom tried to twist away but his throbbing side prevented him from ducking in time.

Greyback seized him around the throat, picking him up off the ground entirely with one arm. Tom choked, his windpipe completely closed off, kicking useless and clawing at the meaty hand at his throat. His vision started to fade, his muscles spasming. His eyes rolled back in his head as he started to go limp, the victorious gleam of Greyback’s smile fading in lieu of another’s smile.

Hermione sat across from him on the grass, sunshine streaming in from the blue skies overhead. She wore a summer dress, spread out over her bent legs, head tipped back and eyes closed, basking in the warmth. A smile slowly curved her pink lips, her eyes opening and her head turning, pinning him beneath her warm hazel gaze.

“Tom…”

Suddenly the vice around his throat released, Tom fell to the ground in a crumpled heap, gasping desperately for breath, his windpipe still throbbing, eyes streaming with tears. He blinked, turning his head to watch in amazement as Greyback staggered on his feet, eyes wide and horrified.

He dropped to his knees, the sound of his bones and weight hitting the cement a deafening crack. Tom blinked through the blur of wetness and saw a river of red cutting a path from Greyback’s neck across his chest, down to his thighs and pooling along the ground, saturating the fabric and cement.

Tom’s eyes traveled up, following the torrent of blood to the shimmer of something metal. He choked on another greedy breath as he realized his own discarded blade was wedged into the man’s carotid artery, the brass knuckles dancing beneath the strobe light.

And Bella stood behind him, panting, arms trembling, eyes fixed on her wounded and dying prey. Her eyes glowed menacingly.

“I wore this dress special for you, lover.” Her voice was deep, husky. She slowly walked around Greyback to stand at his front. “Do you like it?”

She lowered to her knees before him, running her hands along his chest, through the blood, soaking her palms in it. “I did my research, see. I’m very good at that. People don’t think I am. But I watch. I listen. And I knew you were a delicious morsel the moment I laid eyes on you.”

She smiled lavisciously, eyes locking with him. Greyback wheezed, choking on blood, body wracked with tremors. She wrapped a hand around his neck, forcing his eyes to stay on hers.

“I know you make a career of beating and humiliating women. I was so excited to meet you. I wanted you to like me, I wanted you to want me for your collection. I wanted to cut you open and see what your insides look like.”

She laughed, high and shrill, eyes crazed. “I’ve met men like you before. Men who think women are nothing but vessels for their own sick demented pleasures. We’re nothing but punching bags and cum dumpsters, toys, easily discarded rubbish. I’ve known men just like you. I’ve cut them open, too. From neck to groin, and pulled out all their insides. And you know what I’ve learned, lover?”
She whispered against his open mouth, blood dribbling down his chin and catching on her smiling lips, dripping onto her tongue.

“I’ve learned that you’re all exactly the same. Every single one of you. Useless, pathetic, weak. And so fun to play with.”

She licked his mouth, blood smearing over his lips and her tongue, dragging up along his cheek. His eyes started to roll back in his head, his heavy body tipping to the side. Bella wrapped her arms around his frame and tipped with him, pushing him back and lying across him like a lover in an intimate embrace.

“All the women you’ve hurt. Beaten. Kidnapped. All those faces that meant nothing to you. And now a woman is the cause of your demise. How absolutely delectable. Don’t you think? And I did it all in high heels and a tight little dress.”

She laughed maniacally, poised atop him as she watched his final death throes.

Tom swallowed thickly, pushing himself into a sitting position and leaning into the dumpster. He watched in morbid fascination as Bella leaned down to kiss the now lifeless body, blood dribbling from her mouth down the side of his pale and still face. Tom cringed.

She slowly leaned up, wiping delicately at her mouth and pushing her disheveled black hair from her face. She crawled off the body and turned to face Tom.

“Well. That was fun.”

Tom watched her carefully, then nodded once. “Yes, it looks like you had a ball.”

She smiled, pulling at the hem of her dress where it had ridden up her thighs. The image of her trying to straighten her clothes while blood and lipstick coated the bottom half of her face was quite a sight to behold.

She glanced back up, expression neutral and calm. “I’m quite worked up. Would you like to fuck?”

Tom swallowed, reaching a hand to press against his broken rib. “As flattering as the offer is, I have more pressing concerns to see to at the moment.”

Bella tilted her head and studied him. “Is it me? This is the second time you’ve turned me down now.”

Tom blinked. “Waking up to a knife at my throat doesn’t exactly put me in the mood. Neither does being beaten and strangled in an alley.”

She shrugged, slowly taking her feet and brushing at her skinned knees. “I think it’s more than that. Is there someone else?”

Tom opened and closed his mouth, watching her in disbelief. “What the bloody hell are you on about?”

She smiled, teeth still wet with Greyback’s blood. “I think you know exactly what I mean, Tommy.”

Tom narrowed his eyes, biting back a groan as he struggled to stand, ignoring her.

“Well, for what it’s worth, I think she’s a very lucky girl. Or perhaps your devotion makes her rather unlucky.”
Tom braced his weight against the dumpster, glancing at her with resigned anger. He knew he couldn't shut her up. Couldn’t control her. It was better to wait out her mood swings. Soon enough she disregarded him and peered down at her fallen prey, studying the body with a blank expression.

“Well…” she said on a sigh, leaning down and pulling the blade from the corpse’s neck. The metal made a wet squelching sound, another spurt of blood spraying the cement. “If I can’t have your cock, I guess I’ll have to take his.”

Tom blinked, brows drawn together, certain he must have misheard her. Then he watched with detached horror and fascination as Bella lowered herself into a straddle position over Greyback’s thighs and started to unfasten his pants. Tom held his breath, leaning his weight against the wall, arm still cradled at his side, watching as Bella repositioned the blade in her right hand and fished the limp cock from the dead man’s trousers with her left.

He took a deep breath and looked away, the wet sound of severing flesh filling the narrow alley.

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**Wednesday July 13, 2005**

Harry made several copies of Luna’s sketch, posting one to the center of the evidence wall and distributing the others to his team. They’d use the photo during interviews with the party guests to see if the mysterious janitor was also at the Club that night.

Luna and Neville printed out lists of guest names and posted them alphabetically to the wall. Sirius suggested they group them by physical address to make more efficient use of their time.

“Not everyone will be accessible at home, we’ll also need to list work addresses,” Harry said, still pacing the small office with pent up energy in the wake of having such a strong lead.

*His face. We have his bloody face…*

“In that case, we should group the Club employees together, call ahead so management can set aside a room, spend the day doing interviews,” Sirius suggested.

“We aren’t Ministry sanctioned, I doubt they’ll be so accommodating.”

“They don’t need to know that. Who’s the best actor among us?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Such a wonderful example you set.”

“I’m not the boss anymore, I don’t have to be a pillar of respectability anymore,” Sirius winked, grinning broadly.

“I don’t think anyone’s ever accused you of that.”

“Perhaps we should rank the guests in order of importance, start interviews with those closest to Lucius, people more likely to have been in his company throughout the night,” spoke the feminine voice of the team.

Harry smiled at Luna. “I like that idea.”

Then he blinked, expression falling. If they started the interviews with the people most closely connected to the victims then at the very top of their list would be…

“We should make Draco Malfoy priority one,” Sirius said, making his way to the coffee maker.
Harry’s eyes fixed to the wall. He knew Draco was their best bet, in terms of possible witness testimony as well as motive to coordinate the murders. He was their top suspect until they were able to rule him out. Harry knew he needed to conduct the interview himself, as soon as possible.

But christ he was dreading it.

Harry felt responsible for Narcissa’s murder, his actions paved the way for the killer to get to her. How was he supposed to look Draco in the eye after that? The man had lost both his parents in a weekend. Harry could sympathize. He’d lost his parents within a two day span as well.

*What a morbid bloody coincidence.*

Still, no matter Harry’s inner turmoil he had a job to do, and speaking with Draco, gauging his likelihood as a suspect, was vital to moving forward with the case. Even if Draco wasn’t behind the plot to murder his parents he may have a handle on who was. He’d worked closely with his father at the family company for all his adult life, surely he knew the same people, had the same connections. He could be their greatest untapped resource.

“I’ll call his office, see how soon I can get in to see him,” Harry said, voice flat.

He jolted when he felt a hand at his shoulder. He glanced to the side and saw Luna standing next to him. She smiled serenely, as always.

“It will be a difficult meeting, but a necessary one. If he really wants to catch his parents’ killer he’ll want to speak with you.”

Harry blinked, swallowing and nodding, unsure what message he was trying to impart but appreciating her words nonetheless. She was very intuitive, she’d be great at conducting interviews. An idea popped into his head suddenly and he made the decision then and there.

“I’d like to pair you and Neville for field interviews.”

She had a gentle patience that Neville would respond well to. She’d help ease him into working more closely with the public. Harry had chosen Neville for his skills with the computer, but he wanted to strengthen his friend in other areas if he could, and field work was vital to becoming an Officer, which he knew Neville wanted more than anything.

Luna tilted her head. “I think that’s a great idea.”

Harry couldn’t contain his smirk when he heard Neville trip over the table leg.

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Tom watched his associates from his position against the wall facing the kitchenette. They’d arrived at their Vienna hotel suite an hour earlier. Regulus had spent the time setting up his equipment and Bella had excused herself to the bathroom, the sound of running water emanating from behind the ornately carved door.

She’d emerged in a terry cloth robe several minutes earlier, dark hair wrapped in a plush towel. Her make up was removed, face clean and delicate looking, the unassuming man might even think her fragile. Tom knew better. Her black eyes still held smoldering embers at the center, always watching, evaluating the room and its inhabitants. He’d underestimated her abilities once, he’d never make the mistake again.

“Tommy, luv, please sit down, you’re brooding is making me nervous.”
Tom rolled his eyes, ignoring the bait.

She smiled, lips curving a wicked line even without their normal coat of red paint. He looked away, his mind superimposing the memory of blood dripping down her chin.

“Surely you aren’t always this stressed? You’d have more lines on your face.”

“Don’t worry about me, Bella.”

She laughed lightly, pulling out a chair beside Regulus at the table and sitting, primly crossing her legs. The robe split open to reveal a long tanned leg from ankle to hip. She leaned back, stretching her arms over her head and arching her back, moaning low in her throat with her eyes closed. Tom and Regulus exchanged looks of annoyance and amusement. Tom knew he harbored no desire for the female assassin and he was quite certain Regulus shared his sentiments. Still, Tom expected Bella to try something at least once with him, if not with both of them before the mission was through.

*Then again, you haven’t seen her in nearly six years. She may have changed…*

**Yeah, she might be even more bat shit.**

Tom turned his focus to the window beside him, the room was quiet but for Bella’s long red nails tapping along the table top in a slow drum and the sound of Regulus punching keys at rapid speed. Tom watched the busy street below, cars and bicycles filling the motorway, pedestrians surging along the crosswalks and store fronts.

His eyes lifted to the skyline, the breathtaking mix of Baroque and modern architecture. From this vantage point he could just make out ships cruising along the Danube river. He loved the water. It always had a way of calming his mind. He often ran along the Thames on the mornings he was home.

“You look exhausted.”

Tom’s jaw ticked, eyes remaining fastened to the window. He could see her face in the glass, her features seemed sharper, more lethal in the reflected version. She watched Tom with an irritating smile.

“Late night?”

He sighed, cracking his neck and shifting his position. “They’re all late nights.”

He watched her reflection from the corner of his eye, her smile deepened. “Lover keep you up late?”

Tom blinked, shoulders tensing. He watched the triumphant gleam in her dark gaze as her eyes shifted to stare at the reflection he cast in the window, their translucent selves engaging in a game of mental warfare.

“My lovers always keep me busy. That’s why I keep them around.”

She hummed, folding her hands beneath her chin and leaning forward, elbows resting on the table, watching him with amusement. “Is that so? A string of lovers then? Or do you have a particular favorite?”

Tom stood deathly still, anger simmering just beneath the surface. He got the disturbing feeling Bella knew more than she was letting on. But she couldn’t possibly know.
He spun around, pinning her with his stormy gaze. Lightning blazed in their depths. “Is there a point to these questions, Bella?”

Her expression turned innocent, confused, a look that was so obscenely out of place on her face it nearly caused him to laugh outright.

“I’m just trying to catch up on the last six years, Tommy. I’m sorry if I’ve hit a nerve.”

Tom inhaled sharply, stance going rigid. He opened his mouth to sling the next barb when Regulus loudly cleared his throat from the other side of the table.

“If you two are done with your disturbing mating ritual I’d like to discuss the actual job.”

Bella and Tom blinked, turning their attention to the third person in the room, both having forgotten he was even there.

Regulus sat behind two laptops, multiple cables running out of the backs and into another machine he didn’t recognize. Tom had never been a technology enthusiast. He understood the basics for the sake of his own missions, hidden cameras, bugs, tracking devices, but he wasn’t an expert by any stretch of the imagination. Regulus was the go to person when you needed something hacked, disabled or some special piece of equipment to overcome tightened security.

“What’s on your mind, Reg?”

Regulus glanced at Tom with an annoyed expression but quickly averted his attention back to one of the screens. He was very focused, very driven, and very good at his job. All reasons Tom found him more tolerable than most others he’d encountered.

“Have either of you read the summary on our target?” His flat tone suggested he already knew the answer to the question.

Tom leaned against the wall once more and smirked. “Why bother doing my homework when I know you’ve already done the assignment?”

Regulus rolled his eyes, continuing to type something out. Bella smiled and leaned towards the tech specialist. “Come now, Reggie, darling, you know how I love to hear you talk. Why read a boring block of text when I can listen to your honeyed voice instead?”

Now Regulus really rolled his eyes. “Bloody hell, useless, the both of you.”

Tom folded his arms and continued to smile, waiting for Regulus to continue.

“Well, had either of you read the summary Green provided then you’d know Corban Yaxley comes to Vienna on a regular basis for business. He always stays at the same hotel, the same penthouse suite, and tends to frequent the same venues.”

“Hmm. A creature of habit. How I love those,” Tom said to no one in particular.

“Yes, well, it certainly makes for easier planning. I dug up his spending history from his past few visits. Credit card receipts, bank statements, even his room service bills. Looks like he prefers to dine in during the week and eat out on the weekend.”

“Lovely. Perhaps we can pose as chefs and poison his meal?” Bella’s eyes gleamed with mirth.
Regulus didn’t bother to acknowledge her. “He also travels with his own private security detail. Four armed guards. All of them accompany him when he’s in the city, two stay in his suite with him when he’s at the hotel. The other two stay in a room one floor below.”

Tom turned his head back towards the window, eyes fixed upon the glitter of the water in the far distance as his mind worked through the possibilities. Four armed guards for one man was a bit much, but he’d cut through more to get to his target in the past. Still, he was on a probationary period with Green and wanted to avoid making a bigger mess than absolutely necessary. He’d need to think creatively, show a bit more finesse versus brute strength.

“There’s something else.”

Tom turned back around to gaze upon Regulus, the tone of the man’s voice perking his ears.

“There’s a large charge that appears on his personal card every time he makes a trip to Vienna. But the company listed for the charge is a fake. Or at least the name is. I traced the electronic payment to an offshore account. There was a single phone number registered to it. I tried a reverse look up but there was no matches on any public registries.”

Tom straightened, intrigued by the news. Bella also sensed something big on the horizon, leaning forward and smiling at Regulus’s look of concentration.

“I ran the phone number through the dark web and found a hit.”

Tom inhaled sharply. This couldn’t mean anything good. Drugs were easy enough to procure through one of Yaxley’s many associates. The same went for unregistered weapons. If he was purchasing something off the dark web it was most likely a service provided directly to or for him. Most services fell into one of two categories; sex or murder. A disturbing few fell into both. He wondered which extracurricular activity Yaxley dabbled in.

“Exciting. Is he a pervert or a psychopath?” Bella asked, obviously following along a similar train of thought.

Regulus sighed, tapping a few more keys before resting his hands on the table. “The phone number pulled up two websites. Both distinctly different yet distinctly similar. Obviously it’s the same company, they’re just running different ads to appeal to more clients.”

Tom raised a dark brow. Definitely a service then. Bella stood from her chair and walked behind Regulus, leaning forward and placing her hands on his shoulders, the robe slipping open and revealing the swell of her cleavage, pressing into the back of Regulus’s head as she peered at the screen in front of him.

“Do you mind?” he snapped, leaning forward and shrugging out of her grasp.

Bella didn’t spare him a glance, laughing instead. At first Tom thought she was laughing at Regulus’s obvious revulsion and discomfort. But as her laugh lingered on he realized she was reacting to whatever she saw on the screen.

*Fuck. This can’t be good.*

Tom tilted his head in confusion as Bella’s dark gaze cut to him, leaning back and holding her side as her laughter took on the maniacal quality he remembered so vividly. It was the same sound she emitted when she was hanging onto Greyback’s neck, trying to choke the life out of a man easily three times her size.
Regulus peered up as well, his expression more resigned than amused. “It’s an escort service. He hires companions every time he’s in Vienna.”

Tom felt his shoulders relax. Prostitution was a far more tame pastime than he’d been braced for. In fact, it was so run of the mill it was almost disappointing. There were plenty of escort services on the regular web to choose from. Hell, there was probably ads disguised in the local paper.

Bella continued to laugh, Regulus glanced at her in annoyance, then turned back to Tom. “The type of… services they offer are… a bit more exotic in nature than what you’d find at your typical bordello.”

Tom rolled his eyes. “I don’t think anyone uses that word anymore, Reg. Alright, so the man’s a bit kinky. Why does that have you in stitches?” He directed his focus to Bella. The towel had come loose from her head, her long dark hair fell in damp chaos around her shoulders.

“Oh, Tommy, this is going to be our most exciting mission yet!” She wiped at her eyes, taking a deep breath to steady herself.

Tom got a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He stood away from the wall and started walking to the table, eyes fixed to the back of the laptop. Regulus leaned back to give Tom room to see the screen.

Tom walked around the table and peered down, his heart stuttering upon seeing the images on the homepage of the website. Bella’s laughter renewed upon seeing the blood drain from his face. Regulus glanced up at him, sympathy in his eyes.

“Sorry, mate. It’s a gay S&M service. Looks like you’ll be going undercover tonight.”
Another Wednesday

A/N: Welcome back my turtle doves!

Thank you for your comments, I love reading your reactions :D

On with the show!

Saturday November 9, 2002

“I can’t believe you’re leaving,” Hermione said into her friend’s hair, hugging her tightly.

“I know, it’s surreal,” Carmen said with a light laugh, squeezing her close.

“I’m going to miss you so much, Car.”

“I’m only going to be a quick phone call away, you know I’ll be calling you obsessively when we get there. I won’t know the first thing to do in America. What if they don’t have the biscuits I like?”

Hermione laughed, pulling back to peer in Carmen’s guileless brown eyes. “I am sure you’ll find a perfectly suitable substitute, the country is quite large, lots of stores to choose from.”

The girls reluctantly broke apart, both smiling sadly. Hermione was trying her best to keep it together, she was losing her closest friend tonight but refused to dwell on the full ramifications, she’d let it hit her like a tidal wave in the privacy of her own flat tomorrow morning.

“Where’s my girl at?” a familiar voice called from outside the kitchen.

Carmen rolled her eyes. “In here, idiot!” she called out with a broad grin.

Hermione smiled as well as a third person entered the narrow galley. “Mione! There you are! I didn’t know you arrived yet.”

“I just got here. The party is great, Ollie.”

She leaned in to hug the tall, gangly male wearing his signature rugby sweater. He pulled her in close and squeezed her tightly, making her laugh against his chest.

Hermione had always felt at ease in Oliver’s presence. He was down to earth and treated Carmen like a princess. She was deeply relieved her best friend had found someone who cherished her so. They shared a deep seeded tenderness and an ongoing banter that lacked any scorn. Seeing them together made Hermione insanely happy and insanely jealous. She felt overwhelming guilt for the latter emotion, but she couldn’t help herself. Seeing the couple brought up memories of Him.

It hurt to think his name. Three years she’d been out of Wool’s, three years she’d been out in the world, three years he had yet to make an appearance.

*He isn’t going to appear, Hermione. Don’t you get that? He left you. He’s gone. Now you’re losing Carmen, too…*

*You have no one. You’re all alone. You’ll always be alone.*

Hermione cleared her throat to distract herself from the dark voices in her mind. They were acting up
as of late, sending her into lapses of depression. Her usual recourse from these sour moods was to visit Carmen, but now she’d have to find some other means of distraction.

Nothing will be the same when she leaves. You’ll never find a friend like her. No one who loves you this much, who is this loyal.

Hermione blinked rapidly, trying to stave off the tears. She refused to have an emotional breakdown at Carmen and Oliver’s going away party. This was a night for celebration and she wouldn’t make it about her.

“Oi, Mione,” Oliver whispered suddenly, effectively pulling her from her melancholy thoughts for a moment. “Vic’s here, he was asking about you.”

Hermione blinked, warmth staining her cheeks. Carmen smiled from behind her boyfriend, wrapping her arms around his middle and winking at Hermione. “Victor’s been hot for Mione since he met her, what else is new?”

Hermione averted her gaze, busying herself with sorting through a pile of napkins on the counter. “You guys, please…”

“Oh come on, Mione!” Oliver cried with a smirk. “The bloke’s absolutely batty for you. Have mercy on the poor love stricken sod. Go out with him, just once, otherwise he’s gonna continue whining to me at all hours of the night, and once we’re in separate time zones that just won't be practical.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, the blush spreading, staining her neck. Carmen laughed. “Ollie, leave her alone! She is free to date or not date whoever she pleases. Besides, Victor is a bit too rough and tumble for Mione. She needs someone more refined, more book smart. He’d never be able to keep up with her.”

“Well that’s never hindered your friendship.”

Carmen gasped, scandalised, swatting at the back of his head while he laughed and tried to catch her hands. “Prat!”

“Sorry, love, you know it’s true. None of us can keep up with the little scientist. Doesn’t mean Vic can’t satisfy her in other ways.”

Hermione shook her head, mortified and praying the ground would swallow her whole.

“Perv!” Carmen laughed, then gazed past him to stare at her friend. “Mione, I apologize for this man’s stupidity. Please, don’t feel pressured to go out with Victor.”

Oliver wrapped his arms around Carmen once more. “Sorry, Mione. I was just playing around. But honestly, Vic is a great guy and is really interested in you. You could stand to do a lot worse.”

Hermione sighed, her hand unconsciously moving to play with the golden pendant around her neck. She always wore the necklace. Showered in it. Slept in it. It only left her neck on the few occasions she’d had it cleaned. Carmen caught the movement, as she always did, and her brown eyes narrowed.

“Ollie, luv, can you take the veggie platter to the living room, please?”

Oliver leaned down and kissed the top of her head. “Ah, time for girl talk. That’s all you had to say.”

She smiled up at him, pecking him on the lips. “Thank you, darling. But really, our guests are eating
us out of house and home. Please take the veggies out, it sends the hint that we’re running out of food and they need to chip in to order pizza.”

He laughed and did as bade, flashing Hermione his boyish grin on his way out with the tray in both hands. Hermione sighed deeply, eyes lingering on his retreating form, knowing what was in store for her now that Carmen had her secluded.

“Mione, are you avoiding romantic entanglements because of Tom?”

Hermione couldn’t prevent from cringing upon hearing his name. She couldn’t help it, the sound those three letters made caused a sharp pain in her chest.

“Jesus christ, it’s been five years, Mione!”

Hermione’s jaw flexed, angry tears brimming in her eyes as she kept her gaze averted to the counter. “You think I like feeling this way, Carmen? You think I don’t know how pathetic I look?”

Her friend sighed and approached her, placing a gentle arm on her shoulder and squeezing. “Hermione, you aren’t pathetic. You’re heart broken. But you need to let go and move on, for your sake. It’s not healthy to obsess like this.”

Hermione swallowed lightly, wiping at her eyes before the tears had a chance to fall. “I’m not obsessed,” she muttered miserably, not sounding convincing even to herself.

“Mione, luv, you wear the necklace every day. Every. Single. Day. Since you were sixteen. You avoid nice blokes because you’re waiting for him to magically reappear. Tell me this, if he did show up on your doorstep tomorrow, would you even want him? No, think about it…” she bade, gently nudging Hermione’s shoulder. “Would you want to take back the boy who abandoned you for five years? Who broke the only promise he ever made you? Is that really someone you think you can depend on? That you’d want in your life?”

Hermione blinked, a tear trekking down her cheek. She groaned and wiped at it angrily.

I can’t believe I’m crying over a guy I haven’t seen in half a decade! He certainly isn’t crying over me. He probably hasn’t thought of me in years.

Carmen sighed, leaning against the counter to face Hermione, her brown eyes warm and sympathetic. “Look, Mione, I can’t pretend to know what you’re going through. Ollie is my first and only love, and I can’t imagine losing him, especially all of a sudden, without explanation. But I’ve known you for a very long time, and I’ve seen you overcome greater obstacles than Tom fucking Riddle. I just can’t understand why you can’t let him go. He left you, Mione. He doesn’t deserve your devotion. And certainly not your tears. And let’s face it, he’s probably not anything like he was. If you ran into him on the street tomorrow he’d be an entirely different person, you don’t even know if you’d feel the same way about him.”

Hermione swallowed heavily, looking away and closing her eyes. “I know you’re right, Car. I say those things aloud everytime I think about him. But I can’t stop. I can’t turn it off. I’ve tried. Honestly, I’ve tried so hard. I hate myself for hanging on. For wearing the necklace. But it hurts less when I wear it, and I’d rather wallow in self loathing than constant heartbreak.”

She opened her eyes, meeting her friend’s gaze with a silent plea. She didn’t know how she was going to make Carmen understand when she didn’t understand it herself.

She just couldn’t let go. Try as she might, her heart was still caught on Tom’s hook, the metal spike puncturing all the way through to her core, inescapable.
She swallowed thickly, wiping her eyes one last time. Carmen tilted her head. “Maybe if you had a
distraction you’d be able to start letting go. Not all at once, but in pieces. Until one day you
eventually wake up and realize you haven’t thought about him in weeks, then months, and
eventually you forget you’ve even forgotten.”

Hermione laughed bitterly.

*Yeah, forget Tom Riddle. That’ll happen.*

“I’m already plenty busy, Car. I’m at the lab until all hours of the night, plus my job at the library. I
barely have time to shower.”

“I didn’t say busy, I said distracted. There’s a difference.”

Hermione raised a brow. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, how often do you think about Tom when you’re mixing chemicals, or thumbing through a
massive tomb at the back of the library?”

Hermione remained silent, cheeks flushing.

*I think about him all the time. At school, at work, everytime I see a guy over six feet with dark hair.
Every time I hear a deep voice or laugh from around the corner. I’m always on the lookout, always
envisioning what he looks like now.*

Carmen shook her head, reading Hermione’s thoughts plain as day. “Exactly. Staying busy doesn’t
necessarily mean you’ll be free of him. But being distracted, by something that can fill the void that
Tom left, that can help.”

Hermione’s shoulder drew back, suspecting the turn this conversation was about to take. Carmen
raised a staying hand.

“Wait! Just hear me out! You’re a scientist. You experiment all the time. You don’t know if
something works unless you give it a test run. You never know if adding a new ingredient will make
the formula better until you try. You’re brilliant, Mione. You have to understand what you’re doing
is very unhealthy. I know you want to be free from him. But what you’ve tried so far isn’t working,
what you’re doing each day isn’t working. So as a scientist, it’s time to change up the formula. I
think you should try going on a date.”

Hermione paled, leaning against the counter. Carmen stepped forward and grabbed her arm.

“Just one date! I’m not asking you to run off and get hitched to the first bloke you see. But try having
a casual night out with a guy that you might like, even as a friend. Nothing has to happen, you can
stand ten feet away from him the entire time. But you’ll never know whether you like it until you try.
The worst that can happen is the night’s a bust and you obsess over Tom the same as always. But
think of all the benefits that could come out of it.”

Hermione sighed deeply, leave it to Carmen to make the prospect of dating into a scientific
experiment. She knew it helped Hermione think about it from that viewpoint.

“And let me guess, you’d like my first controlled experiment to be with Victor.”

Carmen grinned. “I didn’t say that. However, if we’re talking nice guys who we already know think
you hang the moon, and also happen to be hot as fuck, well, I can think of no better candidate.”
Hermione rolled her eyes. “But… he’s a rugby player.”

“So is Oliver. Trust me, they have amazing asses beneath those shorts.”

Hermione allowed a small smirk to play at the corner of her mouth before her expression fell once again. “He’s always so serious looking. I’ve never seen him laugh, or smile. At anything. It’s like he’s paid to keep emotions off his face.”

“Hmm. Sounds a bit like you, doesn’t it? Imagine how surly and temperamental your children will be.”

Hermione opened her mouth, ready to voice a denial, but the words fell flat on her tongue as she thought to the past parties and games she attended, always remanding herself to a corner of the room, avoiding eye contact, opening a book to read on the stands. She sighed.

“Fine. If I happen to cross paths with Victor tonight I’ll…. give him an honest shot. But I make no promises.”

Carmen laughed, leaning into Hermione’s side. “Oh don’t you worry about crossing paths. That boy looks for any excuse to talk to you. Trust me, he’ll find his way to you before the night’s through.”

Hermione rested her head on Carmen’s shoulder, finding it hard to feign interest in a new relationship when tomorrow she was losing her best friend. But she’d honor her word and give Victor a shot, even if if it was just to prove to herself she could.

She would break Tom’s hold over her heart, starting tonight.

Wednesday July 13, 2005

Hermione tilted her head back and groaned. Her skull pressed against something soft. Her body was vertical, weightless atop something plush. She tried to sit up but her limbs felt leaden.

She slowly opened her eyes, the movement took great effort. Her hazy gaze was met with a sea of white. She blinked, and the sea turned three dimensional. She blinked again and noticed a long crack running along the water.

Not water. A sea bed. Dry and cracked and dying.

The thought made her swallow instinctively but the motion caught in her throat, parched as it was, a burning ache.

She tried to turn her head but it had other ideas. She moved her eyes instead, tracing the long crack until it disappeared into another wall of white.

I know that crack...

She tried again to swallow, to no avail.

My ceiling.

She inhaled sharply, realization dawning on her, the memories quick to follow.

Oh my god.

Oh my god! Oh my god oh my god oh my god…
She detected movement behind the couch, near her kitchen, but whatever was moving was blocked from view. Her heart raced wildly, her limbs frozen, the adrenaline spiking with no way to expend the energy. She was going to have a heart attack.

_No, you’ll have cardiac arrest._

_Really?! This is no time for logical thinking! If there was ever a time to panic it’s now!_

_Why the fuck can’t I move?_

_Who’s there? Is that Whitmore?_

_He isn’t Whitmore! He’s someone that knows Tom._

_Tom…_

_Does Tom know about this? Is he in on it? Did he send this man to kill me?_

_You know Tom wouldn’t do that._

_Then why isn’t he here?_

_He’s in Vienna. He left you, remember? You told him to choose and he didn’t choose you._

_Is that why this man is here to kill me? Because Tom is done with me? I’m to be treated like a used up napkin, easy crumpled and tossed away…_

She blinked rapidly, tears trekking down the sides of her face, soaking into her hairline.

She screamed at her limbs to move, her head a symphony of profanity and blind panic. Her fingers flinched at her sides, brushing her bare thighs where the dress had ridden up. She realized with belated disbelief that this was the same way she’d been laying on her couch when Tom made love to her.

_And now I’m going to die here. Because of Tom. How fitting._

_Mrs. Cole was right, girls who sin burn in hell._

_I’m not a girl anymore, I’m a grown woman and I’m going to fight through whatever the fuck is in my system! Just breathe Hermione, breathe and calm down, we can get through this, you aren’t dying here today._

The tears continued to flow freely down her face even as her resolve strengthened. She heard the sound of glass clinking, something being set on her countertop. Her chest moved faster with her quickened breath. She heard soft footfalls, the sound of a cabinet opening and shutting.

_Move, dammit!_

Her left arm flinched, flopping off the side of the couch, her hand smacking against the hardwood. She cringed internally, sensing the movement behind her stilling. Silence filled the flat. She knew she was being watched, and her heart felt like it would explode in her chest.

Then the sound of approaching footsteps filled her world, a long shadow appearing on the wall in front of her, stretching from the floor to ceiling, steadily growing smaller as the figure neared. She sucked in a sharp breathe that sounded like a sob.
“Ah, sleeping beauty awakens. Perfect timing, I was just putting the kettle onto boil. Would you like a cup of tea?”

Hermione blinked, another tear escaping down her cheek.

“You have quite the selection. I’m also an avid tea drinker. How about some Earl Grey?”

Hermione opened and closed her mouth, her jaw clicking, tilting her head back with great effort, but she still couldn’t see the man who spoke. Her left hand opened and closed repeatedly, a desperate attempt to awaken the rest of the limb.

“Now now, Hermione, the neuromuscular blocker I gave you is obviously wearing off. If you’re able to move your hand then you should be able to provide at least one word answers.”

She blinked, her hand frozen in a claw like curl. She tilted her head back again to stretch her throat, convulsively swallowing. This time her tongue cooperated. She tried to hum, to warm up her vocal chords, but it came out as a strangled moan. She inhaled sharply and tried again, this time controlling the flow of sound.

“Wh… wh… who…” she desperately tried to form the words, nearly panting with the effort.

“I asked you if you wanted tea, dear, that’s a simple yes or no. Give it a try.”

Hermione lifted her tongue to the roof of her mouth, trying to flex every muscle she could. “F-f-fuck… y-y-you…”

The room was deathly silent for several beats before the shadow tipped its head back and emitted a deep belly laugh. “Oh, I must admit I was not expecting such spunk, Ms. Granger. I see why our Tom is so besotted.”

She continued her struggle to make her limbs cooperate. Now her right hand was moving at the wrist, fingers still clumsy.

“I’ll make you a cup anyway, you need the hydration.”

The shadow turned and grew larger as the sound of footsteps traveled to the kitchen.

What the hell is happening?

She listened to the sound of him turning the sink on, the water hitting a hollow surface, metal scraping metal, the click click click of her gas burner coming to life.

Then the footsteps approached once more. She could swivel her foot at the ankle by the time he reached her. He stood over the back of the couch, looking down upon her in equal parts fascination and amusement. His piercing gaze made her skin crawl.

“I see you are extremely strong willed. I should have expected no less. The drugs should wear off within the next half hour by the rate you’re fighting them. I’m impressed.” He slowly walked around the couch to stand at her other side. “It’s rare for me to have such a captive audience. I hope you don’t mind if I start our little chat now. We’ll consider this my turn to talk, your time to listen. Once you regain your faculties I’ll allow you the opportunity to respond. I’m a strong believer in fair play.”

She whimpered, eyes wide in terror as he leaned down, arms reaching out.

“I think we’d both prefer it if you were sitting up.” He reached behind her shoulders and pushed her
A strong wave of vertigo made her stomach flop. She inhaled sharply, a small gasp emitting from her lips as his other arm scooped beneath her knees, pulling her legs to the side and rotating her to the front, into a sitting position.

She leaned heavily against the cushions, still unable to sit upright. Her bare feet skimmed the cold ground. She blinked rapidly, taking in the new perspective, and her expression pinched in concentration as she brought her hands to her lap, fingers curled into tight fists.

“Yes, that’s much better.”

He smiled amicably, as though they were the oldest of friends, and then backed up a few paces to sit in the upholstered chair facing the couch. He leaned back, crossing his legs and stretching his arms out over the armrests, looking completely at ease.

A psychopath…

Fuck my life.

The mysterious stranger tilted his head, a look of intrigue lighting his penetrating gaze.

“I can only imagine the frustration you feel, being paralyzed. But rest assured that you have me at an equal disadvantage. One of my greatest talents is reading others, and that ability is made useless when the subject of my scrutiny is rendered motionless. You’re eyes are quite expressive though, and you seem to be coming to life more each minute. Good, that will make this conversation much easier. I detest lying, you see. Which is why I give little stock to the words people say versus the way in which they say them. I’m telling you this to save you the burden of trying to conceal the truth from me, Hermione. You may attempt to do so if you really desire, but I assure you I will see right through the illusion to the real answer. Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

Hermione blinked, nails digging into her palms as her fists clenched.

“The more you exercise your vocal chords the sooner you’ll be able to speak.”

She swallowed bitterly, eyes narrowing.

“Y-yes.”

The man smiled, nodding once. “Excellent. Let’s begin, shall we?”

Tom peered over the top of his dark sunglasses at the people milling through the hotel lobby. He stood in one of the richest establishments in the city, the main floor dripped in opulence, the decor a blend of high end modern and stylish antiques. He currently leaned against the wall farthest from the entrance, a dark line cutting across the pale damask wallpaper.

He was clad in a finely tailored suit and dress shirt, sleek leather derby shoes and sunglasses. All black. The only non black he wore was the metal of his watch, cufflinks, and clasps of his suspenders beneath the jacket. The briefcase at his side was a matte black chrome, the one he always traveled with. Only this time he’d removed his gun and filled the compartment with five hundred dollars worth of sex toys.

This day was certainly taking an interesting turn.

After Regulus had informed Tom of their targets favorite proclivity and Bella had calmed down enough to look at him with a straight face, they’d all decided going the escort route was their best bet
of catching Yaxley alone, or mostly alone, considering at least two of his armed guards were always at his side.

Tom just hoped they didn’t sit in the same room with their boss while he fucked male prostitutes. Tom could get around it, but the plan would be a hell of a lot easier to execute if afforded some privacy with his prey.

After the three of them agreed on their plan they just had to do the necessary prep work, which included more database hacking (Regulus), a trip to the local tailor (Tom) and a jaunt to the local sex store (decidedly Bella).

Afterwards they all met back at their suite to discuss game plan. Regulus had pulled up the escort service client files, they used aliases for their customers but Yaxley was easy enough to suss out based on the dates of his Vienna trips. Regulus read the client preference sheet aloud, detailing all of Yaxley’s past sessions and favorite kinks, and Bella had started cracking up anew.

Tom was no stranger to kink, he had a penchant for rough sex and role playing with wild haired brunettes. But he wasn’t familiar with S&M from a practical standpoint and had to ask for clarification on what certain terms meant. Regulus had mostly shrugged, equally perplexed, leaving it up to Bella to educate the boys. She was only too happy to describe the acts in great detail.

Tom was relieved to find out Yaxley preferred being the submissive, that would make the job exponentially easier. It also served as a personal relief as Tom had no desire to relinquish control, even while play acting. His biggest hangup upon seeing the photos on the website wasn’t disgust or homophobia, he could care less who people fucked or how they chose to be fucked. As long as all parties were consensual he didn’t see the harm in whatever acts people needed to get off. He just couldn’t stomach the thought of being dominated, of being made to feel helpless, even from an illusionary standpoint. It brought up old memories, opened old wounds, and he needed to have his head clear for this assignment. He couldn’t afford to make any mistakes.

Regulus had been assigned the task of setting up tonight’s clandestine meeting, pretending to be an employee of the escort service. While he worked that out Tom followed Bella into her bedroom to gaze upon a mattress covered in items that looked like medieval torture devices. He didn’t plan on using any of them, they were just for show, but Bella insisted he at least know what they were for in case he had to maintain the ruse longer than anticipated.

Tom had rolled his eyes, knowing her true intention was just to further amuse herself, but if he acted put off he’d only provide her with more power over him. The toys themselves didn’t bother him, rather it was the thought of Bella trying to needle her way under his skin. He kept an unaffected air about him as she held up each toy in turn, miming their uses.

He waited for the obvious bait, where she made some lewd comment about Tom practicing his S&M skills on her. But it never came. He left the sex toy seminar more unnerved by her lack of flirtation than by the images she’d just painted in his mind as she described each item.

He wondered not for the first time if she wasn’t at least slightly changed.

Still, it was better to not risk it and maintain his distance.

They’d parted ways into their separate rooms to prepare for the evening to come before each arriving at their target’s hotel separately. Regulus got here first dressed as a hotel security officer. He’d already duplicated the badge of another employee who wasn’t on shift. He was currently in the security office altering the penthouse floor camera view to broadcast footage from earlier in the evening. It wouldn’t do to have any of their faces on tape going to and from Yaxley’s room.
Tom arrived second, awaiting the text from Regulus that he was cleared to proceed upstairs. He continued to watch the guests come and go, all wearing expensive garb, fancy jewelry, expensive luggage being carted behind them by bell staff.

Though Tom had amassed a small fortune through his jobs he still detested the highly privileged. He wondered how many of them earned their money through blood, sweat and tears as he did. He knew the majority of the obscenely wealthy were born into the lifestyle. They’d never had to skip meals, live without electricity or running water, sleep with one eye open because you never knew who was going to jump you in the dark of night.

He shook his head in disgust, tipping his head back to obscure them from view behind his dark lenses. He sighed, gazing up at the intricate mural painted along the vaulted ceiling. And his thoughts yet again drifted to Hermione.

*She’s been back in my life for four days and already has me wrapped around her bloody finger.*

*Even worse, she doesn’t want me there. She wants nothing to do with me.*

His jaw ticked.

*She just needs time to cool down. She’ll come around. I’ll make her see reason.*

*I won’t lose her again. That simply isn’t an option.*

He’d deal with exactly what that meant after he finished this job.

*If we wrap up early enough I can catch a red eye back to London.*

He desperately wanted- no, *needed* - to see her. They’d work this out. They had to.

His pocket buzzed and Tom cracked his neck, pulling out his phone and glancing at the message glowing brightly on the screen.

*Clr. 1h.*

One hour would be plenty of time to complete the mission. He slipped the phone back into his pocket and leaned over to pick up his briefcase, cutting a path across the lobby to the front desk. He flashed a silver grin at the young woman working reception, even with his eyes hidden he knew his smile could disarm the best of them.

She glanced up nervously, face flushing and unconsciously tucked her bushy hair behind her ears. It reminded him of what Hermione’s hair looked like when they were kids, before she learned to condition and tame the locks. It gave him a soft spot for the girl so he changed course last minute and went to the employee beside her. He knew investigators would be swarming this place tomorrow and whoever he spoke with would be subjected to intense questioning.

The bushy haired girl blushed profusely, obviously thinking Tom changed course because of something she did. He ignored her and directed his focus on the young man standing before him.

“Hello, Sir. Welcome to the Paradies Hotel, how may I help you today?” he asked in english, his German accent thickening the contestants.

Tom smiled. “Hello. I’m visiting a friend at the penthouse level. They should be expecting me.”

“Certainly, Sir. May I have your name?”
“Of course, Rigel Black.”

“Thank you, Sir, just a moment, please.”

He typed something into the computer, his eyes flickering as he read something on the screen.

“Yes, Sir, I see you have been given permission to access the Penthouse level. I will have one of our staff take you up.”

“Thank you.”

Minutes later Tom was riding the gold plated lift, a short member of concierge beside him, using his master key to access the private floor. The doors dinged open and Tom followed the man out, down the long stretch of hall to the opulent double doors of the private suite.

“Is there anything else I can assist you with, today, Sir?”

Tom smiled. “No there isn’t, you’ve been a great help. Thank you.”

“Excellent, Sir. Have a wonderful day.”

He waited until the small figure disappeared into the open lift before turning to face the doors. He reached up a hand and knocked three times.

He heard the sound of shuffling, of heavy footsteps treading on hard ground, and then the doors were opening to reveal a large muscled guard with a jagged scar across his cheek and a gun openly displayed in a holster beneath his arm.

Tom retained his pleasant smile, removing his shades and peering into the man’s dark eyes.

“Good evening. I’m here to see Mr. Novalis.”

The guard gave him a thorough once over with his eyes before grunting, stepping back into the room and watching Tom as he stepped over the threshold.

“Set your case down, turn around and hold out your arms.”

Tom barely glanced the spacious, finely styled penthouse before he was once again eyeing a stretch of damask wallpaper, arms held aloft while the giant patted down each of his limbs.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw another large man round the corner, garbed in a similar outfit with a matching holster and weapon slung around his chest.

“Elias, check the case,” the man behind him said gruffly.

Tom continued to trace the swirling patterns on the wall as his case was brought to the coffee table and opened, Elias reaching in and removing every toy one by one and placing them on the counter, running his hands along the walls of the case looking for any hidden compartments. Neither man looked phased by the items contained within. Tom fought back a smirk at seeing the hulking guard holding a massive latex dildo.

Fuck, I wish I had a camera. This is one for the books.

Satisfied the case was free of weapons, he unceremoniously tossed all the items back inside and snapped the lid shut.
“Clear.”

The guard behind him nodded, finishing his physical inspection at the same time.

“Please take a seat. Mr. Novalis will be right with you.”

Tom tipped his head in acknowledgement and made his way across the opulent living space, taking a seat on one of the plush couches.

He spread his arms over the back, crossing his legs and peering out of the large floor to ceiling windows at the beautiful city view. He was left to his own devices for barely thirty seconds before the patter of footsteps rounded the corner and a third man appeared.

Tom studied the new addition, recognizing him from the photos Regulus provided but nonetheless easy to spot beside the large guards he employed. Yaxley had a short stature, thin, balding, with a pinched face. Tom hid his amusement behind his mask of indifference, suddenly understanding why the man preferred to pay for sex versus mingling among the gay and S&M communities in the city or surrounding areas.

Tom took his feet, towering over the man. Yaxley peered up at his face with a look of wonder, eyes gleaming. “My, aren’t you a sight…”

Tom smirked, causing Yaxley to swallow convulsively.

“Sh-shall we get acquainted in m-my quarters?”

Tom’s smile gleamed. “Certainly.”

He picked up the suitcase and followed Yaxley to the master bedroom, smiling to himself when the short man shut the door behind him, leaving his two armed guards in the main room.

*Child’s play, this.*

Yaxley cleared his throat nervously, glancing at Tom with equal parts excitement and trepidation.

“Did, did the agency tell you what… what I like?”

Tom took a deep, satisfying breath. Yes, thanks to Regulus he knew very well that this high powered businessman enjoyed being dominated and humiliated in his spare time. In the most fascinating of ways.

Tom’s eyes turned predatory, his features lethal. It was a second skin he wore often, usually stirring instinctual fear in his prey. But Yaxley lapped it up like a kitten to milk.

*Let’s have some fun, shall we?*

“In this room you will refer to me as Master. You no longer have a name. You don’t deserve a name. You will ask my permission before starting any task, and will submit to my every command. Do you understand?”

Yaxley’s eyes were wide, skin flush, chest heaving in short pants.

“Y-y-yes, Master!”

Tom’s eyes narrowed, fighting to hide his amusement as he turned away, setting the suitcase on the dresser and flipping it open.
“Good. Let’s begin.”

He reached inside for the body binds, pausing as he came across the gagball. He blinked, then smirked, grabbing it as well.

*Here goes another Wednesday.*

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**Saturday August 12, 1989**

Harry heard the phone ring downstairs, followed by the sound of his mom’s delicate footsteps as she came inside from the backyard, walking through the kitchen to answer it. The screen door slammed shut around the same time he heard her muffled voice. He couldn’t make out her words but it sounded like she was greeting whoever was on the line.

He thumbed through his comic book while sprawled out on his bed, his head near the foot and his bare feet propped up on his pillow.

Sunlight streamed in from his window, the light creating a blinding glare where it danced between swaying tree branches. Harry squinted, raising his arm and turning his head to the side. He rolled over on the mattress at the same time he heard his mother’s voice raise to shrill volumes.

He lowered the comic, brows drawing in, turning his head towards his closed door. She let out a scream and something loud thumped against the ground, followed by rapid footsteps.

Harry leapt to his feet, racing to his door without processing what he was hearing. His mother never yelled out. Something was wrong. He grabbed the doorknob as he heard her scream “Harry!” at piercing volumes, just once. He threw the door open and ran down the hall so fast he tripped on the runner, face planting at full velocity. He hit the ground with a deafening thud, all the wind pushed out of him. His glasses popped off,landing a few feet away.

He groaned, rubbing a hand over his face and slowly pushing his body up. He took to his knees and scrambled for his glasses. The downstairs was silent.

“Mom?” he called out, fingers grazing the wire frames. He swallowed heavily as he slipped them back over his face. He stared blankly at the top of the staircase from his prone position on the floor.

“Mom!”

The silence was eerie. His mother was always bustling about the house, especially on the weekend. Cooking, cleaning, laundry, plus she liked to work to sound so the TV was usually on in at least one room. The utter silence, the utter stillness spoke volumes.

*She was working on the flower bed. Maybe she went back outside…*

He thought it sounded reasonable but he couldn’t quite convince himself.

He pushed up to his feet and placed one hand against the wall to steady himself. His ankle hurt from the fall but he couldn’t focus on the pain, his entire body tense and all senses honed on the top of the landing.

He thought he heard the sound of a footstep, or maybe a chair being moved, he couldn’t tell for sure but it sounded like it was coming from the dining room or kitchen.

“Mom!” he tried again, adrenaline spiking. He swallowed heavily at the silence that answered.
She’s outside. You imagined the sound.

He slowly walked down the remainder of the hall and paused at the first step. He held his breath, limbs frozen, straining to hear any noise, any indicator of her location.

She’s outside.

He started down the steps, taking them at half speed, his hand clutching the railing in a vice.

She’d outside.

He swallowed as he felt the air around him change, some pressure differential that made the hairs on his arms and the back of his neck stand up. Instinctually it felt like someone else had entered the room, but he was in a vacuum, no sound or movement from any direction.

He was three steps away from the bottom when he saw the pool of red blossoming along the hardwood.

“Mom!”

He leapt the final two steps, hitting the bottom on a pounce and tearing around the corner to the living room. His heart lurched in his chest, skipping a beat, then picking up a rapid and painful pace.

“Mom! Mom!” he fell to his knees beside her prone form, she was laying unresponsive on her side, long auburn hair flung over her face and along the floor, part of it soaked in the ever growing pool of crimson.

Harry’s hands trembled as he grabbed her shoulder, rolling her onto her back and pushing her hair out of her face.

“Mom! Wake up!” he cried desperately, tears blurring his vision. She had a deep gash at her right temple, blood oozing from the wound in a constant stream. He was hyperventilating as he rocked on his knees, his mind so scattered he sat frozen for several seconds.

He swallowed thickly as he saw the cordless phone lying a few feet away on the floor. He awoke from his stupor, scrambling on his hands and knees to grab it. He felt separated from his body, realizing almost belatedly that the phone was on, the dial tone beeping loudly. He blinked rapidly, dialing 999 with stiff fingers and speaking to the operator in a stupor.

Tears streamed down his face as he crawled back to her side. The operator said not to move her but to try and put pressure on the wound. They asked Harry if she had a pulse. His fingers were shaking so bad he could barely find her neck.

He let out a strangled sob, nearly dropping the phone.

“No… no she doesn’t have a pulse!”

He cried heavily as he listened to the operator instruct him on CPR. His mind was still a scrambled mess, pulling up a random memory of summer camp and the CPR lesson he skived so he and his friends could take the canoe out on the empty lake.

He placed the phone aside and started chest compressions, the knees of his jeans soaked in blood. His whole body shook as he tipped her head back and breathed in her mouth. He was on the fifth round when the sound of sirens filled the air, a loud banging on the door.
He scrambled to his feet and nearly tripped again, rushing to let the paramedics in, watching in a numb stupor as they fell atop her still form, the next few minutes a blur of activity.

Someone in a uniform walked in behind them, taking Harry by the shoulders and leaning over to his eye level, saying something that he couldn’t hear, couldn’t make sense of. He wiped at his streaming eyes, the lenses of his glasses terribly smudged, his gaze still fixed on his mother. Her body jolted as they applied the external defibrillator. He choked on a strangled breath.

“I skipped my CPR class,” he said suddenly, turning to face the officer who still held him by the shoulders.

“I-I skipped it, I shouldn’t have, but I did…” he swallowed thickly, staggering on his feet, listening to the electrical zap of the defibrillator and the deafening hum of a heart rate monitor flatline.

“I’m sorry!” He collapsed forward, the officer catching him. He sobbed into the man’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

**Wednesday July 13, 2005**

Harry followed the hostess along finely made tables and finely dressed dinner guests, feeling deeply out of place and terribly underdressed.

He’d never set foot in such a fine establishment in all his life. His parents had money but never flaunted it, and the funds they left Harry were put in a trust until he reached majority, so he’d relied on his Aunt and Uncle’s charity until moving in with Sirius at sixteen, and they certainly never lavished him with fine dining experiences.

Sirius’s idea of a classy meal was a steak at the local pub, and though Remus had a refined palate he didn’t like the stuffy atmosphere of high end restaurants, preferring to cook at home. The result was that Harry’s most formative years were spent eating fish and chips and assorted delicacies from the local food carts. So stepping into such an expensive restaurant, the type you had to make reservations at well in advance, was a rather stressful experience.

But this was the location Draco Malfoy had chosen for their meeting, and as Harry was the one who requested said meeting, and Draco was the one holding all the cards, here he stood.

Harry was quite surprised Draco agreed to meet with him at all, little less the same day he called Malfoy Enterprises. The assistant he’d spoken to had been quick to dismiss Harry, promising to deliver his message to the company’s new CEO but not so subtly hinting that the request would be granted around the time’s pigs fly.

Harry had been resigned to rejection, already formulating another plan to cross paths with the young Malfoy heir when he received a call back not an hour later, confirming tonight’s reservations at the upscale French Restaurant in the heart of the business district.

Harry had been flabbergasted, but never one to look a gift horse in the mouth he quickly accepted the confirmation and then ask Sirius to help him prepare for the meeting. Luna had passed by their desk some time later and asked Harry what he planned to wear to the venue, causing an entire new set of stressors to take hold and burrow into his mind.

Harry owned plenty of suits thanks to his job at the Ministry (well, his former job at the Ministry) but he usually bought what was on sale. He considered the garments to still be flattering, but he never developed a strong fashion sense. As far as he was concerned there were greater things to worry
about than whether his outfits coordinated, usually hunting down a criminal. Plus his clothes often
got ruined in the field, stained with blood and debris from tumbles on the streets and fights in the
alleys, he just didn’t see the point in investing in anything particularly nice.

An oversight he now greatly regretted, bopping and weaving between the tables of finely tailored
suits and evening dresses.

He sighed, staring at the back of the hostess’s head.

*You aren’t here for a fashion show. You’re here to interview a potential source. A potential lead.*

*Focus.*

His heart stuttered when he caught sight of their destination at the far corner of the room. Draco’s
shock of white blonde hair was unmistakable, recognizable not only from the photos in his father’s
homicide file but from the media and online coverage of his parents demise. His face had been
splashed through the news over the last few days, on the cover of papers and magazines. The reality
of what Harry was about to do started to sink in. His thoughts strayed once more to Narcissa in her
final moments. He felt his skin turn clammy, sweat forming at his temples and along the back of his
neck.

The hostess came to a stop before the table, directing her smile at Draco as she spoke to Harry.

“Here you are, Sir. Enjoy your meal.”

Harry cleared his throat awkwardly. “Thank you.”

She nodded to Draco, who sported a supremely amused look, and then spun on her heel, heading
back the way they came.

Draco’s mercurial gaze shifted and locked onto Harry’s emerald stare, the mirth fading from the
aristocratic features to be replaced by a blank mask.

“Officer Potter. How nice to finally meet you. Please, take a seat.”

His voice was flat, uninviting despite his words. Harry swallowed lightly and pulled out a chair
opposite the man. He noted absently that Malfoy was dressed in an extremely fine looking suit that
only made Harry feel more like a sore thumb.

Harry scooted his chair in, glancing at the multitude of glasses and silverware on the table. His pulse
quickened.

*Fuck. Which fork do I start with again? I should have asked Luna for more than just fashion advice.*

“I take it you aren’t used to three star dining, Officer Potter.”

Harry did his level best not to cringe, grasping the arms of his chair beneath the table and locking
gazes with the blonde once more.

“That would be an accurate statement, and please, call me Harry.”

Malfoy smiled thinly, eyes void of any amusement. “Hmm. So informal for our first meeting. Or is
there another reason you’d like me to abstain from using your professional title?”

Harry’s jaw ticked, sensing the trap he had been led to. Never one to tow the line, Harry plunged in
headfirst, face breaking through the icy cold waters.
“I take it you’ve been made aware of my dismissal from the Ministry.”

Malfoy leaned back, leveling Harry with an intense stare.

“Yes, I have. I heard there was an incident.”

Harry felt his pulse thrumming through his body, he took a deep breath. “I am very sorry about what happened to your mother. I take full responsibility for what transpired. And that is the reason I requested this meeting. I am still trying to pursue her killer.”

Malfoy tipped his head, expression unreadable, but his eyes held an inner flame that was impossible to look away from, much as Harry wanted to.

“How kind of you to take responsibility for something that was decidedly your fault. Please, allow me to commend you for your selfless abdication.”

Harry’s brows drew together, his chest tightening, words forming on instinct, scalding his tongue. He forced himself to take a deep breath, his hands clenching on his thighs, willing his composure to stay strong.

You’ve been where he is. Two dead parents in as many days. Angry and confused, lashing out at any and everyone within reach.

And let’s face it, you’ve earned his scorn. At least this once.

Harry held Malfoy’s heated stare, allowing a few seconds of tense silence to pass before responding in a calm manner.

“I am deeply sorry for your loss. I know you don’t know me at all, but trust me when I say your mother’s passing will haunt me for the rest of my days. It also has filled me with a relentless drive to find her killer. The same person that killed your father. And when I set my mind to something, I’m a force to be reckoned with.”

A muscle in the blonde’s jaw tensed, his eyes slitting. “What a misfortune that you couldn’t have set your mind to protecting my mother from a homicidal maniac.”

Harry leaned back, measuring Malfoy with a steady gaze. “Not a homicidal maniac. A highly skilled and intelligent assassin. Most likely a hitman. Hired to kill your father, and then to eliminate your mother as a viable witness. Trained to stalk his prey and overcome obstacles. I want to know who hired him, and I want to ensure no one else is killed by him.”

He had hoped this profile of his parent’s murderer would shake Malfoy from his bitter throne and inspire enough curiosity to move the conversation forward. He watched the internal debate the blonde was having, his eyes casting down to the table and his posture stiffening, as though envisioning the crimes in his head. Harry wondered how many times the man played the violent scenes in his head, imagining what they experienced, what they thought of in their final moments. Such thoughts plagued Harry years after his parents deaths, still to this day even.

Finally Malfoy looked up, determination written as clear as day across his fine boned features.

“You have any leads?”

Harry took a deep breath, relieved to steer the conversation in a new direction. “I have his face.”
Malfroy blinked, jolting in his chair. Harry slid Luna’s sketch out of the folder he brought with him, leaning forward and pushing it across the white table linen, knocking over an empty wine glass with his elbow. Draco maintained his distance, reaching forward and picking up the paper with his thumb and index finger, as though lifting a dirty sock off the ground.

Harry watched his reaction carefully, eyes transfixed, ready to catch any hint of panic or recognition. As guilty as he felt regarding Narcissa’s murder, he hadn’t ruled out her son as a suspect.

The blonde held the paper low, peering down at it, his face a sea of a calm. It was almost eerie, the lack of reaction. Harry reminded himself the eye of the storm contained calm waters as well. He couldn’t determine anything one way or the other, the man’s lack of reaction could be due to indifference or practiced avoidance. He may have spent time preparing for this moment, schooling his reactions.

“Recognize him?”

Malfroy continued to study the image, his body locked and frozen other than the minute flicker of his pale eyes.

“No.”

Harry chewed on the inside of his cheek, continuing to study the man. Finally the blonde set the drawing down, peering up at Harry with emotionless eyes.

“You’re certain this is the man who killed my mother?”

Harry blinked, the question taking him off guard. “Not certain, but all evidence is pointing that way at the moment. We also suspect he was the one to kill your father, we still need to show his image to party guests to cross reference his presence at the Club.”

“How is it you’re still running this investigation when you were fired from the Ministry? You’re no longer an Officer, correct?”

Harry felt his shoulder tense. He took a deep, steadying breath. He’d anticipated this question, had prepared what information he was willing to provide before hand, but hearing the verbal reminder of his termination still stung, especially when delivered with such scorn.

“I am running a privately funded investigation to track the person responsible for these crimes.”

“And who is financing this project?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

“And if I were to refuse to continue this conversation until you reveal a name?”

“Well I’ll have to bid you good evening. But I implore you to reconsider. We are not Ministry sanctioned, however we are operating within the law, with far less red tape to get through without having to worry about Ministry policies. I assure you, working with me will lead to a faster outcome than partnering exclusively with the Ministry.”

Malfroy tipped his head back, peering down his nose at Harry.

“You’re asking me to trust the person responsible for my mother having her throat sliced open in her own hospital room?”
Harry held his gaze. “I’m asking you to trust the person hunting this man, the person who saw his face, who won’t stop at anything until he finds him and brings him to justice. I will continue to pursue him without your help, but it would be a great benefit to have your assistance.”

The silence at the table was deafening. Harry held his breath, muscles tense. Finally after a short eternity he watched as Malfoy’s defensive posture eased, his jaw tipping down to bring his eyes level with Harry’s.

“Very well, Potter. Let’s order some food and discuss catching this murderer.”

Friday December 20, 2002

Hermione pulled her coat closer as a crisp winter breeze swept over the water front and along the pedestrian path. Victor’s large frame had helped block out a lot of the wind but this one blew in from a side angle, tossing her curls across her face.

She brushed the hair away, wishing she had braided or tied it all back. But Carmen had insisted she leave it down, counseling her on outfit choices as Hermione spoke to her while getting ready. Her friend was just as invested in Hermione’s first date with the handsome rugby player as Hermione herself. Actually, she was probably more invested, as Hermione had great difficulty amounting any great excitement for the evening to come. Try as she might, it was difficult to be enthusiastic given the objective of the date.

Carmen had insisted Hermione leave the necklace behind. Hermione had lied and said she removed it, only to walk out the door with it on. She’d turned on her heal before reaching the stairwell and dashed back inside, actually taking it off and leaving it on the entry table. She had then stood outside her door for a solid five minutes talking herself out of a panic attack. She’d debated cancelling the date, feigning last minute illness, then cursed herself for being so weak, so dependant on a piece of jewelry, allowing it to have such power over her all these years later.

She’d drawn her shoulders back and proceeded out of her building with a steely determination that had more to do with letting go of her past relationship than trying to form a new one. Still, Victor proved to be a very pleasant distraction, his company far more enjoyable than she’d anticipated. Up until now she’d only conversed with him at parties and sporting events she attended as Olliver’s guest. He’d always been kind to her, but also so serious, abrupt even, never really engaging her on a mental level. She’d assumed he fit the classic jock stereotype, all brawn and no brains, pretty to look at but unable to hold her interest otherwise.

She was happy to be proven wrong. They’d met outside a charming French Bistro for dinner, he’d offered to meet her at her building but she didn’t see the point in making him trek halfway across the city just to backtrack. She supposed it really wasn’t about the efficiency as much as the chivalry, but Hermione was ever the practical one, unable to turn off her sensibility in lieu of romance. During dinner he’d proven to be quite entertaining, and while it took her a few minutes to get around his thick accent, she admitted to herself he was quite witty and bright.

He wasn’t the most skilled conversationalist, he even admitted to being more comfortable expressing himself physically on the field. But he was quite handsome, poised, driven, and respectful. All fantastic qualities that she knew most girls fell out of their seats for when he walked by. Why he focused so much of his attention on Hermione for so long was beyond her, but she felt flattered by his interest.

But for all his award winning qualities, he still possessed one major, unmistakable, irreversible flaw.
He wasn’t Tom.

She tried her best to not compare the men, especially given the fact she hadn’t seen Tom in years. Who knew how the man he’d become stacked against Victor. But beyond that she knew it wasn’t fair to compare them, they were completely different people, which was a good thing. How healthy would it be if she attempted to move past her first love by dating his doppleganger?

Still, it was difficult letting go, and she accepted before leaving for the date she wouldn’t be able to accomplish moving on in one night. Her heart required baby steps, she just hoped agreeing to this evening was a step in the right direction.

The railing along the Thames was strung with glittering garland, wreaths hanging on the lampposts. In the distance stood a large tree bedazzled with ornaments and fairy lights. It was a very romantic setting, which only served to put her more on edge.

“Are you going anywhere for the holidays?” Victor’s deep baritone rang out, pulling her from her wayward thoughts and making her smile at his heavy inflection. The first few times she met him his accent bothered her, now she was starting to find it charming.

“No, I stay in town, I don’t know anyone who lives abroad. Well, except for Carmen, I suppose.”

“Not hopping the pond to America?”

She laughed. “No, not this year. Perhaps next time, once they’re more settled.”

“Have you talked to her much?”

Hermione slid her hands in her pea coat pockets, shaking her head. “Not as much as before. The first two weeks she was there we talked three times a day. Now it’s just every other day.”

She glanced to the side with a raised brow at his low chuckle. “What?”

“It’s nothing. I just think I should be more upset that Ollie only talks to me to discuss rugby scores every other weekend.”

Hermione smirked. “Girls are different, we require much more conversing to maintain our bond.”

“I see. I guess I’ll give him a break then.”

She laughed again, enjoying the banter, the lightness amusement provided. It felt like it had been ages since she took a casual stroll along the river, free from worry or constant overthinking.

“What about you?” she asked, blushing slightly at not inquiring sooner. “Are you going somewhere?”

“I’m heading back to Bulgaria.”

“You’re from Bulgaria?”

“Yes, I know it’s subtle but some say I have an accent.”

Hermione glanced at him and saw the sparkle of mirth in his chocolate gaze, she found herself giggling uncontrollably, earning a boyish smirk complete with a set of dimples. She felt her heart kick up a notch at seeing his playful side. It was quite a pleasant change from his usually stern expression.
“I hadn’t noticed,” she finally said, calming down enough to find her voice.

He threw his head back and laughed, the sound deep and pleasant to her ears. His breath created a cloud in the cold air, a dragon billowing smoke. She studied his profile. He really was handsome. Not in the sharp, dark angel way she was used to envisioning in her head, an untouchable being from a William Blake poem.

Victor was a touch shorter but much wider than the figure that lurked in her dreams, pure muscle, well defined all over. He radiated a male energy that was unmistakable. And when he wasn’t gracing her with one of his rare sparks of emotion his face was stoic, drawn, intense.

It actually reminded her a bit of-

Stop that. You’re comparing them again! What’s the matter with you? Can’t you go more than five minutes without thinking of Him? Victor is an amazing catch and has doted on you all evening, don’t blow this because you’re addicted to being haunted by a ghost.

She swallowed lightly, scrambling for a distraction.

“Do you have much family in Bulgaria?”

“Oh yes, a very large family, four generations worth. I have so many cousins I don’t think I could count them all.”

“And you’re the only one in London?”

“Yes, it’s only me.”

“That must be difficult, it sounds like your family is very close. It must have been hard leaving them.”

“The hardest decision I’ve ever made. Also the best. I’m the first one to go to University, and while it was on an athletic scholarship I was very excited to study.”

Hermione blinked. She didn’t expect that. He maintained eye contact, seeming to sense her reaction and smiled. “That surprises you.” It wasn’t a question, and she felt heat rise in her neck. She looked away.

“I… I am a bit surprised. But please don’t take offense, it isn’t you, I just don’t get out much. If I socialized with Oliver’s friends more I’m sure I’d learn all types of interesting things about them.”

She felt his eyes on her. “Yes, I noticed you tend to stick to the corners of parties. I made a fool of myself many times over trying to lure you out.”

She couldn’t suppress the laugh that escaped her. “I’d hardly say a fool. You could wear a lampshade on your head and make it look fashionable.”

He shook his head in amusement but his expression turned serious when he looked to her again. “May I ask, why did you accept my invitation to dinner this time?”

Shite.

Hermione sucked in a breath, looking ahead at the walkway, the families milling about, the happy couples holding hands and kissing beneath the wreaths. She felt her chest tighten, her throat constrict. She swallowed to push past the obstruction.
“I didn’t mean to- I shouldn’t have asked you that, please pretend I didn’t-”

“No, no, it’s alright,” she said quickly, finally finding her voice. “It’s… I… I should have said yes to you long ago, I realize that now, especially after tonight. I’m sorry I didn’t do so sooner. I just… I was… it’s a bit complicated.”

_Bloody hell, Hermione. Could you sound any more cliche?_

She still couldn’t bring herself to look directly at him, too embarrassed at her word vomit. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him draw in closer, just a couple inches, his head bent down towards her.

“Is there someone else?”

Her heart thud painfully in her chest, her entire body thrumming with the surging pressure in her veins. Her mind raced. She’d decided when getting ready for the evening that she wouldn’t reveal Tom’s existence under any circumstance. Carmen had agreed, no good could come of it.

But that was before she’d spent dinner chatting animatedly with Victor, releasing all the pent up stress accumulated throughout the day as she prepared for the date. She found herself desperately wanting to tell him, to liberate herself of this awful burden, this dark secret she’d kept locked in her heart to fester for so long.

She glanced up at him, eyes shining with a gleam of tears she didn’t notice or feel. “There was. But not anymore. Not for a long time. I just… I’ve had trouble letting go. But I want to. So bad.”

Her throat felt raw by the end of her confession, the words dragged out of her like glass shards along her esophagus. She was certain if she coughed into her mitten blood would stain the wool.

Victor’s thick brows drew together, watching her carefully, eyes alight with burning intensity that made his face seem sharper, darker than before. “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

She noticed he slowed his footsteps, coming to a stop. She stopped walking as well, turning to face him.

“I’m positive.”

She heard the unmistakable laughter of children, wild and uncontrolled, and glanced over to see a young boy giving chase to a young girl around the massive tree in the middle of the square. She hadn’t realized they’d come upon the center decoration, the lights creating a soft glow around them.

“Then, if you find it agreeable, I would like to help you.”

Hermione blinked, glancing up once more, locking eyes and feeling her heart stutter anew. His expression had softened but his gaze still burned bright. She found herself swallowing slowly, nodding her head.

“I’d find that very agreeable.”

His large gloved hand reached out and touched her chin gently, tipping her face up. She knew what was coming and felt frozen, utterly rooted to the spot. She hadn’t kissed anyone sense-

_Not now!_

He leaned down, eyes heavy lidded and mesmerizing, causing an electrical current to lick across his spine, centering in her lower back, flooding though her middle to pool low in her abdomen. Her eyes
flickered down to his full lips, slightly chapped in the cold wind.

Then they were pressing into hers, soft, gentle. Asking, not demanding, offering, not taking. The total opposite of-

*Dammit! Focus, Hermione, focus!*

She squeezed her eyes shut, chest burning with a wild flame that threatened to consume her. She was angry that Tom kept invading her thoughts, distracting her. She wouldn't let him deny her another moment of living.

She raised to her tip toes and pressed forward into the warm wall of muscle. Victor jolted slightly, no doubt surprised by her bold move, but quickly recovered, deepening the kiss on a moan and wrapping a strong arm around her waist, pulling her flush against him.

Hermione tipped her head to the side, opening her lips and unclenching her teeth, inviting his tongue’s entry. When that didn’t happen she took initiative, licking tentatively at his lips. She lost herself to the heat, the sensation. She became so distracted she didn’t realize she was mimicking her first kiss, acting out the same advances that were made upon her by the boy she still kept locked in her heart.

Finally they broke apart, both panting, eyes glazed and cheeks flushed. Hermione lowered her heels to the pavement, blinking, shocked by her actions. She quickly glanced around, mortified she’d just made out in public. Victor’s gravel filled chuckle next to her ear drew her gaze forward.

“I... I...” she struggled to find the words. “I don’t normally do that sort of thing.”

He smirked, eyes warm and pleased. “I’m very happy you made an exception for me.”

She swallowed lightly. “We shouldn’t do that in public.”

He studied her face for a few moments, making her want to squirm, embarrassment still staining her cheeks.

“I will be sure to only kiss you in private, then”

She blinked, jarred out of mortification by his casual declaration. He grinned broadly, the effect was devastating. “Will you allow me to walk you home, Hermione?”

She felt the steady throbbing in her limbs again, but this time it wasn’t out of shame or panic, embarrassment or fear. It was out of pure excitement and anticipation.

“Yes, I’d like that.”

She tried to hide her surprise when he reached down and grabbed her hand, starting his strolling pace once more. She fell in step beside him, grinning like mad, feeling like a fool, but also wonderfully light and tingly.

As they progressed down the path she found herself thinking for the first time that maybe there was hope for her heart after all.

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**Wednesday July 13, 2005**

Hermione clenched and unclenched her hands at her sides, eyes focused on the reflection her
kidnapper cast in the window across the room.

He was in the kitchen, pouring boiling water from the kettle into two mugs he’d taken from her cupboard. She swallowed heavily, adrenaline surging.

*My best chance to get away is when he’s in the kitchen. I have to make a break for the door.*

She groaned internally as the futility of the prospect. Her legs weren’t cooperating yet. She could barely control the movement of her toes.

It didn’t stop her from envisioning her escape in great detail. Leaping from the couch, sprinting gracefully to the front door, throwing it open in a wide arc and dashing down the hall, banging on her neighbor’s doors as she passed. Everyone would be home, answering her panicked call immediately, flooding the hallway with weapons in hand, turning their focus on her attacker, helping her overpower and apprehend him. The news interview that would follow, local student captures homicidal maniac.

She blinked, sinking back into reality at the sound of his careful tread, steps approaching from behind. As he neared she lost sight of his reflection but felt his presence at her back, making the hairs along her arms and neck stand on end, heart beating through her chest.

Then he appeared around the side of the couch, pausing before her to sit the tea tray down upon her coffee table.

She didn’t dare blink, didn’t breathe, hoping to fade into the background, disappear from sight. Maybe he’d forget she was there.

“How do you take your tea?”

No such luck.

She swallowed, her tongue still heavy in her mouth but words were coming easier. Unfortunately he was aware of that fact, pinning her with questions that were so commonplace they annerved her.

“Black, with t-two.”

He paused, still poised over the trey, tiny spoon in hand. He glanced sideways at her, that odd gleam in his eyes.

“How fascinating. That’s the same way Tom takes his, though I’m sure you’re aware of that fact.”

She fought to steady her breathing.

“I notice that you have no coffee grounds in your kitchen. Do you have a similar aversion to the beverage?”

She blinked, detecting the trap instantly. Her fidgeting limbs stilled. He glanced down at her hands, smiling, then locked eyes with her once more.

“Ah, I see you know the real reason he detests it. How very interesting.” He turned back to the tray, resuming his work. She cringed at the sound of the metal spoon pinging off the side of the ceramic. It was too domestic a scene for the horror of the situation.

“Did he tell you the story, or merely hint at it?”

She closed her eyes, trying her best to block him out but her dead limbs offered no recourse. She
sighed deeply and formulated a response in her head. But her tongue was too weak to craft something clever. She settled on the truth.

“He t-told me.”

The stranger nodded, as though expecting as much. “He must trust you a great deal, imparting such forbidden knowledge. It took many years before he told me of her, at least in any detail. When did he confide his past to you?”

She watched his movements carefully, trying to anticipate the attack. But she was starting to suspect he intended to lead her off a cliff through words alone. The subject matter he seemed most interested in was a raw, gaping wound in her chest. He only needed to poke it to make her hemorrhage.

“When w-we… were hiding fr-rom… our matron.”

The man smiled fondly, sending chills up her spine. “Ah yes, the renowned Mrs. Cole. Tom talked about her quite a bit during our sessions. He detested her a great deal.”

Hermione drew in a shallow breath.

Sessions?

He read the question in her eyes, something he was disturbingly adept at doing. “Tom and I go way back,” he set a mug of tea at the edge of the table in front of her knees, grabbing the other and walking around the table towards the chair. “I discovered him when he was quite young. At the orphanage. That’s where I first discovered you as well.”

Hermione’s brows drew together, her mind twisting with his words, something heavy settling into the pit of her stomach. Then realization hit all at once, pushing the air from her lungs.

“G-Green…”

He sat down with a sigh, crossing his legs and flashing a gleaming smile. “Ah, I see my reputation precedes me yet again. I take it Tom told you about me?”

Hermione’s mouth clamped shut. Truth be told Tom told her nothing beyond the strange court appointed counselor’s name all those years ago. It irked her that he wasn’t more forthcoming with information, but she was also worried about him. After his sessions he always held himself in such a defensive manner, his mood swings were even more volatile, his actions more risky. She suspected it was due to the sessions he had in the private office on the top floor of the orphanage but she couldn’t be certain as Tom remained tight lipped about the whole ordeal.

But she’d never forgotten the name. Green.

It didn’t make sense. Why was he here, now, still working with Tom?

“I see the wheels spinning in your head, Hermione. Such a fascinating thing to watch. Please, take your time. You’ll experience an epiphany in no time, I’m sure.”

She swallowed, desperately trying to will her legs to move as her mind raced.

Then, damn him, he was right. The epiphany struck like lightning through her chest.

“You recr-ruited him.”

Green’s smile grew fangs, and her heart shattered further.
Tom was targeted at sixteen? He never stood a chance…

Her eyes narrowed. If she didn’t detest this strange man before she certainly did now.

“Ah, such fire in your eyes. I admit when I first glimpsed you through the window I didn’t understand his obsession. You seemed so… well, please excuse me for the misconception, but I deemed you perfectly ordinary. I couldn’t fathom what appealed to him so strongly, to keep you as his greatest secret, his ultimate treasure. But now that I finally have the opportunity to meet you, I’m starting to understand.”

She did her best to rear up, releasing a frustrating gasp, desperate to move, to run, to attack.

He laughed, bringing the steaming mug to his lips. “Yes, I definitely understand.” He took a sip, watching her over the rim.

She collapsed back into the cushions, panting, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes. He tilted his head, studying her.

“You see, we talked about everything during those sessions. Mrs. Cole, the other children, his schoolmates, his enemies, which obviously outnumbered his friends by an exponential rate. We discussed his violent urges, his tussles with the law, eventually we even got to the subject of his past, his life before Wool’s. He was very sensitive about that, only gave me snippets, glimpses into his history. But as enough time went by he eventually told me of his mother. It was years before he provided any details, but he at least broached the subject during those early discussions. There was only one thing we never talked about. Not once. No matter how hard I tried to trap him, and as I’m sure you’ve deduced, I’m very good at trapping people. Care to take a guess at what that forbidden topic was, Hermione?”

She clenched her teeth so hard her jaw ached. She knew the answer, but wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of participating. Her refusal only seemed to amuse him further.

“That’s right. You.”

She tilted her foot up from the floor, her calf muscle sore and waking up. Her heart raced wildly. She legs were slowly coming to life. She kept her gaze steady, wanting to hide that fact as long as she could, flexing her ankles beneath the coffee table, wiggling her toes.

He took another sip from his mug before setting it down on the side table, atop a coaster. “I knew of you from day one. I watched him from the other side of the building, where he’d hidden you, where you waited like an obedient mutt for the hour to be up. He grabbed you by the wrist and dragged you away, obviously eager to put as much distance between himself and me. But after a few weeks I came to the realization he wasn’t trying to distance himself. He was trying to distance you. I admit I grew quite intrigued at that point. Tom was so guarded, such a self professed loner. And yet here he had a little pet he not only toted everywhere but whom he aimed to shield from danger. The fact that he cared for anything, little less another person, was quite fascinating. Even more so when he repeatedly refused to mention you during our sessions, no matter how I tried to trip him up. I couldn’t mention you outright, that would only bring up his iron defenses. But I skirted the topic countless times, allowed him every opportunity to reveal your existence freely, and each time he refused. That’s when I knew.”

Hermione blinked, realizing she’d been holding her breath, hanging on his every word. Damn him. He knew he had her wrapped around his finger. Anything relating to Tom and she was rendered helpless.
He leaned forward in his chair, uncrossing his legs, resting his forearms atop his knees, gaze unwavering.

“That’s when I knew, Hermione, that you were his greatest weakness.”

Her mouth was a desert, her tongue had once again fallen numb. Her limbs followed. Dread pooled in her stomach, snaking out and filling her body with lead. Her efforts to exercise her legs were long forgotten.

“Tom likes to push the limits. He’s built his life around disobeying authority. But at his core, he’s a good boy. I saw that the moment he first entered the room for our very first session. And as the weeks went by, I saw a great deal of myself in him. And I admit that by the time he left Wool’s I was a bit attached. He was my favorite, of all those that came before, he was my special charge. I want to guide him, to see him thrive, to watch him become the man I know he can be.”

She felt her heart stutter as his eyes seemed to glow from within, supernatural. Tom’s eyes also did that on occasion, but he never incited terror to her core.

“Howver, you are a hindrance. I spotted the problem that first day, knew in my heart of hearts you’d be his ultimate downfall. But against my better judgement I looked away, allowed him his toys, told myself you were only a passing phase, easily discarded and forgotten once he entered the real world and had unlimited access to every pleasure he could imagine. But I realize now I committed a grave error. I told myself I was biased. That Tom wasn’t fated to make the same mistakes I did. But once again life proves that history is cursed to repeat itself.”

Hermione blinked, heavy tears dripping down her cheeks, her mind a raging storm of anger and fear. She watched in numb horror as he leaned across the table, hand reaching up, his fingers grazing her cheek and his thumb wiping away the wetness. She jerked back, averting her face. Her arms curled around her middle protectively.

“Ah, I see you’ve been making great strides to regain your mobility while I’ve been talking. Excellent.”

She inhaled sharply, still refusing to meet his eyes.

“You see, Hermione, I know first hand what it’s like to be torn in half by two opposing forces. To allow yourself to be destroyed by something as ambivalent as love.”

The word sounded like a curse on his tongue, washing over her like acid.

“I will not sit by and watch Tom go through the same experience. Not when I can intervene on his behalf. He is young still, he doesn’t know the way of things. Neither of you do. I assure you, I am doing you both a favor.”

She closed her eyes, shrinking back into the cushions, focusing all her might of getting her legs to wake up, to get with the program.

“However I find myself in an interesting dilemma. If I kill you outright then I’ll lose Tom’s trust forever. Of course I could stage it to look like an accident, but he’ll see right through that, and he’ll obviously suspect me first, even if there’s no evidence to support it. The boy has killer instincts. No pun intended.”

She was able to bend her knees, but she couldn’t lift her legs off the ground, her pelvis too weak to support their weight.
“Which puts us at a bit of an impasse, I’d say. I could tell you to stay away from him, and while I think you’re a terribly clever girl, I can also clearly see you’re in love with him. Love makes us do very stupid things. And regardless, Tom would never agree to stay away. I’m quite certain he’s been plotting my murder so he can abscond with you. Obviously he’d never go through with killing me, though he doesn’t realize that yet. He’s always been a bit slow on the uptake when it comes to any type of intimacy. But I digress.”

The room fell silent, her ears filled with only the sound of her thudding heart. She couldn’t stand it, sensing but not seeing or hearing the predator in her midst. She slowly opened her eyes and turned her head forward, peering at him from beneath the protective curtain of her hair.

He looked remarkably calm, poised and collected, eyes no longer glowing. Upon regaining her attention he settled back into the chair, crossing his legs again and picking up the mug.

“I am sorry about your grant.”

She blinked, the abrupt change in topic taking her off guard, scattering her racing thoughts even further.

“I didn’t kill Whitmore. I merely changed the location of your interview in his appointment log. He will simply assume you stood him up. I dare say you won’t be this year’s grant recipient. But of course, that hardly matters now. The course of your life is about to greatly change after tonight. One way or another.”

He took a sip, studying her casually. Her heart was beating so fast her vision blurred. But her thighs burned, the muscles finally awake. Her adrenaline was spiking, sending a tremor through her entire body.

She tensed, ready to spring up and dash for the door, when his next words sent a wire net over her head.

“I’m glad to see you’ve regained your faculties. But there’s no point in running, my dear. I think you know that. Besides, Tom will be here soon.”

She sank back into the couch, eyes wide. She opened her mouth before she even realized she’d regained her voice.

“He’s coming?”

Green smiled. “But of course. I arranged for us to have a little privacy. I wanted to get to know you better, and I’m pleased to say I have, even with your persistent silence. He’ll be finding out I have you shortly, and I anticipate he’ll come racing to your rescue like the black knight he is.”

She felt dread seize her. She wanted Tom to come, to save her, but she also wanted him to stay away, to avoid endangering himself in whatever trap this clearly was. Green obviously read the conflict on her face.

“My my, you really do love him, don’t you? That’s good. Because once he joins us, we’re going to put that love to the ultimate test. Now, drink your tea before it gets cold.”
A/N: So… in an effort to make this story as realistic as possible I performed some pretty questionable experimentation to determine what it sounds like talking around a gag ball. During my research I kept accidentally triggering Alexa, and even more fascinating, she understood me.

Anyways, I guess what I’m trying to say is, Alexa is a closet dominatrix. I think every home should have one. And for obvious reasons this was my favorite chapter to write.

Side note: does anyone speak German? Please let me know if Google screwed me on the translations. Danke ;)

I’ll provide English translations (of what I meant to say) in the next chapter a/n.

Oh, also- I started posting a new Tomione story, the plot couldn’t be more different besides the primary pairing, but if you like my writing style I hope you’ll check it out, chapters will seem comically short compared to this monstrosity.

Okay, enough jib jab.

Enjoy!

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Saturday April 14, 2001

Tom spotted her across the bar twenty minutes ago. He’d been focused on her ever since.

The smoky venue was crowded, rowdy, as it always was on Saturday nights. It was his go-to place when he wanted to fade into the crowd, drink himself into oblivion and watch a free show to boot. There was always at least one drunken fist fight before the final bell sounded. Tom was fascinated by people, loved to watch them go about their daily business, the way their persona changed as the liquor took effect, the person who walked into the bar becoming no more as their alter ego took possession.

It was also a great place to find company for the night. It wasn’t a classy venue by any means, but it wasn’t enough of a dive to attract the bottom rung of society either. It was frequented by just the type of women he preferred, attractive and open to one night stands without threat of attachment, no expectations beyond a moment’s pleasure.

He didn’t want attachment. Couldn’t risk it in his line of work, but really, he had no desire anyway. The only recipient of his affection was long gone, a ghost haunting his dreams. He craved those dreams. He wasn’t going to attempt to replace her.

But he still had urges, desires that needed to be met. Especially after the shite week he’d had, living in a fleabag motel while he tracked his prey through the underbelly of Chicago. It was his second trip to America, and vastly different than his experience in L.A. He admired and detested both cities. LA for its fake glitz and glamour, its obsession with beauty and image, but he thoroughly enjoyed the beautiful beaches and the weather was superb. Chicago reminded him a bit more of home, for better or worse, which perhaps explained his rather temperamental moods throughout the mission.

But he was back now, and was desperate to expend his pent up aggression with physical release. He never risked doing so during an assignment, too many factors at play, too many potential hazards he didn’t want to worry about mitigating just to get off.
So he waited, and then came to his favorite spot, where the bartender knew his name and drink preference, and started hunting. He never moved from his seat, never so much as turned his head or conversed with anyone, but he was on the prowl. He watched every woman who entered, inspected their outfit, their made up faces, noted their choice in perfume, studied their body language, the way in which they socialized, the company they migrated towards, and built profiles in his head, cataloguing each one in order of appeal.

And they watched him, some more subtle than others, a few outright sidling up next to him, sliding hands along his shoulder and bicep, brushing their cleavage against him as they leaned over to grab a straw or napkin from the bar, fluttering lashes and cooing apologies as they attempted to engage him. Some nights he found the displays amusing enough to reward with his silver grin and a few minutes of conversation. But tonight he was at the end of his rope, his nerves grated to jagged stubs. He brushed off their advances like waving away an errant fly. They scoffed and acted affronted, but then continued to eye fuck him from across the room.

He wasn’t in the mood to settle tonight, he’d go home alone and drink himself into a stupor if need be. He was resigned to doing just that when the doors opened and she entered.

The moment he spotted her he knew he had to have her. Whatever it took, whatever persona he had to emulate, he’d be taking her home with him.

And so the game started. Tom watched her carefully, taking note of every detail, sussing out just what approach would successfully disarm her. He sipped steadily at his whiskey, eyes transfixed on her hair. Wild chestnut curls cascading down her back, mascara and lipstick but little else marring her delicate features. Her eyes were the wrong color, and her face, attractive as it was, wasn’t a close enough match to fuck her from the front. But the hair… the hair was breathtaking. The color, the body, he imagined running his hands through it, grasping a fistful and pulling her head back as he took her from behind.

Yes. Yes, she would be perfect. Just the thing he needed to erase the last eight days of hell and allow a momentary escape from reality. He could pretend he was someone else, that he was with someone else, that he led a life he could never have.

He licked his lips, eyes burning bright as he watched her glance around the bar, shoulders drawn and posture turned in, uncomfortable, hesitant. Her clothes were fashionable but modest. This wasn’t her normal type of venue, her normal type of crowd. The searching look she gave the space told him she was waiting for someone, hoping they’d arrive soon, rescue her.

Too late, little one. I’ve set my sights on you, there’s no saving you now.

The stranger’s mannerisms aroused him further, reminded him more of Her, made him more determined. But he continued to watch from the dark corner, waiting to see who arrived, who she intended to spend her evening with, who she’d braved this bar to see.

After twenty minutes she started to fidget, already having fended off the advances of three drunkards. Tom suspected she was meeting a man. And they were late, her frustration growing with each passing minute. He watched as one of the men who hit on her earlier started cutting a path towards her again, either too drunk to remember her previous rejection or too drunk to care. Tom decided to make his move. He was tired of sitting around, was ready to get her home.

He allowed the man to sidle up beside her, slurring something that sounded like it would be lewd and offensive if more intelligible. She shrank back, nearly toppling out of her seat to escape his hand on her arm.
Tom approached the bar and stood on the man’s other side, setting down his empty glass and pinning the back of the balding head with a bored look.

“The lady doesn’t look interested, mate. I suggest you try your luck elsewhere.”

The man spun around, eyes glazed and face pinched. “Wha dya say?”

Tom suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. He suspected the man was drunk and riled enough to attempt fighting him for the opportunity to court the obviously uninterested woman. He’d be easy enough to subdue, but Tom suspected she wasn’t the type to admire a man defending her honor with violence. He didn’t know her at all, but in his mind he was already fucking her, already imagining she was someone else, and that ghost of his past never appreciated when he reverted to pounding fists instead of using his wits to overcome an obstacle.

“I said, it’s time to move on.” He enunciated slowly, his voice a deep rumble, the threat clear in his storm cloud eyes.

The man staggered a bit on his feet, then tipped back and scoffed. The woman scooted back in her stool to avoid him leaning into her.

“Oi! Fuck off!”

Now it was really a battle not to roll his eyes.

_Fucking hell. I just want to knock him unconscious already._

He met the woman’s wide, fearful gaze over the drunkard’s shoulder.

_She’s watching. This is the make or break moment. Be patient. It’ll be well worth it._

He drew a deep breath and turned his focus back to the man. “You’re not doing yourself any favors. She’s clearly not interested. Now move on and you might find more agreeable company before the night’s through.”

“Shove off, dumb cunt!”

Tom sighed, shaking his head to himself. Okay, he’d give it one more try. Then he was going to break a bar stool over the idiot’s head and throw the girl over his shoulder. He’d seduce her on the way to his flat.

“That’s no way to speak in front of a lady. Now I’ll ask you one more time to leave. I suggest you-”

He was cut off by the wide swing of a fist. His honed reflexes allowed him to dodge, even with the whiskey in his system, but unfortunately the whiskey also made him forget his original plan to abstain from violence.

His instincts kicked in and overrode the voice telling him to maintain his nice guy ruse. He caught the fist and twisted, the wrist popping loudly and causing the man to scream out in pain, his knees buckling. Tom used his downward momentum to throw him against the bar, his other hand catching the back of his sweaty neck and shoving his head into the counter.

The man had enough sense left to turn his face at the last moment, avoiding breaking his nose and instead having his cheek slammed against the wood with a loud thunk. The impact left him gasping, the entire ordeal taking no more than a three seconds. He opened and closed his mouth on a groan, looking dazed and confused.
“Now,” Tom said, twisting his wrist further for emphasis, eliciting a shriek, “Apologize to the lady.”

The man tried to throw Tom off but to no avail, Tom’s grip was unrelenting and he twisted the sprained joint once more.

“Oh! Fuck! F-Fine! I’m s-sorry!”

Tom smirked, caught up in the moment, the predator in him enjoying playing with his food.

“Try it again, this time without the ‘fuck’.”

The man gasped, squeezing his eyes shut. “I-I’m sorry, Miss, p-please! I’m sorry!”

Tom nodded, releasing his neck and arm and stepping back to allow him room to stand, cradling his injured limb and blinking dumbly at the gathered crowd. Tom hadn’t realized they’d attracted so much attention. He glanced at a mixture of expressions, ranging from disappointment the brawl was over to lustful awe, the latter directed solely upon Tom. But he only cared about the reaction of one person.

He turned to face his true prey of the evening. She was sitting stiffly upon the stool, supremely uncomfortable and a bit panicked, but her eyes weren’t on Tom, they were on the retreating figure of the drunkard.

Good, she’s more scared of him. I can salvage this.

“I’m also sorry,” he said lowly, stepping closer and gaining her attention. “I shouldn’t have placed my hands on him. I’m not a violent person, I have no idea what came over me.” He affected a bashful expression, embarrassed by his own actions.

She seemed to regain her senses, blinking twice and leaning in towards the bar. The crowd was back to milling about the place, the scuffle long forgotten.

She shook her head. “No, I appreciate the help. He approached me earlier and I said no, he knew I wasn’t interested.”

Tom tilted his head. “He already approached you? The nerve of some people.”

She laughed lightly, her voice high and nervous. “Yeah, tell me about it.”

He watched a blush stain her cheeks, her face turning and eyes averting down but her body still facing to him.

She’s attracted to me. But still shaken up. Let me put her at ease.

“Well, I don’t want to be a bother. I’ll leave you to your evening. I just came to freshen my drink and overheard him speaking to you. I couldn’t in good conscience ignore the situation.”

She glanced back up quickly, eyes wide. “Oh no, you don’t have to leave! I was just waiting for someone, but they haven’t arrived.”

He grinned. “Could you stand for some company while you wait?”

She smiled back. “I’d love some actually, plus it’ll be nice to have a line of defense against the other idiots in this place.”

He laughed good naturedly, pulling out the stool beside her. “I am really quite embarrassed. I can’t
believe I did that.”

She bit her bottom lip, eyes darting to his mouth and then back up. “You seemed pretty comfortable pinning him down. Are you sure you don’t engage in regular pub fights?”

He smirked and shook his head. “Unfortunately everything I’ve learned has been at the hands of my older brothers. I’m the youngest of five, that move you saw was one of the many techniques used against me throughout my youth, usually while wrestling for the remote.”

She laughed again, less nervous and more delighted, her posture easing as she unconsciously drew closer. He kept a respectful distance, talking animatedly about his fake past, asking her questions about her life, her work, laughing at her jokes and buying them drinks, casually sipping his whiskey while she finished her third glass of wine with gusto. An hour later she realized she’d been stood up but didn’t seem to care. Tom made a grand show of stating how stupid the absent man was, how Tom would be an hour early if he had the opportunity to take her out.

She blushed, tipsy and far more relaxed, unsure how to respond but looking very pleased by his attention. He apologized for being too forward, blamed it on the drink, and offered to walk her home. Disappointment stole her features but she quickly shook it off, sliding off her stool and swaying on her feet. Tom helped steady her, feeling her jolt at his touch, leaning against him with a sigh. He smiled down at her, eyes gleaming in the dim lights. He asked if she’d rather have a nightcap at his flat, they could continue talking. She’d already mentioned living with two roommates and detesting the lack of privacy.

She swallowed lightly and nodded, allowing him to lead her by the hand through the streets to his building, laughing on the lift ride up about some story he only half paid attention to. They stumbled into his flat with another laugh. She excused herself to the bathroom while he prepared drinks, turned on a few lights, removed his jacket. She came out with a few alterations, her lipstick refreshed, hair tamed and swept over one shoulder, another button on her blouse undone. He offered her a drink, a seat beside him on the couch. Within minutes he was kissing her, hand sliding up her thigh.

He had maintained the good guy ruse for well over an hour, at the bar and on the trip home, but the moment his eyes closed and his hand slid into her soft curls his breath seized in his chest, heart stuttering, images flashing behind his lids. He was transported to another time, another place, another woman. And the mask fell away, the beast surging within and taking over.

He was barely aware of his actions, half carrying half dragging her to his bedroom, pinning her beneath him while he stripped her bare, mouth and hands covering every inch of skin, drinking in the sounds of her gasps and moans, growling at the feel of her nails raking his back. He worked her over with his hand, heat radiating from her core, her center dripping and ready within minutes. He unceremoniously flipped her onto her stomach, hearing her gasp of surprise and rewarding it by dragging her hips up and back, unfastening his pants like a man possessed.

She keened into the bedding when he thrust into her, hard, to the hilt. He groaned, savoring the blessed heat and tightness, the long awaited release. He took on a merciless pace, pounding her hard, his grip on her waist bruising, urged on by her gasps, her low moans and soon she was driving back to meet his thrusts.

Her hair swayed wildly, but then his driving pace overwhelmed her and she couldn’t support her weight on her hands, collapsing face first into the mattress, hair cascading across his sheets in beautiful chaos. He reached down and fisted a large hand in the curls, pulling her head back and eliciting a sharp gasp from her throat.

He couldn’t see her face, only the long line of her back and All. That. Fucking. Hair. It drove him
wild. He drove into her so hard she started sliding up the bed, he growled and dragged her back with
an arm wrapped around her middle. He leaned over her, nuzzling the back of her head, drawing in
the scent of her tresses. And as a sweet berry concoction reached his nose his eyes narrowed.
No. The scent was wrong.
He swallowed thickly, rearing up and releasing her hair, punishing her with his bruising grip, his
relentless pace. He gazed down at her, her body rocking hard with his movements, the room filled
with the sound of her high pitched keening and slicked slapping skin.
Her voice was wrong, too, not deep enough.
He growled, releasing her hips and bracing his fists on the mattress beside them, eyes locked on the
bouncing curls.
Yes, the hair was perfect. He kept his attention focused solely on the pool of chestnut.
He was getting close.
He reached a hand around to manipulate her clit. She squealed, clawing at the sheets, sweat dripping
down her back.
“Say my name,” he growled, voice sounding demonic.
“I-I-”
“Say it!”
She gasped. “T-Tom!”
“Again!”
“Tom!”
He closed his eyes. Suddenly her voice turned deeper, her hair smelled of warm vanilla, her eyes
became hazel, lips fuller, freckles dotting her skin. She became the One he wanted, the One he
always wanted. She was hit. Finally, She was his.
The spell was broken as the woman beneath him screamed, eyes rolling back in her head and spine
arching, her swollen passage clamping around him like a vice.
He blocked out her sounds and desperately tried to maintain the fantasy but couldn’t recapture the
lost moment. He sighed, searching his mind for another image to use, to push him over the edge. He
settled on their parting kiss, altering the memory to something far more intimate than what actually
occurred, but it was enough to give him that final push.
Stars appeared behind his lids, he wrapped an arm around her waist to pull her into his pulsating
orgasm, picturing Her, saturating Her.
He groaned, slowly pulling out and collapsing beside the panting, sweat soaked feminine body. He
opened his eyes, her hair was thrown over her face, and for a moment he was able to prolong the
fantasy of who was lying beside him. Then her hands reached up and pushed the curls away, brown
eyes stared out at him, a stranger’s face, and the spell was broken.
Tom looked up at his ceiling, drawing a hand over his eyes, wiping away the sweat, his breath
slowing. And as always happened after he mercilessly fucked Her dopplegangers, he felt a
nauseating wave of shame steal over him, like ice water rushing through his veins.

The stranger beside him sighed softly, scooting closer and laying a hand on his chest, nuzzling into his shoulder. He wanted her gone. He wanted to shower, to wash away the evidence of his weakness, his festering obsession.

But he was too tired to make up an excuse, to deal with the anger and tears, to drag himself into the bathroom. Too tired to gaze upon his reflection in the mirror and see what new piece of himself had slipped away. Too tired to face reality, to sort through haunted memories and troubled thoughts. He just wanted a reprieve, however brief, just for a little while. Just for tonight.

Just tonight. He’d sleep, and hopefully, he’d dream of Her.

Wednesday July 13, 2005

“Tell me, my pet, are you a good little boy?”

Yaxley swallowed around the gag ball, nodding his head rapidly.

“Hm… I think you’re lying to me, pet. I think you’re a bad little boy.”

“No, Maffer! I’m a guh voy!”

Tom paced around the bed, gazing upon the image of Yaxley, all four limbs tied to the wood posts, stripped but for his underwear, thrashing at his binds.

“I don’t think so. I think you’re a very bad little boy. And I think you just lied to me. You know what happens when you lie to me.”

“Fwee, Maffer, I’m elling va foof!”

Tom smirked, supremely amused, but it also held a hint of cruelty that Yaxley went wild for, erection straining through the flimsy material.

“I don’t think so. You lied to avoid punishment. Such a bad, bad boy you are.”

“Fwee, fwee, no!”

“Are you trying to give me orders, now?” Tom came to a stop before the suitcase, wondering for the tenth time where the fuck Bella was. “My my, I’m really going to have to teach you a lesson.” He peered down at the toys inside, grabbing the leather fogger, which seemed the less intrusive of his options.

“No, Maffer! Fwee, Imma guh voy!”

Tom sighed, running his fingers through the leather tassels, picturing all the things he’d like to do to Bella when she finally decided to grace them with her presence. Of course knowing her, she’d find the torture arousing, considering it more reward than punishment.

Just you wait, I’ll strangle the life out of you yet, you bitch. Where the fuck are you?

He had no doubt she was drawing this out for her own amusement.

He slowly approached the bed, each step a growing threat, his confident stance radiating power and danger. He was surprised how easily he took to this role. He’d always enjoyed being dominant.
during sex, but he’d never considered it from an S&M standpoint. He was starting to see the appeal.

Yaxley wasn’t at all arousing to Tom, besides the fact that he was a man. Tom could admit when another male was attractive without having the urge to fuck him. But this particular specimen held no appeal whatsoever, especially with his begging and groveling. Tom liked his partners to have a bit of fight, a stubborn streak, it made overpowering them with pleasure all the more fulfilling.

He ran the tassels over Yaxley’s bare thighs, along his pudgy stomach, watching the man inhale sharply around the obstruction in his mouth. And Tom thought about Hermione, all the fun he intended to have with her when he got back, once he forced her to move past her insolent anger. Maybe he’d encourage a little role playing. He’d fantasized about fucking her for so long it still seemed surreal he’d actually lived it in real life. But the experience had been cut short by her unrelenting conscience. If it had been up to him he’d have taken her again, and again, and again, until she couldn’t walk, a bumbling mess of raw nerve endings and marked flesh.

Alas, he’d waited eight years for her, he could certainly stand to wait a bit longer. Make her come to him, want him even a fraction as much as he wanted her. Then he’d live out every sexual fantasy he’d ever had involving her. He’d coax her to share her own desires and live them out as well. If she wanted to be the dominant one he’d allow it, only for her. He knew he could trust her, he wouldn’t panic beneath her gentle, commanding touch. The thought of her pinning him down, riding him to her own completion sent a warm flush down his body.

Yaxley seemed to notice the change, the feral light in Tom’s eyes, and started hyperventilating, his erection tenting his underwear obscenely.

Tom batted the end of the flogger against his palm a few times, watching the apprehension in his prey grow and swell, thickening the air. He couldn’t stall any longer, the foreplay well drawn out. The only option left was to kill him or fuck him, which for Tom really wasn’t a decision at all. Even if Yaxley had been a woman, an attractive one at that, he’d never stoop so low as to sexually abuse his target, even if they thoroughly enjoyed it. Fucking and killing was Bella’s specialty, not his.

As soon as Tom thought her name a muffled knock sounded from the main room, at the entrance.

*About. Fucking. Time.*

Yaxley called out in disappointment as Tom placed the flogger back into the case, turning his back to the bound man and walking to the bedroom door.

“Terribly sorry, pet,” he said over his shoulder, leaning in to listen through the wood. “Our session is about to be cut short.”

Bella smoothed a hand over the front of her uniform, a simple white blouse and black skirt, complete with the most dowdy pair of mary janes she’d ever seen. She looked absolutely ridiculous.

Still, she’d altered the uniform a touch, leaving the front unbuttoned low enough to show a swell of cleavage, adding a side slit to the skirt for added mobility and a flash of thigh. She wore her hair up in the maid’s customary bun but a long golden hair stick ran through the center, adding a bit of flare. A girl had to have her accessories.

She lowered her arm after knocking on the door, tilting her head as she heard the loud tread of footsteps approaching. Whoever it was sounded big. She hoped the were big. She loved the big ones the most.

When the door swung open she wasn’t disappointed. A hulking beast eyed her with a hard gaze,
already looking suspicious. Of course with a scar like that across his face he was probably always on the defensive. She could sympathize. The scars she wore along her body were a constant reminder that no one, absolutely no one, was to be trusted.

“Hello, there. You ordered room service?”

He grunted, brow raising. “It wasn’t supposed to arrive for another hour.”

She blinked, feigning distress. “Oh my, I’m terribly sorry. I’m new here, and I must have read the orders wrong. Please, let me take it back, I’ll have them make you a new platter—”

“No, nevermind. Bring it in.”

She smiled gratefully. “Thank you! You’re saving me here, another mistake and I’m liable to lose my job.”

His reply was another grunt but he stepped away from the threshold, allowing her room to push the serving cart inside. The two covered platters gleamed beneath the chandelier over seeing the living room. She pushed the cart to the center, eyeing another guard on the couch. He was reading a magazine, glancing up at her entrance.

“The food’s here already?”

“There was a mix up,” the first guard explained, no doubt hoping to cut short any renewed ramblings from the empty headed maid. “Makes no difference, we’ll eat now. He won’t be done for some time anyway.”

Bella fought to hide her smirk, desperate to know what was happening in the bedroom across the floor. She’d give up every pence she’d ever made to see Tom in a gimp suit, licking some 5’4” accountant’s toes, begging to be buggered.

The fantasy was so intense it made her wet, and it took a moment for her to settle back into the role of eager maid.

She watched the second guard stand and approach, lifting one of the lids and peering at the food, leaning down to inhale the scent. Then she watched his eyes lift and fall to her cleavage, his expression changing to something she easily recognized.

Mmm. How delightful. Why should Tommy be the only one to have any fun tonight?

She leaned over the cart, lifting the second lid, giving the guard a nice glimpse down her shirt.

“Is everything to your liking, Sir?”

A muscle in his jaw tensed, eyes still affixed to her chest. “Um… yeah. Yes.”

She smiled demurely, bowing her head in subjugation. A big man like this, serving a tiny master who dangled wealth over his head like a carrot, who remanded him to wait outside the bedroom while he fucked to his heart’s content, no doubt suffered from an inferiority complex. Most men did, to some extent. Societal expectations, masculine toxicity and fancy terms she’d heard traded at coffee shops and college pubs.

She’s never bothered to research the topic, but she certainly used the ailment to her benefit. There was nothing more exhilarating than crushing a man, seeing the hope drain from his eyes before his life was chased away shortly after. But making him live out his greatest fear beforehand, that was the
cherry on top.

She watched his pupils expand, eyeing her hungrily.

*That’s a good boy. Now step a little closer, my darling. Let me see you…*

As though she’d spoken the command aloud the guard pulled to his full height, chest out, preening. He smirked and stepped around the cart, into her personal space.

“Hello there. I’m Elias. I’ve never seen you before. Are you new?”

Her hands fidgeted nervously, eyes averting in embarrassment. “Is it that obvious?”

He grinned, flexing his muscles as he tried to effect a casual stance. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the scarred guard roll his eyes, shaking his head. “Elias, we don’t have time for this.”

“Come on, Sebastian, you said yourself he’ll be tied up for at least another hour.”

She couldn’t help but smirk at his choice of words.

“Elias-”

“What? We never get to have any fun. I just want to talk to her, get to know the staff. That’s in my job description, right? Know who comes and goes from the room?”

Sebastian sighed, grabbing a platter off the cart and walking towards the dining space with a pinched look on his face. Elias glared at his back for another moment before turning his focus once more to Bella, grinning.

“Sorry about that, *Schatz.*”

She bit her lip, cheeks flushing. “I just moved here. I don’t speak much German. Luckily we’re instructed to speak English to the guests unless otherwise requested. I’m afraid I don’t know much beyond silly tourist phrases.”

He laughed, crossing his large arms and pinning her with a smug look.

“*Ich freue mich, dir Deutsche beizubringen, wunderschön. Ich werde dir auch andere Dinge beibringen.*”

She giggled, shuffling on her feet, well aware of the scowl Sebastian pinned them with across the room.

“I have no idea what you just said. Except Deutsche… that means German, right?”

“Sehr gut, mein Schatz!”

She laughed anew, shaking her head. “Now you’re just showing off!”

“No, no, I spent part of my childhood in Austria, German is my first language.”

She tilted her head, leaning towards him. “Really? I don’t hear an accent.”

“I spent most my life in Britain.”

“I see. Is that where you learned to shoot?” she gestured at the gun in his holster. He peered down,
patting the butt of the weapon, glancing back up with a smirk.

“Have you ever held a gun, Schatz?”

She gasped, eyes wide and wonderous. “Of course not! I’m more likely to shoot myself than my target!”

“I assure you, it is an adrenaline rush like you’ve never experienced. I will show you. What time does your shift end?”

“You will do no such thing, Elias!” Sebastian shouted from his seat, mouth full of food.

Elias ignored him. “I am on duty tonight but tomorrow morning I switch with the guards downstairs. Would you like to pay me a visit?”

Bella pretended to debate the idea, peeking up through her lashes. “I’m not sure… guns are so scary. What if I hurt myself?”

He smirked. “Do not fear, sweet one. I will not let you hurt yourself.”

She smiled, teeth gleaming beneath the opulent lights. “What if I hurt you?”

He chuckled. “I promise, you won’t shoot me.”

“Of course not,” she ran a hand along his wide bicep, earning an appreciative grin as his eyes traced the movement. “What would be the fun in shooting you? All this muscle… it would be so much more exciting to carve you up.”

He blinked, eyes darting to her. “What was that?”

She laughed, still affecting a light, playful tone. “Oh, don’t worry, Elias. I’m on a bit of a deadline. I won’t have time to decorate you with my blade. Such a shame. But I promise, what I have planned for you is just as special.”

He stepped back, shoulders tense. “What the fuck?”

She saw Sebastian tense in his chair, watching her with narrowed eyes, both men too taken aback to think to reach for their weapons.

_Silly boys._

She reached for her blouse, unbuttoning it down to her navel, parting the fabric to reveal the black lace of her bra. Elias was caught between confusion, anger and lust, the combination left him frozen, eyes glued to her breasts. Sebastian seemed the more intelligent of the two, his eyes still firmly locked on her face.

She reached her hand up to her hair, pulling out the golden stick and letting the long dark locks tumble freely down her shoulders. Elias swallowed heavily, no doubt torn between throwing her out and throwing her over the back of the couch.

She decided to put him out of his misery.

With lightning reflexes she plunged the golden stick forward, the sharp end easily piercing his thick pectoral muscle. He jolted back, gasping in pain, and her thumb pushed the depressor at the end, injecting his body with the deadly neurotoxin.
She heard Sebastian leap to his feet, drawing his weapon. She leaned into Elias and used his huge body as a shield, gazing up into his shock blown eyes and uncurling her true smile, the mask falling away to reveal her sharp fangs, her hand wrapping around the back of his neck to hold his gaze, talons piercing his skin.

“Bleib hier, liebhaber. Ich werde für dich zurück sein,” she whispered, thrilling in the look of panic that crossed his paled features.

“Get the fuck away from him!” Sebastian shouted, darting around the table to get a better shot. He walked in front of the master suite doors and missed the tall dark figure closing in behind him. Elias swayed on his feet, collapsing to his knees as his muscles went numb, struggling for breath. Bella fell with him, still using him as shield until he tipped forward, unable to provide decent cover.

She dived behind the couch as she heard a grunt and a thump. She saw the gun hit the wood floor and slide beneath the table. She didn’t bother grabbing for it, a gunshot would be heard from one of the lower floors and attract unwanted attention before they were through. Instead she leaned back and watched Tom wrestle the massive guard, reflexes lighting fast, as agile as ever. The years had been good to him. He was broader, stronger than the last time she’d seen him, that fateful assignment in Edinburgh, when he unwittingly captured her attention in more ways than one.

He kneed the guard in the stomach, drove his elbow sharply into his neck, followed by a punch to his ear, all in rapid succession and knocking the wind out of him. As he staggered back Tom pulled a blade from his waistband. It was narrow and sleek, easily concealed in one of the vibrators. It had been her idea to remove the battery pack and install the weapon, an ingenious bit scheming she was quite proud of.

The guard saw the knife and quickly ducked out of the way, tackling Tom around the middle and driving them both to the floor in a crash of heavy limbs. She sat forward, rising to her knees to continue watching the show. Elias laid out on his back beside her, panting shallow breaths, his limbs dead weight at his sides.

Tom grappled with his assailant another few moments, taking a hit to side of his face that split his bottom lip, blood blossoming along the parted flesh. She inhaled sharply, wanting to lick it away, imagining his revulsion and smirking. Tom managed to keep his grip on the blade through the tumble and stabbed the man somewhere in his side, out of her line of sight. She groaned, wanting to see the bloodshed.

She crawled unceremoniously over Elias’s twitching body to get a clearer view. Tom rolled with the guard, straddling him and pulling the blade free, pinning a strong forearm against the man’s thick neck and driving the knife into his carotid artery. She smiled, warmth spreading through her chest, down, down, pooling in her womb.

She watched Tom rear back, panting heavily, wiping the blood from his chin with the back of his hand. His intense stormy eyes watched the man beneath him sputter and twitch, grabbing futility at the blade and pulling it free, sealing his own doom as the blood spurted out with each heart beat.

Tom’s eyes cut to her, pinning her with a heated glare that only made her wetter. The blood began to pool and spread along the glossy hardwood. She laughed.

“Nice move. Dare I say I’ve rubbed off on you?”

“I was forced to improvise, as you obviously had no intention of assisting.”

She leaned back against the now lifeless corpse behind her. “I already got one. Was I expected to do
all the work?”

Tom rolled his eyes, rising to his feet and walking to a large baroque mirror on the wall, inspecting his split lip and bruised cheek.

“Don’t worry, luv, you’re still as sexy as ever. Especially after a kill. Fuck, doesn’t it make you horny? I’m absolutely drenched.”

He licked at the wound, wiping away the fresh trail of blood.

“You’re also late.”

She leaned forward, slowly buttoning her shirt. “Am I? Oh dear. What did I miss?”

“Spare me. Start cleaning up, I’ve still got to take care of the target.” He strode away from the mirror, stepping over the bloodied body and heading for the bedroom door that stood ajar.

Her attention perked.

“You haven’t killed him yet? What have you boys been doing all this time?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know. I’m serious, Bella, get moving.”

She rose to her feet. “Oh come now, Tommy. We still have plenty of time to play.”

He stopped short, dark brow raising. “Excuse me?”

She rolled her eyes, sauntering closer. “I spent all that time and money picking out those toys, explaining each one to you, and now we’re just to throw them all away, unused?”

He blinked. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“I’d rather just be fucking you.”

He groaned, rubbing a hand over his face. ‘I’m really not in the mood for this right now.”

She smirked. “I remember, you’re never in the mood for me. A shame. But no matter, I’d rather use my skills on a man that appreciates the beauty of pain and pleasure.”

Tom opened and closed his mouth, looking perplexed, glancing at the bedroom door, then back to her. “Are you saying you want to fuck and torture the target before killing him?”

She tilted her head. “Such a prosaic description. But also apt. What?”

She didn’t appreciate his laughter. People were always laughing at her expense. Which is why she made sure to laugh with them all the way through their death throes.

He continued to shake with amusement, grin splitting his face, further agitating his torn lip. “You’re actually serious. Jesus fucking Christ, this day just keeps getting better and better.”

Bella smiled, wicked and cruel.

Oh, Tommy, you have no idea my love.

She’d been planning to sit on the grenade a bit longer, but if he insisted on being a stubborn arse she’d happily toss him the explosive. At least it would get him off her back, give her some time to
play.

“How about you leave the target to me? I’ll handle the clean up as well, give you a head start.”

His laughter faded, eyes turning dangerous and guarded once more. “Head start for what?”

She couldn’t contain her excitement. “A head start to the airport, of course. I assume you want to return to Hermione as soon as possible. Especially after that terrible row the two of you—”

She was cut short by a hand seizing her throat, throwing her back into the wall. Her head crashed against a picture frame, the glass shattering behind her skull. She clawed at his wrist, eyes tearing, but continued to laugh silently, unable to emit sound. His rage was perfection.

“How the fuck do you know about her?” His face was close to hers, eyes murderous. She choked on a gasp, unable to form words. He slackened his grip a fraction, allowing a thin sliver of oxygen to flood her senses, she used her revived vocal chords to laugh anew.

He growled, pulling her away from the wall and throwing her back against it, the picture falling away entirely, crashing between their feet.

“I swear to whatever fucking deity is listening I will kill you here and now without hesitation, you crazy bitch. Tell me how you know about her!”

She blinked against the tears, her vision so blurred she could barely make out his silhouette.

“I—” she wheezed, desperately sucking in air, “G-Green sent me-e—” the hand holding her captive released all at once, sending her crashing to the floor atop broken shards of glass. They cut into her hands and calves. She smiled, savoring the pain, the sting of parting flesh. The reminder that she was still alive, that others weren’t, because of her.

She heard him race across the room and managed to suck in enough breath to shout after his retreating figure. “Don’t worry, Tommy! Green is keeping her company for you!”

As the door slammed behind him she tipped her head back and cackled, more amused than she’d been in a long time. And then a rustling sound caught her attention, stealing her laughter as she turned her head towards the bedroom.

Oh my, how could I forget? Poor dear, all alone…

She pushed up to her feet, walking into the bedroom and shining her feral smile on the bound, gagged, and terrified man laid out like a delicious human sacrifice for her consumption.

“Hello, lovely. Aren’t you a pretty thing?”

She approached the bed slowly, grin broadening at his thrashing attempts to break free.

“Don’t waste your strength, I chose those binds myself. I assure you, they won’t break. I know from personal experience.”

She ignored his muffled pleas as she walked to Tom’s discarded case, peering inside at all the goodies. She squealed, clapping her palms together, a kid in a candy shoppe.

“Oh my,” she peered at him over her shoulder, eyes bright, “I know all about your proclivities. And I promise, I will make your wildest fantasies come true.”

He screamed behind the gag, tears streaming down his face, thrashing wildly, the binds cutting
harshly into his bruised flesh. She licked her lips.

“What a wonderous way to go, dying from pleasure.” She reached inside the case, drawing out her favorite tool from the items inside. Yaxley’s eyes turned wide as saucers as she approached with it in hand, shaking his head desperately.

“Now now, luv, hold still for me.”

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**Saturday August 12, 1989**

Harry adjusted on the plastic chair, eyes averted to the floor, hands tucked beneath his thighs as he sat hunched over.

He’d passed the time by counting the floor tiles, the ceiling tiles, counting down from 500, starting over each time he lost his place. The TV in the waiting room was broken, a sign taped across the front apologizing for the inconvenience.

The other two occupants in the room were older gentlemen, one sat reading a thick book and the other was slumped over in his chair, asleep. The only sounds in the room were muffled voices and the chorus of equipment drifting in from the hallway, the turning of pages, the occasional snore, the ticking of the wall clock, and the sound of his own heartbeat, though Harry supposed the latter was only in his head.

He’d been here going on five hours.

His mother was declared dead at the scene.

He’d spent the following two hours waiting for the social worker to arrive, to speak with him, offer condolences, inquire as to his father and any local relatives. He knew Aunt Petunia lived outside of London but he’d only met her on two occasions, so long ago he couldn’t remember her face and he certainly didn’t know her number by heart.

He explained his father was on assignment for his government job and wasn’t reachable by phone most of the time, he and his mother awaited his call each night, usually before Harry went to bed. His dad liked to ask him about his day and wish him a good night when he was abroad. He also liked to make his mom laugh, if her girlish giggles floating up from downstairs after Harry went to bed were anything to go by.

His chest ached, realizing he’d never hear his mother laugh again. She has several different laughs, all of them wonderful. Her light giggles were usually stirred by his dad. Her deep belly laughs were usually drawn out by Sirius. She had a slightly wild, uncontrollable laugh that was contagious to everyone around her, usually the result of seeing someone do something utterly imbecilic, as she liked to put it.

Then she had a laugh she reserved just for Harry. It was their secret laugh, the acknowledgment of some shared joke between them, a private source of amusement only they could relate to. He loved that laugh the most.

The social worker looked troubled when Harry asked her to call Sirius, asking if he was certain he didn’t want them looking up his aunt’s number. Finally she relented, no doubt detecting the barely contained hysteria swirling within his emerald gaze. Sirius has just gotten back from assignment abroad as well. Harry assumed he was crashed out, sleeping like the dead, as his mother used to put it, describing the coma like state his father would collapse into after several sleepless nights followed
by a transcontinental flight. She’d draw the blackout curtains in their bedroom and shut the door, *encasing your dad in his tomb*, she’d say with a smirk, *let’s let papa bear hibernate while we go see a movie.*

The woman left a message on Sirius’s answering machine and took Harry to a playroom with disturbing clown art on the walls. He felt their maudlin eyes track his every movement. She’d let him migrate to the adult waiting room instead. Sirius called back a couple hours later and said he was on his way. The social worker looked distraught when she delivered the news to Harry. He wasn’t sure why, wasn’t it a good thing someone was coming to pick him up?

He was anxious for Sirius to arrive. He’d cried his eyes out in the clown room but had kept his composure out here, wanting to effect a more mature disposition while in the company of adults. But he knew he could break down in Sirius’s company without fear of judgement or shame. Sirius was his dad’s best mate, Harry’s unofficial uncle and godfather. He’d take care of everything.

He glanced up at the sound of feet pounding down the hall, quickly approaching. He noticed that the man with the book was staring at him. Harry blinked, catching his eye. The man had a piercing gaze, pale green. Harry fidgeted in his seat once more, strangely annerved. The man nodded once, a silent acknowledgement, and then returned his focus to his book as a figure pushed open the door and burst inside, long hair wild and lungs pumping furiously.

“Harry.”

Harry flew out of his seat like a bullet, crashing head first into Sirius, glasses askew, wrapping his arms around the tall man’s middle while he leaned over, wrapping his arms around Harry in turn.

“My boy. I’m so sorry, Harry. Christ, I’m so sorry.”

Harry felt the tears streaming down his face, soaking the material of Sirius’s shirt. He turned his head away from the strangers in the waiting room, face burning with emotion and embarrassment. Sirius patted him on the back, gentle rubbing motions, speaking softly. “Come on, lad, let’s head home.”

Harry’s eyes snapped up. “No! I don’t want to go back there!” he swallowed thickly, still seeing the pool of blood staining the hardwood after they’d lifted her body into the gurney.

Sirius shook his head. “Sorry, I meant my home. My flat. You’ll be staying with me while we get things sorted, I just spoke to the counselor.”

Harry blinked, arms still tight around his godfather. “What about dad? Is he on his way home?”

His heart stuttered when he saw the dark look that crossed Sirius’s eyes. He somehow looked more troubled than when he first entered and something foul settled into the pit of Harry’s stomach, eating up his insides.

“Let’s get out of here, kiddo, we’ll talk more at the house.”

Harry nodded, desperate to leave the hospital, to get away from the death and decay that grew over the walls like ivy.

The drive to Sirius’s house had been long and ominous, so was sitting on the couch with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders, a steaming cup of cocoa set before him on the table. Sirius had been unusually quiet since leaving the hospital and Harry suspected something even worse was on the horizon, though what could possibly be worse than losing his mom he didn’t know, and certainly didn’t care to venture.
“Harry-” Sirius eventually said, sitting down across from him, dark circles beneath his eyes. “Fucking hell,” he muttered to himself, pulling absently at his disheveled hair, “I don’t even know how to tell you this…”

Harry blinked, his heartbeat slowing down and speeding up at the same time.

“What is it?”

Sirius inhaled sharply, gazing at Harry with tears in his eyes. “Harry, I am so very sorry to tell you this so soon after Lily. But…” he swallowed, voice cracking. “James died, Harry. He’s-” he sucked in a shuddering breath. “James is gone, too.”

Wednesday July 13, 2005

Harry moved his fork through the cassoulet on the plate before him. He’d been a bit overwhelmed by the menu, none of the dishes contained descriptions and the names were all in French. Harry spoke a bit of conversational French but he lacked the vocabulary to converse with a waiter at a three star restaurant.

Luckily Remus has gone through a cooking show phase when Harry was about eighteen and had spent months trying to emulate the fancy cuisine the Michelin star chefs created on tv. Remus was a good cook, but the majority of the dishes were far more complex than Harry really preferred. However there was one meal he thoroughly enjoyed, a hearty casserole made in the slow cooker he could recall the smell and flavor of even years later. And luckily he remembered the name as well, a small saving grace when it came time to order.

Malfoy had gone with the duck confit and was methodically cutting into the breast with pristine, impeccable manners. Harry had requested additional background data on the man prior to their meeting, to gain a better sense of what to expect. The youngest member of the Malfoy empire attended Eton like his father and grandfather before him, the Malfoys were major donors to the prestigious boarding school and held a seat on the board. He’d then gone onto Oxford where he majored in business, preparing for his role at the family company.

He was blue blood through and through, and paired with his good looks, he’d become quite the media sensation as well. Gossip rags chronicled his every move, featured photographs of every event he attended, made wild speculations as to his relationships with models and actresses around the world. But Harry didn’t give two shites about whether or not the Malfoy heir was carrying on a secret love affair with the up and coming fashion model Jadea Warbeck, daughter of the renowned singer, or if his heart truly lied with his childhood sweetheart Pansy Parkinson, another paparazzi worshipped socialite.

All Harry cared about was whether or not Draco Malfoy was behind his parent’s killings, or whether he held viable information that could lead to whoever was.

Unfortunately, the man was proving to be a very difficult read.

“So tell me something, Potter, why bother continuing this investigation even after your dismissal? Is it to prove to the Ministry what a mistake they made by firing you or do you contain no other skill set beyond running blindly into danger?”

Harry chewed his bite, used to Draco’s casual, scathing remarks at this point.

“Neither,” he said after swallowing, “Well, perhaps a bit of the latter. But my primary motivation is
removing the killer from play. And once we have him in custody he can lead us to a larger network, the possibilities are vast.”

Draco sipped his wine, eyes narrowing thoughtfully. “But you aren’t an Officer any longer. Why bother?”

Harry studied the blonde in return. “If you spent the better part of your adult life working on a project, only to be tossed from the team overnight, would you be able to just walk away?”

“If I was tossed far enough, I don’t suppose I’d have to walk far.”

Harry smirked. “I don’t believe that for a second. You’ve been groomed from a young age to take over your family business someday. I bet you know the company like the back of your hand, have become an expert in the industry. If the board were to issue your walking papers tomorrow I highly doubt you’d be able to sever all ties at once.”

Draco leaned back in his chair. “Quite a thing to assume when we’ve only just met.”

“Well, then tell me about yourself. I’d like to know more.”

Draco smirked humorlessly. “I dare say there’s an overabundance of information that’s been published already. You only need to pick up the latest edition of The Sun to read the ten page biography they’ve just published.”

Harry kept his face blank, recalling the article he spoke of. Luna had ran to the corner newsstand and bought various papers to better gauge what details of the murders the public was being made privy to. She’d snatched up The Sun upon seeing a close up of Draco’s face on the cover. The write up was complete sensationalism, dripping with speculation, and offered no legit sources to back its rather asinine claims. But one thing was certain, the media loved Draco Malfoy, and Draco Malfoy loathed the media.

Neville had been hard pressed to find any accounts of Draco willingly submitting information for publishing. The most recent thing he could dig up was a twenty second interview Draco provided the local news station following a court hearing where Malfoy Enterprises was the defendant, some five years ago. He was fresh out of Oxford then but held himself with as much poise and confidence as the regal patriarch at his side.

The memory spurred a bevy of questions in Harry.

“I apologize if this is abrupt, but I’d like to inquire as to your relationship with your parents.”

Draco raised a pale brow. “Will personal information somehow lead you to the killer’s door?”

Harry picked up his water glass, studying the condensation along the side. “It may lead us to the door of whoever hired him.”

He took a long sip, chomping lightly on a stray ice cube. He glanced up after a prolonged bout of silence to see Draco watching him angrily.

“And let me guess, I’m suspect number one?”

Harry leaned back, absently running his fingers over the napkin on his lap. In the brief time he’d spent in Draco’s company he’d learned one thing, the man liked to cut through the bullshite to get to the core of the matter. Harry could relate to the sentiment, appreciated it even. He’d been expecting an uptight politician that talked circles around the truth. What he met instead was an uptight business
mogul that talked a straight line that was dagger sharp, cutting down everything in its path with little regard for impact.

Harry decided to meet him head on with equal straight talk. He hoped providing blatant honesty would prove he held no tricks up his sleeves, nothing in his pockets, only saying what he meant and meaning what he said.

“As of this moment, yes. You stood to gain the most by your parents’ demise. Until we can expand the circle of suspects further, you are my primary lead.”

Draco’s jaw ticked once, eyes still narrowed, but his rigid posture seemed to deflate a bit.

“I will admit, had my father been the only victim, I would warrant such investigation. However I can assure you I would never bring harm to my mother. And when I find the person responsible for doing so no courtroom or prison cell will be able to protect them from me.”

Harry took another bite, chewing thoughtfully, intrigued by the revelation.

“You weren’t close with your father?”

Draco picked up his utensils, resuming his meal as well. “We had our ups and down, same as any family. I admit, during some of our more heated rows I may have wished him ill will. But never death. And certainly not the gruesome way in which it was met.”

He sliced into a spear of asparagus with extra force, the knife glancing off the fine china with a sharp scrape. The blonde cringed, setting the blade down and looking up with an annoyed air.

“I don’t like speaking ill of the dead. We had our disagreements in the manner any father and son would fight. Nothing abnormal. Didn’t you ever have an argument with your father about the way in which you wanted to lead your life? Or did your parents support your every decision from the time you were weaned?”

Harry took another bite. “My parents died when I was twelve. They were both MI6 operatives with several near death experiences between them before I was even born. So while I have no doubt they’d both be immensely proud I was able to make something of myself in their absence, I also think they’d have liked for me to have chosen a less dangerous line of work.”

Draco’s face fell blank as he seemed to process the information. Harry waited for him to respond, curious as to what category he’d fall into. When Harry revealed his parent’s fate there were a set amount of responses he usually received, with the occasional outlier. His money was on Draco asking follow up questions, pushing for sordid details without a hint of sympathy. So he was immensely surprised when the man’s pale brows drew together and a flash of emotion shined through his pale gaze, gone in an instant.

“I see. How fortunate you had such freedom during your most formative years.”

Ah, that was more like it.

Harry nodded once, smirking. “Yes, I consider myself very lucky.”

Draco’s expression remained unaffected but his eyes held a glint of amusement. Apparently they could find common ground on having a morbid sense of humor. At least it was something.

“So, did you and your father fight about any subject in particular, or was it a general array of topics?”
Draco sighed, swirling his wine in the glass, gazing at the deep ruby hue. “My father was of the belief I should lead my life according to the same set of rules and schedules he followed. I was willing to compromise to an extent. After school I had hoped to have earned enough of his esteem to persuade him to loosen the reins a bit. But he had other ideas, tightening them at every turn.”

Harry continued to chew, hoping Draco would expand on the metaphors and provide actual substance without him having to ask. Draco paused, sipping his drink, eyes distant.

“We disagreed over my private life,” he continued, still studying the contents of the glass, “far more than we disagreed on business. Which was fortunate, as things would have been unbearable otherwise. I assure you, I had no reason to want my feather dead, from a personal and a practical standpoint. He ran the company with an iron fist, revolutionized it after taking over from my grandfather. There’s no one who could run it better, including me.”

Harry raised a brow. Draco didn’t seem the most modest of men, the statement took him off guard.

Draco’s mercurial gaze cut to him. “You’re surprised to hear me admit such a thing?” Then he smiled, somewhat sardonically. “You aren’t alone. My father would no doubt roll over in his grave if he could hear me, figuratively of course, as he’s yet to be buried. I never would have made such a claim while he was alive. Alas, now it seems pointless to deny. Lucius Malfoy was the rigid backbone of the company, my mother was the heart, and without those two vital pieces I just don’t see how we can go on as we did before.”

Harry leaned forward, resting his forearms against the table. “Are you thinking of disbanding?”

Draco took another large swig. “There’s many discussions taking place. It’s far too early for me to make any credible statements on the matter.”

Harry’s eyes trailed over him, thoughts going a mile a minute. His emerald gaze snapped back up. “You said your father revolutionized the business. What did you mean by that?”

Draco leaned back and sighed, seeming bored by the story before it began. “My great grandfather, the original Lucius Malfoy, founded Malfoy Enterprises in 1910. We were a shipping company back then, performing modestly. Then the war began and Lucius had the forethought to secure a private contract with the Royal Navy, acting as merchant marine transport vessels during that time and turning quite the profit. Abraxas, my grandfather, joined the company at eighteen, just as the second war began and Lucius secured a similar agreement. But the shipping industry faced rocky waters in the decades to follow, no pun intended.”

He paused to casually sip his wine, affecting a casual sprawl that somehow still managed to look graceful. “There were many new maritime laws in place, territory and boundary wars happening throughout international waters. The railway thrived while the shipping industry declined. Abraxas had been raised on ships, it was what he lived and breathed, all he knew. He didn’t know how to diversify, to see beyond the sea. He managed to keep the company afloat, that pun was intended, but our stock was quickly plummeting. Then my father joined the business with a new vision in mind. Technology. All types of advancements were being made to merchant and Naval vessels. He employed some of the brightest minds to stay at the forefront of that curve, equipping our ships with the most cutting edge technology available. By the early 80s the maritime industry was facing a multitude of hardships but Abraxas wanted to stay on the sinking ship. The board forced him into early retirement and gave my father controlling rights. He expanded our R&D departments, built new manufacturing plants, and secured patents on a bevy of technologies that were utilized by companies the world over, from railroads and automotive to major utilities. Essentially, he single handedly made the company what it is today.”
Harry blinked, trying to process all the information, storing it away into a file in his mind.

“Your grandfather couldn’t have been pleased being forced into early retirement.”

Draco smirked. “As much as I’d love to transfer suspicion to another member of my family, I must tell you that grandfather has been dead for fifteen years.”

Harry leaned back in his chair. “I see. How fortunate you don’t have to listen to him drone on about the war.”

Draco blinked, eyes brow arching. Then a slow grin broke out across his face, transforming his features and aging him back at least five years.

“Touché, Potter. Touché.”

Harry smirked, finding Draco slightly less abrasive the longer he spent in his company.

“I’ll be direct, Malfoy, is there anyone you can think of who would have cause to target your father, or your family in general? Remember, I’m not with the Ministry, I can keep things off the record if need be.”

Draco’s smile fell. “Are you insinuating I have something to hide, Potter?”

“We all have something to hide. I’m just trying to figure out if your father’s secrets led to his murder.”

“I wasn’t privy to all my father’s secrets.”

“But you were privy to some of them.”

Draco’s shoulders drew back, posture turning guarded once more. “We’re beginning to talk in circles, and I have better things to do with my evening. You called this meeting to learn more about me, about my likelihood of being the orchestrator of my parent’s murders. I have no way of proving to you I am innocent beyond my character, the final conclusion is up to you to determine. However, if you’re half the investigator you seem to think you are then you’ll surely come to the conclusion that I am not your perpetrator, rather I am a source of endless capital for you to utilize beyond whatever meager funding you no doubt currently possess.”

Harry opened his mouth, words lost in his mind.

“I know your time with a mother was limited, Potter, but surely you’ve been told if you wear a dumbfounded expression for too long your face will freeze that way.”

Harry snapped out of his daze. “You want to provide funding?”

“You’re hunting my parents’ killer. Why wouldn’t I offer funding? It’s one of the few resources I possess that can be useful in this matter, but I certainly have it in abundance.”

Harry cleared his throat. “I appreciate the offer, Malfoy, but we-”

“Don’t so something as daft as reject my offer to help at this stage in the game. Certainly after spending time as an Officer you’ve learned to keep every possible option open. Nothing in life is certain. You never know if or when your current donor will cut you off, or become too controlling, dictating your every move by tightening the purse strings.”

Harry tilted his head back, equal parts annerved and impressed by Draco’s succinct deduction of the
situations, even with the limited information he possessed.

“Alright,” he finally said, “I’ll let you know if I need additional funding to supplement the investigation.”

Draco polished off the wine in his glass, fingers dancing along the stem. “Excellent. I dare say we end our evening here, before you say something daft that causes me to lose my already limited faith in you.”

Harry fought the urge to roll his eyes, watching Draco flag the waiter down.

“Will you be in town this weekend?” Draco asked, eyes still averted to the side.

“As of now I intend to be.”

Draco’s gaze cut back to him. “The funeral is this Saturday. Brompton. It will be dual as they’re both entering the family mausoleum.”

Harry felt his chest constrict, breath evading him.

“You’re welcome to attend, from an investigational standpoint if you’d like to meet others in their social network. Also from a personal one if my mother’s death really holds the significance to you that you claim.”

Harry swallowed, nodding. “Yes, I’ll be there.”

Draco held his gaze as the waiter approached with the bill in hand.

“Fantastic. It’ll be a party. But I must insist you shop for a suitable outfit beforehand. If you attend in the rags you’re currently wearing my mother’s liable to haunt you from beyond the grave.”

Harry shook his head, wondering if Draco Malfoy would prove to be his greatest ally or his arch nemesis.

Tom raced out of Paradies Hotel in a blur, barely remembering to use the staff exit to avoid providing a time stamp for his departure.

His ears still rang with Bella’s shrill laughter. If he wasn’t in such a rush he would have happily killed her. But he needed her to stay behind and take care of the target. Regulus wasn’t a hitman, had never pulled the trigger before, to Tom’s knowledge. And he didn’t have time to explain his sudden departure to the third member of their team.

A part of him wondered if Reggie was in on it, too. But he quickly banished the idea. He had no reason to cross Tom. Bella didn’t need a reason. Causing chaos and destruction was her modus operandi, regardless of who she harmed.

His heart was racing faster than the cab that took him to the airport. He didn’t bother going back to his hotel, he’d brought nothing with him he couldn’t easily replace. And he always kept his passport on his person, one of many, never knowing when he’d need to make a quick exit.

His thoughts churned violently, a storm raging inside him. He thought back to all the comments Green made over the last few days, all the little hints he dropped that Tom disregarded, assured by his own stealth. But he’d been careless, blinded by her presence once more, losing his edge. And now that grave error in reasoning was going to cost him.
Everything.

*He won’t kill her. He knows I’d come after him, until he’s forced to put me down as well.*

*But why else send me on this little mission with Bella as his spy?*

*What could he possibly want with Hermione if not to kill her?*

His chest seized painfully, picturing all the horrific things that could have transpired over the long course of the day. His leg jostled up and down while he leaned over to speak to the cabbie.

“Faster!”

The man peered over his shoulder, English stilted but annoyance clear as day on his face. “I go speed limit.”

Tom glared, reaching into his jacket and extracting several bills, tossing them onto the seat in front.

“Sod the bloody speed limit! I’ll give you double that if you get me to the airport in the next ten minutes.”

The man glanced at the bills, then up and Tom, and nodded. Tom was lurched back into his seat as the cab picked up speed, zipping through the streets.

**Tuesday May 6, 2003**

Hermione lost her virginity on a Tuesday.

She wasn’t sure why that fact was of any particular note. Perhaps because it was a weekday, and in her abstract view of sex everything scandalous happened on the weekend, at night, behind closed doors.

It had still been light out when Victor laid her on his bed. There’d been no candles, no rose petals, no violin solo taking place in the corner of the room. All the bodice ripping romance novels she’d perused from Carmen’s collection when she had nothing better to kill the time had greatly mislead her. And she couldn’t have been more relieved.

As far as she was concerned her first time was perfect.

Really, it was.

Well… perhaps she would go back and tweak a few minor details, if given the opportunity. But that was just because Hermione was a perfectionist, a bit OCD at times. Any normal person would say her first time was just perfectly fine.

Victor was gentle, patient, considerate. He took it slow, asked her throughout if she was okay, how it felt, if she wanted him to stop or move a different way. It was very sweet, and while she felt a sting during the act and a general soreness after, he managed to make her orgasm using his hand and held her in bed for hours after. The sex was great, but the pillow talk was her favorite part of the experience. She’d never felt so close, so intimately tied to another person.

After he fell asleep she carefully slipped out from beneath his arm and crept to the bathroom down the hall, shutting the door and sitting on the edge of the tub, staring at her reflection in the mirror for
several heavy beats before bursting into tears.

She felt a mixture of overwhelming emotions, all of them warring within her for dominance. But she’d be lying to herself if she said she didn’t know what lay at the core of tangled branches.

At one point when Victor was inside her she felt the urge to cry, and was mortified of the prospect. She knew he’d misinterpret the tears, think he was hurting her or that she’d changed her mind. She didn’t want him to stop, she didn’t want him to see her fall apart, she didn’t want to feel this never ending tug of war on her heart.

She’d managed to keep her composure by doing something that greatly shamed her. She’d closed her eyes, wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down so his face was hidden in the side of her neck, and pretended it was someone else making love to her.

It took several minutes for the fantasy to take effect, for her to transform Victor’s sounds into smooth honey, for his tanned skin to turn pale as marble, feathered with familiar scars, for his close cropped hair to lengthen, darken, black silk sliding through her fingers. And just like that, Tom was laid atop her, thrusting into her, arms wrapped tight around her body, moaning his pleasure in her ear.

It caused a stirring of pleasure that had been absent up to that point, the pain finally overridden. She squeezed her lids so tight the pressure hurt, but it was worth it to chase the electrical current sparking along her nerve endings, making her core clench rhythmically. Tom whispered sweet nothings and encouragements in her ear, told her how beautiful she was, how good she felt, how wonderful she made him feel. He gently kissed her neck, her shoulder, her jaw.

She tipped her head back to grant him better access to the column of her throat. He’d always been so fascinated with her pulse, watching the thrum of her heart to gauge her reaction to something. Sometimes he’d rest a hand along her neck, thumb pressed against the gentle throb, head tilted as he studied her like a page of an anatomy book. She couldn’t abide when he dragged her around by her wrist, but she didn’t mind his hand around her throat, as much as she told herself she should. It felt like a warm brand, a possessive gesture he was hardly aware of, and it caused such stirrings in her chest and someplace lower she simply couldn’t formulate any kind of dissent.

But to her great disappointment he didn’t caress her neck, didn’t pay any attention to her exposed throat. Some traitorous voice whispered to her that this was wrong, she knew what she was doing and it wasn’t fair to the boy that actually laid atop her. She silenced that voice by raking her nails down Tom’s back, taking great pleasure in the animalistic growl that tore from his throat. His thrusts increased, became more erratic, and she tightened her legs around him, knees lifting to allow him deeper entry. It hurt, the feeling of him pounding against the back of her womb, but it was also necessary, she needed him as deep as possible, to mark her here the same way he’d marked her everywhere else.

She realized she liked it when he was rough, it was what she expected of him, made the fantasy more real, easier to get lost in. She encouraged his quickened pace by clenching her pelvic floor and was rewarded with the most erotic sounding growls. Yes, this was what Tom was, an animal, a beast, taking her with unrestrained passion.

She felt her climax building, she teetered on the edge, and at the last moment before freefalling she heard the words she’d always longed to hear Tom say, but they were delivered in the wrong voice, the heavy accent shattering her fantasy in one fell swoop.

“I love you, Hermione.”

Her eyes snapped open, staring at the ceiling with tears brimming in her eyes as Victor thrust into her
once, twice, three more times and groaned like a man on the torturing rack, his entire body convulsing with the force of his release, her core flooding with liquid warmth.

She blinked rapidly, trying to talk herself down from a hysterical outburst, any chance of orgasm long forgotten. She’d managed to regain her composure by the time he relieved her of his weight, lying beside her and brushing his hand along her face, asking if she was okay, if she enjoyed it.

She forced herself to smile, guilt and shame riding her hard, telling him how wonderful it was. She wanted to dash to the bathroom then and there, but he insisted on finishing her off manually. She told him it was fine, but the hurt look in his eyes stabbed further at her heart. She had relented and allowed him to slip his hand between her legs. She kept her eyes on him the entire time, terrified of losing herself to the dark fantasy yet again. She didn’t think she could survive being pulled from it a second time.

Afterwards Victor had spooned her and they’d talked. Her nerves had settled, she told herself she was fine, that the fantasy, the betrayal, was a one time occurrence that would never happen again. The next time she slept with Victor she’d be fully invested in him, and only him.

But as soon as he nodded off and she had no conversation to distract her racing mind, thoughts of Him started surfacing like ripples on a lake. She subconsciously reached for the pendant she no longer wore and suddenly felt the storm rising, a hurricane tearing across the horizon. While frustrated with herself, she was also relieved she’d managed to hold it all in until she was afforded some privacy.

So in the bathroom Hermione sat, and wept, and thought about all the things that could have been, but would never be. And she cried because she was finally learning to accept it.

Wednesday July 13, 2005

Tom ran down the street leading to Hermione’s flat. He knew Green would be at her place. Yet another way to demonstrate how much power he had, how much control he exerted over Tom’s life. The message was clear: I know everything, Tom.

He took the back entrance, the side her windows didn’t face, and threw open the door so hard it banged off the bricks. He panted, taking the stairs two at a time, long legs quickly eating up the distance.

He burst onto her floor, adrenaline through the roof, running down the hall as quietly as possible. It was late, most people would be sleeping, though he heard the sound of muffled television sets as he passed neighbors’ doors. He took comfort in the fact that Green hated large clean ups and would be unlikely to conduct a gruesome torture session in her flat and risk alerting the entire floor.

Still, he had no idea what he’d find inside, and he refused to think about it, trying to maintain his composure. For her sake.

He skid to a stop before her door and swallowed thickly upon seeing it ajar, a sliver of light pouring out into the hall. He inhaled sharply, braced for the worst, and stepped inside.

His eyes immediately fell upon her.

His heart stopped.
Decisions, decisions.

A/N: Hello my shimmering moonbeams! I’m so happy you’re still following this little diddy :D

For the next few weeks my goal is to update Kiss Kiss Bang Bang every Friday and The Bloody Tower every Tuesday, schedule permitting. Just a head’s up for my lovelies who check in on their alert messages.

For anyone interested, below are the English translations for the German featured last chapter:

*Schatz* = Jewel/treasure/darling

*Ich freue mich, dir Deutsche beizubringen, wunderschön. Ich werde dir auch andere Dinge beibringen.* = I am happy to teach you German, beautiful. I will also teach you other things.

*Sehr gut, mein Schatz!* = Very good, my treasure!

*Bleib hier, liebhaber. Ich werde für dich zurück sein.* = Stay here, lover. I will be back for you.

You’ve all waited so patiently for the Tom/Mr. Green confrontation… I can’t wait to hear your reactions :D

Enjoy.

**Friday August 14, 1987**

Tom flinched at the sound of the bathroom door opening. Light flooded the dark space from the main room, illuminating the large silhouette of a man across the shower curtain Tom hid behind.

The eight year old boy shrank further back in the stained tub, wrapping his arms around his legs and burying his face in his knees, willing himself to become invisible.

He could hear the broken static of the telly echoing off the chipped tiles, but no other movement beyond the heavy tread of boots on linoleum as the large figure approached the toilet. The faceless man groaned, flipping up the seat with a bang. Tom jolted, biting his lip.

The man had arrived not thirty minutes ago, he’d paid for the full hour but Tom didn’t hear his mother. He wondered if she was asleep or passed out, and if the man would simply leave the motel after he was done peeing.

There was a long stretch of silence where Tom’s heart beat was deafening, but then the steady flow of urination filled the tiny bathroom and Tom counted to twenty before the stream stemmed. The man groaned again, not bothering to flush or lower the seat. Tom was relieved to hear his footsteps head to the doorway, the silhouette shrinking in the distance.

“Oi! You hear me?”

Tom held his breath, but then realized the stranger must have been talking to his mother in the other room. He heard the sound of shifting fabric, rustling, and then a sharp, unmistakable slap of flesh.

“Hey, bitch! Wake up! We’re not done yet.”

Tom squeezed his eyes shut at the sound of his mother’s low moan. He knew that sound, groggy,
feeble and lost, he suspected she was coasting the rings of Saturn.

“Bitch, how much did you cook up? I said two fucking bags! You better pray you left enough for me.”

Tom sighed into his knees, suspecting the stranger wasn’t leaving any time soon.

“Fuck, did you pull from that glass? That’s disgusting.”

The man entered the bathroom again. Tom’s heart started to race. He watched the silhouette walk to the sink and the boy cringed, his intelligent mind already leaping to what was to follow. The man turned the handles to no avail, the faucet bone dry. The sink had been broken for weeks, his mother never reported it because she was always behind rent.

The man spun around, heading for the tub.

Tom shrank so far back the hard ceramic bruised his spine. The shower curtain was torn open as the man leaned towards the lever, stopping short upon seeing Tom.

“Fuck!” he gasped, rearing back. “Jesus kid, you scared the piss outta me!”

Tom blinked with wide, terrified eyes.

“The fuck you doing hiding like that? Trying to give me a heart attack?”

Tom held his breath, body frozen, wishing to god his mother was coherent enough to hear the man shouting, to pull him from the bathroom and leave Tom to his solitude. But he knew it would be several hours before she arouse from her sleep of the dead.

Tom was on his own.

“Hey, you deaf? I said what the fuck are you doing?”

Tom swallowed lightly. “Mum told me to wait.”

The man blinked, glancing at the open door, the end of the bed where only his mother’s track marked ankles and dirty soles were visible. “Fucking Merope…” he muttered angrily, expression pinched. “Always holding out on me.”

Tom’s shoulders drew in, something in the man’s tone annerving him further. He pressed back harder, trying to pass his cells through the ceramic. The stranger glanced back to Tom and lowered to his haunches before him.

“Hey kid, your mother fucking stole from me. She cooked over half my bundle and then had the nerve to pass out before our hour was up. What do you think I should do about it, huh?”

Tom blinked. His mother’s customers had spoken to him on occasion, but usually just glancing remarks. None had ever addressed him with a question, awaiting his answer with a terrifying gleam in their eyes.

“I said what the fuck should I do? Should I kill her?”

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“I said what the fuck should I do? Should I kill her?”

Tom’s breath caught in his throat.

“Yeah, I think that’s a good idea, don’t you? She’s a lying, thieving whore. She’s stolen from me before, you know that? She already owes me from last time.”
Tom’s body shook with the throb of his heartbeat.

“I think she owes me a lot of fucking money she can’t pay. So I should kill her, right? Teach her a lesson? Show her what happens when someone steals from me.”

The silence that followed was deafening, overriding the sounds of television static and his mother’s rhythmic breaths. The man tilted his head. “You love your mum?”

Tom blinked rapidly, the question eliciting a bevy of emotions within him. Did he love his mother? He knew he hated her. He wasn’t sure if he loved her.

“You want her to wake up tomorrow? Cook you breakfast? Tell you bedtime stories?”

If Tom wasn’t so utterly terrified he’d burst out laughing at the notion of his mother performing either domestic tasks.

“Yeah, I think you want your mummy to live, don’t you? So I think you should pay off her debt instead, right? That’s fair?”

Tom’s breathing became shallow, instincts alert to danger.

“I think that’s a bloody brilliant idea. You pay off her debt, or I stab that bitch in her black heart.”

And then he was reaching for Tom, fingers curled into a claw with jagged, yellowing nails. Tom gasped, rearing back and pushing up to his feet. The man leaned forward, trapping him at the back of the tub. Adrenaline flooded Tom’s small body, survival instinct roaring to life and taking possession of his four limbs, pumping lungs and racing heart.

He reached up for the grime caked shower curtain and pulled it down from the plastic hooks with all his might, swaddling arms full of the stiff fabric and shoving it into the man’s face, blinding him, throwing him off balance as he fell into the side of the tub.

Tom leapt over the lip and raced for the door, bare feet silently finding purchase on the peeling linoleum. He crossed the nail ridden threshold into the main room where a queen sized bed sat at the center, a frail thin body laying across its center, a discarded spoon laying atop her center… a kaleidoscope of misery that folding in on itself over and over, fragmenting light and reflecting a distorted reality that filled every corner of the smoke hazed room.

Tom didn’t bother shouting for her, she wouldn’t hear him and even if she could he’d never rely on her to provide safety. He heard booming thunder behind him, a menacing shout and ground shaking footsteps, and then something hard slammed into his back, cracking against his shoulders and head and knocking him off his feet, stars appearing before his eyes.

He blinked, struggling to toss off the stiff dead weight of whatever collapsed atop him. Wood grain filled his vision and he realized it was a chair.

“Fucking little cunt!”

Suddenly the chair was gone, and then so was gravity. Tom’s arm was squeezed in a vice and nearly torn from the socket as he was hauled up by the thin limb. His ears were still ringing from the glancing blow to his head, skull throbbing, balance further tipped off as he was dangled in the air.

“Stupid shite,” the man grumbled, face red and murderous. “You don’t run from me. No one ever runs from me.”
Tom burst to life like a live wire, sparking fury and terror with his three free limbs, kicking violently and clawing at the beast’s face. The man barked in outrage, shaking Tom harder, making it feel as though his arm was severed at the spot where the large hand squeezed it, palm covering the smattering of criss cross scars marring the pale flesh.

Tom narrowed his eyes, trying to focus through the pain, strategize through the blind terror. He directed his kicks with more focus, aiming a bent foot between the man’s legs and earning a satisfying Oomf! as all the air left the stranger in a sour exhale directed into Tom’s face.

He dropped Tom all at once, hands cupping his crotch as though to undo damage already done. Tom had expected as much and managed to land on his feet in a low crouch, darting around the hunched figure to the door. He cringed when he saw the deadbolt fastened at the top, beyond his reach. His mother installed extra locks on the door for added security, or so she told herself, despite the fact the window had been broken so often it was hardly worth replacing and the door itself had been knocked clear off its hinges more than once.

However the top lock was exclusively for her wayward son, to keep Tom inside the room when she wanted to punish him. Tom would normally wait for her to pass out and simply push the chair to the door, unfastening it himself. But the chair was currently next to the stranger, and the stranger was quickly regaining his bearings.

Tom’s mind raced, trying to figure out an escape plan, his mind going to two places- the bathroom or the front window. The front window didn’t open but could be broken again, Tom could climb through. The bathroom had a door but no lock, Tom could fit through the tiny window above the tub but he wasn’t tall enough to reach it without some sort of boost.

Front window it was.

He raced to his mother’s bedside and grabbed the lamp, pulling harshly to rip the cord from the wall and dashed back to the window, throwing it full force at the pane, feeling a surge of triumph at the explosive sound of shattering glass. He followed the path of the lamp, leaping towards freedom, and was caught mid air.

A large hand grabbed the back of his shirt and ripped him back, clipping his wings and hauling him into a hard, foul smelling body. Tom started to scream. Not in fear, not for help, but in pure adrenaline fueled rage. He nearly choked on the black smoke billowing from deep within. The man laughed cruelly, head tipping back with malevolent mirth, his mother sighed irritably and rolled to her side, facing away from the scene unfolding next to her.

A strong arm formed an unbreakable seatbelt across Tom’s chest, pinning him against the man’s torso and once more lifting him off the ground. Tom kicked at the man’s kneecaps, grunting with the effort, earning a harsh smack to the previously injured side of his head.

“I’m gonna kill you and your whore of a mother you fucking little- Ow! Dammit!”

Tom managed to elbow the man in the mouth, his teeth cutting into Tom’s arm, but the sting of pain was worth it. He started dragging Tom past the bed and back towards the bathroom as Tom struggled with all his might to free himself. It was to no avail, he was simply no match for the man’s strength. As they passed the snow filled television Tom’s eyes landed on the scattered items on the dresser, desperate for any kind of weapon.

There was the one pot burner, unplugged and caked in filth, next to the coffee maker, still half full with a two day old brew, cold, black and congealing in the glass pot. There was a smattering of discarded gear but Tom didn’t think he could reach any of the needles, his hands shaking too much.

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to fumble with the tiny plastic.

He set his sights on the coffee pot, lunging forward as much as the band around his middle would allow, fingers straining, straining, just reaching their target and curling around the plastic handle. He pulled the pot free and swung it over his head and down, aiming blindly, gasping at the force of the blow. The shock radiated up his arm to his shoulder but his death grip on the handle remained.

The handle was all that survived, the glass shattering over the top of the man’s head and cold coffee soaking Tom’s hair, pouring in streams down his neck and back, stinging the scalp wound he didn’t realize was there, mixing with caked blood and soaking his shirt.

The man yelled in pain, dropping Tom and clutching his head, wiping at his eyes. Tom didn’t land gracefully this time, falling in a pile of scattered limbs, feeling stray glass shards reach up from the ash burned carpet to bite into his skin. He gasped for breath, scrambling on his hands and knees towards the wall, blinking rapidly, coffee in his eyes.

His senses were overwhelmed with the beverage, overriding the room’s normal pungent odors of cigarettes and stale sex. Tom swallowed, throat tightening in his panic to run, knowing the man would kill him as soon as he recovered.

He spared a glance at his mother, still passed out on the bed, and felt a strange tug, an invisible rope pulling him towards her. He narrowed his eyes, resisting the urge and turning away, knowing it was likely the last time he’d see her alive.

He ran to the broken window, hoisting himself up to straddle the frame, jagged glass slicing into his hands, forearms, through his pants and into his thighs. Out the corner of his eye he saw the man charge for him, arms out and lungs screaming. Tom threw his leg over the side and dropped to the landing below, staggering a bit and then sprinting down the walkway, past neighbor’s doors and windows, no one sparing the loud commotion a glance.

He heard the door to his mother’s room crash open, heavy footsteps chasing him, echoing down the walkway. But Tom was back in his element, knew the motel like the back of his hand, the surrounding neighborhood was a map he could trace in the dark. He had enough of a head start that he reached the stairs before the man was halfway across the upper floor, Tom’s short but agile legs tearing across the parking lot to the alley behind the manager’s office.

Tom disappeared into the dark of night, barefoot, soaked in coffee and blood, ears filled with the sound of his panting breaths and a demon’s thunderous roar.

Wednesday July 13, 2005

Tom skid to a stop before Hermione’s door. He swallowed thickly upon seeing it ajar, a sliver of light pouring out into the hall. He inhaled sharply, braced for the worst, and stepped inside.

His eyes immediately fell upon her.

His heart stopped.

“Ah, Tom, my boy. You made excellent time. Please, come in, have a seat.”

Tom’s eyes flickered rapidly between Hermione’s tear filled eyes and the metal barrel of the gun pressed to her temple. His mind raced, formulating a dozen plans at once, running through the scenarios, discarding one after the other and pulling up the next.
“Ah ah ah, I suggest you put those ideas to the side, or you’ll be saying your goodbyes to Hermione much sooner than necessary.”

Tom inhaled sharply, eyes moving up to lock with Green’s amused, gleaming gaze. He managed to force words past the constriction in his throat. “You’ve been busy I see.”

“What irony, I was going to say that very thing to you. Now, please have a seat so we can get the rest of our evening underway. It’s terribly late and I’m quite exhausted, I imagine you’re in a similar state considering the day you’ve had.”

“I’ve just caught a second wind.”

“Always the jester. Now sit, Hermione and I have been patiently waiting for you and it’s rude to make us wait further.”

Tom swallowed lightly, eyes shifting down to Hermione. She sat rigid in the upholstered chair, spine straight as a board and fists clenched at her sides. She gazed forward, head held high, though she tracked Tom’s movements with her eyes and blinked rapidly through silent tears.

“Hermione, it’s going to be okay. I promise.” He was amazed how steady he managed to keep his voice.

She gasped lightly, no doubt the emotions she was trying to keep tamped down were boiling high within her, about to overflow the lid. He shook his head, holding up a hand as he neared the couch.

“Don’t speak, luv, don’t move. I’m going to take care of everything. Just stay calm and trust me.”

Green smirked. “I’ve been waiting twelve long years to hear you interact with your hidden gem and I must admit, it does not disappoint.”

Tom scowled at the man once more. “You should be pointing that gun at me, I’m your greatest threat.”

“Yes, and she’s your greatest treasure. I have the gun pointed in the right direction, I assure you. Oh, and speaking of firearms, please place your weapon on the table and slide it over before you sit down.”

Tom stopped short, posture stiff. “I left Vienna is quite a hurry. No bags, no weapons.”

Green smiled. “Yes, I’m sure you did. I can only imagine how quickly you ran to cab stand after disembarking from the plane. However I know you made a pit stop along the way, that little storage locker you keep at Heathrow? Sound familiar?”

His fangs descended at the dark look that crossed Tom’s eyes. “I thought so. Put the weapons down, Tom. Don’t make me wait.”

Tom’s jaw ticked, eyes murderous, fingers curling into fists as his side. A heavy beat of silence passed, Hermione’s quickened breath the only sound in the room. And then Tom slowly reached behind him, hand sliding beneath his jacket, only to emerge with his Smith & Wesson held tightly, pointed to the floor.

All three sets of eyes locked onto the weapon, each held an intense emotion unique to their owner. Finally Tom gazed up, watching his handler as carefully as the man watched him as he made his way to the coffee table and set the glock down, sliding it across the wood to rest before Hermione’s bare knees.
“Excellent. Now, the rest of it.”

Tom swayed on his feet with the force of his rage.

“Come now,” Green pressed the barrel deeper into her temple, she squeezed her eyes shut and Tom saw red. “We don’t have all night.”

Tom reached back into his jacket and removed a curved hunting blade from the inner lining, tossing it on the table with a dull thunk. He reached into the other side and pulled out his subcompact beretta, placing it down with more care.

He straightened, locking eyes with Green once more. His handler raised a grey brow, the corner of his mouth curving upward, the knowing glint in his eye making Tom’s blood pressure rise.

Tom leaned over and pulled a small switchblade from beneath his sock, tossing it up to the table before pulling up his other pant leg, removing a sleek dagger with a S-curved blade that glinted in the light. He slid it into the pile of weapons before once more standing tall.

Green sighed, tipping his chin to gesture at Tom’s middle. Tom’s eye twitched, teeth grinding together as he reached into his pockets, one hand extracting two hypodermic needles filled with a clear liquid and the other pulled out a-

Hermione gasped, pressing back in the chair, forgetting the gun at her temple as she eyed the grenade Tom placed at the center of her table.

She blinked, opened and closed her mouth, emitting no sound. Then she looked up at Tom with wide eyes. He held her gaze for a moment before shrugging lightly. “I like to be prepared.”

Green chuckled. “Yes, always the forward thinker, aren’t you? I’ve said many of times that you think things through far too much. If only you could learn to be a bit more impulsive.”

Tom’s fists tightened anew at the amusement marring Green’s face. “I’ve always done what you’ve asked of me. Now is no different. I’m defenseless. Now let her go.”

“Funny, I don’t remember making that agreement. The only arrangement I’m aware of is the one that includes me having sole control of this situation, which I can only maintain by keeping this gun pointed at the lovely Ms. Granger’s head. Now, take a seat and keep your hands where I can see them. I know I don’t need to waste more time telling you something as cliché as what will happen if you act out of turn, so we’ll skip that part and get right to the exciting bits.”

Tom held his breath as he lowered himself onto the couch, directly in front of Hermione. He held her gaze, trying to convey a message of reassurance with his eyes alone. He would figure a way out of this, but he needed her to remain calm. If she tried anything then shite would surely hit the fan. Tom was fast, but he couldn’t outpace a bullet.

“That’s a good boy.”

Tom’s look of reassurance turned to homicidal longings as he gazed up, lips pressed to a thin line.

“Hermione, dear, would you be so kind as to place Tom’s little toys at my feet.”

She jolted, glancing up with raised brows.

“It’s quite alright, my dear, just avoid touching the business ends and you’ll be just fine.”
She turned around and reached forward with shaking hands, her palms hovering over the pile, indecision on her face.

“The warning I gave Tom goes for you as well. But you’re far more reasonable, I think you know you’re much more likely to injure yourself than me if you try to wield anything. Now, start with the guns.”

She swallowed heavily, eyes darting up to Tom. He nodded once, eyes flickering to the larger glock. “The safety’s on, only touch the-”

“I remember,” she spoke suddenly, fingers curling around the grip. Tom blinked, racing thoughts stuttering on a faded frame, a long ago memory of a time long forgotten.

*That’s right. I showed her how to shoot. She was bloody terrified of pulling the trigger. She started to cry after but tried to hide it from me.*

He was pulled from his musings as he watched her lean over and place the weapon at Green’s feet, repeating the motion with the beretta and then going for the knives. Her eyes caught the reflection of the longer blade, his chest seized at the image she painted. But then the weapon was discarded at his handler’s feet and only the syringes and narrow metal cylinder remained. He knew which items she’d grab first.

She studiously avoided peering at the grenade, and once the needles were on the ground she spun forward and placed her hands on her knees.

“I can’t touch that.”

Green smirked. “It’s not explosive, dear. As much as Tom would love to see me blown to bits he’d never risk your pretty neck. It’s a non-lethal stunner. But I assure you, pulling the clip will not save you from a bullet to the brain. Now please, put it with the others.”

She sighed deeply, slowly leaning forward and carefully picking up the device with both hands, holding her breath as she lowered it to the ground.

“Perfect. Now that that’s done I think we can all breathe easier.”

Hermione looked to be on the verge of hyperventilating.

“Enough games!” Tom snarled, the gun at her temple grating his nerves. “Tell us what you want.”

Green removed the barrel from her head but kept it pointed in her direction as he walked behind her chair and took a seat in the one beside it, catty corner from Tom.

“Such anger. Surely you didn’t think you could keep her hidden from me forever?”

Tom glared. “What do you want, Green? Why are you doing this?”

Green’s amusement faded, eyes intense. “I want the same thing as always, Tom. For you to succeed. Surely you see the insurmountable problem you’ve created by bringing your childhood sweetheart into the web we live upon? How did you intend to keep her hidden from the spiders?”

Tom drew shallow breaths, muscles tensed. There was no point in beating around the bush. Green would see through the lies anyway.

“I didn’t intend to bring her in. I intended to leave.”
Green watched him in silence for several heavy beats, then smiled sardonically. “Yes, I thought as much. Tell me, where did you plan on running to? What corner of the earth do you think is sacred from our reach?”

Tom tipped his chin up, looking down his nose at the man but remaining silent. Green chuckled, shaking his head. “Always running around looking for things to destroy. It was only a matter of time before you turned that destructive nature inward. Luckily I’m stepping in before you did something you’d regret.”

Tom blinked, then released a sharp bark of laughter. “Too late for that. I regret ever agreeing to speak with you that night ten years ago. More so, I regret not reporting you to the authorities when I was at Wool’s.”

Green waved a hand. “You’re judgement is clouded at the moment. We both know if I didn’t step in you’d be dead or in prison by now. At least you have a semblance of a life you can ruin with poor decisions. I gave that to you.”

Tom couldn’t tamp down the explosion of anger. “You gave me a gun and a living target. A lifetime of killing. Nothing else.”

Green sighed, unaffected by his charge’s rising ire. “I gave you an invaluable skill set and the tools to perform, which has led you around the world and given you great wealth. I gave you a purpose, and while at the moment you may claim to abhor that purpose we both know that deep down you thrive on having such power and control.”

“Control? I have control over nothing!”

“Do calm down, Tom. I’ve had enough of your hysterics to last a lifetime. And I don’t know how we once more drifted to the subject of your life when Hermione’s hangs in the balance.”

Tom’s mouth clamped shut, entire body tense and ready to spring, though he didn’t know in which direction. If he leaped for Green he may fire the gun, if he leaped for Hermione he’d never reach her in time.

“Bloody hell, can you not sit still and listen for even a few minutes? What am I saying, of course you can’t. Very well, I’ll try and shorten my proposal to thirty seconds.”

Tom blinked, defensive posture easing. Hermione glanced at him with questioning eyes. He was certain they mirrored his own.

Proposal?

“Yes, proposal.”

Tom leaned back, expression hard and filled with trepidation. He knew this couldn’t be good, and considering the situation they were currently in, that was really saying something.

“Let’s see, how can I put this most precisely? You want out, correct?”

Tom narrowed his eyes.

“That was rhetorical, of course. You’ve already made you opinion on the matter quite known. And it just so happens I have the ability to let you out. Scot free. No strings attached.”

Tom tensed. He didn’t believe that for a moment.
“Of course you don’t believe me. No one ever gets out, you say. No one ever walks away. But allow me to play devil’s advocate for a moment, if you will. Despite your many misgivings over the years, have I ever done anything to put you in harm’s way? Have I ever demonstrated anything but concern for your well being?”

Tom blinked.

“Exactly. I’ve proven time and time again that I only have your best interests at heart. So why would I set you on the path to destruction now, all of a sudden?”

Tom’s gaze slowly cut in Hermione’s direction. She was watching the exchange with wide eyes, posture stiff and arms crossed protectively across her middle.

“Yes, she does certainly present an interesting variable. But I gain nothing by killing her. I would only lose you. Alas, if I allow you children to run wild with your own devices I lose you yet again. You’re clever Tom, but you’d never be able to pull off the daring escape you’ve been romanticizing in your mind. You’d always be looking over your shoulder, her shoulder, and eventually, the past would catch up to you. If there’s one guarantee in life beyond death, it’s that no man can outrun his past.”

Tom watched his handler carefully. “I don’t understand. Why would you let me go?”

Green leaned back, crossing his legs and effecting a comfortable posture. “The way I see it, you’re already gone. You’ll be discontent staying, which will lead to sloppy work and eventual death, or you’ll attempt your own daring exit, which will lead to immediate death. And as we’ve already established, I have no interest in attending your funeral. So it seems I have little choice but to offer my assistance.”

Tom swallowed, eyes darting back to Hermione, locking gazes. Her message was clear. 

*Don’t trust him.*

He tipped his chin.

*I don’t.*

He looked back to Green, brow raised. “I appreciate the selfless offer, but pardon my hesitation to accept. I have a hard time believing you’re willing to let me go, *no strings attached*, as you say.”

Green chuckled, shaking his head and resting the gun on his thigh, still aimed at Hermione.

“Oh, I apologize for the confusion. I meant there were no obligations after your release. Of course the release itself will cost you.”

*And there it is.*

Tom leaned back, crossing his legs and imitating the casual air of the man across from him.

“I see. You need something from me.”

Green smirked, cocking his head. “Actually, *you* need something from *me*. However if I’m going to offer my services then naturally I’ll expect something in return, *quid pro quo*, if you will.”

The muscle in Tom’s jaw ticked, braced for impact. “And what exactly do you have in mind?”

Green shrugged lightly, face a study in calm.
“I need you to complete three final missions. Three final targets. And then you’re done. For good.”

Tom watched him with a calculated gaze. It was too easy. Too simple.

“And what’s the catch?”

Green’s smile split his face in half, teeth gleaming as brightly as his eyes.

“The catch, my dear boy, is that Hermione has to help.”

Monday February 12, 1990

Harry carefully pulled another box off the top of the pile and lowered it to the ground, sneezing in the wake of the dust cloud it stirred.

He straightened his glasses, peering at the familiar handwriting along the flap with such a strong ache of longing it stole his breath away. He ran his hands along the messy cursive, throat tight. The muffled sound of footsteps from the floor below shook him from his stupor and he sighed, opening the lid to study the contents.

His heart lurched in his chest upon seeing the items. He knew what the box contained, but it always felt like he was discovering the treasures for the first time. He reached in and pulled out a pale blue baby blanket, neatly folded and soft from years of wear. It smelled like fabric softener and a hint of perfume. Her perfume. Beside it was a very familiar looking teddy bear, missing one eye, the nose dented and chewed, the pale stomach faded and stained. Beneath the bear sat a large book, a photo album.

He sucked in a breath and carefully maneuvered it free, opening the cover with great care, as though the binding would crumble and the pages would turn to ash at the slightest provocation. He blinked several times when he saw the photos on the first page, willing the tears at bay. His parents looked so young, so happy, so alive.

They held a tiny infant in their arms in each frame, sometimes posing for the camera, others were more intimate, candid moments. His father feeding Harry ice cream in front of the telly, his mother holding his chubby arms aloft while he tried to balance on his feet for the first time.

The photos were filled with smiles, laughter, love. He got lost in the pages, turning one after the other until he was met with the empty white of the back cover. He sighed, pulling out of the reverie to gaze at his surroundings, remembering where he was.

His aunt’s attic.

He closed the album and carefully placed it back inside the box, one of the few he insisted on bringing with him to the Dursley’s, the rest were kept in Sirius’s basement.

Today was the six month anniversary of his mother’s death, six month and one day of his father’s. He’d been a resident in the Dursley household for roughly five of those months, Remus and Sirius reluctantly relinquished possession of him after the courts set down their ruling, granting Harry’s blood relatives custody.

Custody that they didn’t want. Of course they didn’t let the judge know that. His Aunt put on a good show for the courts, crying over the loss of her beloved sister, begging them to release Harry into their care, where he could be raised the way his parents intended. Nevermind she hadn’t seen Harry in person for years, avoiding Lily and her husband like the plague she considered them to be.
But they were a financially comfortable plague that built up a considerable savings and left that wealth to their only child, money that could be accessed every month to assist with Harry’s upkeep until he reached majority. Vernon had recently lost yet another job, because of bearacrical bullshit according to him, but Harry suspected it had far more to do with the man’s surly attitude and short fuse. The Dursley’s had fallen on hard times and low and behold a wealthy, estranged nephew fell into their lap. They weren’t keen to let him go.

Immediately after the funerals Sirius had taken off work as long as he could, finally accepting an assignment that would keep him local based, but the judge didn’t deem either him or Remus a more viable option for raising Harry than his own family, especially since the Dursley’s had a child Harry’s age. What a great idea it was to allow the boys to grow up together, becoming as close as brothers.

Dudley was an unholy menace and despised Harry more than his Aunt and Uncle did. He didn’t appreciate having his only child status messed with, even though his parents spared no affection for the new addition, but Dudley didn’t see it that way. Sharing a room with the boy had become so unbearable Harry had taken it upon himself to move to the dark, drafty, attic. He’d gladly face a few rats up here to avoid the vermin residing downstairs.

Harry didn’t know why his Aunt despised her own flesh and blood so much. He’d never had the opportunity to see her and his mother interact outside of a handful of family functions in his youth. Those events eventually tapered off after his grandparents died, leaving their daughters no reason to force the matter for appearances sake.

He’d overheard his mother talking about it once or twice with his father, she sounded regretful and upset over the estrangement, wishing things could be different. He thought he recalled his mother saying she wished Petunia would get over the past, let bygones be bygones, making him suspect something occured between them in their younger years, before Harry was born. But whenever he asked about her sister hurt would flood her features. Harry couldn’t bear to see his mother in distress and would always drop the subject.

But now, given the situation he found himself in, he wish he had pushed the matter more, just to have any sort of clue as to why he was enemy number one with his Aunt and her family. He knew Petunia would never tell him, at least not the truth, so he supposed the secret died with his mother.

“Boy! Get down here!”

Harry cringed.

“I know you can hear me! You have five seconds to get your arse downstairs!”

Harry sighed, sliding the box away and taking to his feet, silently moving across the floor. He’d quickly learned which beams made noise to avoid drawing attention from downstairs. He opened the hatch and kicked the ladder free, letting it slide open and click into place. He was halfway down the rungs when he was yanked off by a meaty hand around his arm, causing him to yelp and land with a stumble.

“Boy! You’ve been messing with my trophies again? I told you to stay away from them!”

Harry blinked, trying to jerk free of the strong grip on his arm to no avail.

“I didn’t touch your stupid trophies!”

Vernon’s red face began to turn purple, beady eyes narrowed to slits.
“How dare you speak to me like that! In my own house!”

“Vernon?” called a feminine voice from downstairs, making Harry cringe anew. He hated his aunt even more than his uncle. She had his mother’s same auburn hair and treated her nephew as she would a pebble in her shoe. It was too much to bear.

“Not now, Petunia! I’m talking to the bloody nuisance!”

“Do try and keep your voice down, the neighbors just walked by the front-”

“I’ll talk as loud as I want to in my own goddamn house! Now shut up!”

The downstairs fell silent once more. Harry regained his uncle’s full, undivided rage.

“Now listen here, boy. I shined those trophies myself just the other day and I know exactly what direction they were all facing. I set it up as a trap, see? And low and behold I walk by this morning and find my two League trophies facing the wrong way, covered in smudges! What do you have to say about that?”

Harry tugged his trapped arm. “I’d say you have a bit too much time on your hands.”

A growl reverberated through the barrel chest, rumbling free from thin lips and a bushy mustache. “Smart arse little bastard! Those parents of yours taught you no manners whatsoever! But what else is to be expected of a drug addict and an alcoholic? You’ve got a mix of the worst genes you could possibly inherit! I just hope we’re free of you before you start thieving!”

Harry blinked, taken aback by the statement, how completely ludicrous it was on every level. He wasn’t even sure where to start his protests, which led to a heavy beat of silence where Vernon’s eyes turned bright with victory.

“That’s right, boy. Didn’t know your parents were both lushes? Hid behind those fancy government jobs and acted so high and mighty, but behind closed doors we all know what was really going on!”

Now the words rushed to Harry so fast he didn’t know how to staunch the flow. “Are you daft? I lived behind those closed doors for twelve years, I think I’d know if my parents were alcoholics or addicts! They didn’t even have a liquor cabinet! You on the other hand stash bottles in every room!”

Vernon drew his hand back and Harry cowered instinctively, unable to run, resigned to taking the blow to the side of the head just as he’d taken the last three. But the hit didn’t come, instead he was jerked roughly forward, eyes popping open in fear and anger as Vernon held him aloft. They were eye level, the steam of Vernon’s sour breath fogging the lenses of Harry’s glasses, saturating the world in a hazy fog with each panting breath.

“You stupid little shite! I own a beautiful home, have a beautiful wife and brilliant child, I have everything a man could ever want! And what do you have? You have nothing! No one! Because you’re an awful burden that no one wants to be pinned with! Your own mother killed herself to escape you-”

Harry thrashed wildly. “Liar! Take it back! Take it back! She didn’t kill herself!”

“She overdosed, the same thing!”

“She didn’t overdose! Liar! Her heart gave out!”

“And why do you think her heart stopped? That doesn’t just happen to young women without
Harry aimed a knee at Vernon’s middle, earning a satisfying gasp of pain as he was finally released. Harry landed deftly on his feet and backed up so fast he tripped over the extended ladder at his back, falling to his bum. But he hardly registered the pain, still livid with indignation. He could handle insults aimed at him, his appearance, his situation, but he couldn’t stomach the hateful things they said about his parents.

“She just got word about dad! She went into cardiac arrest and fell and hit her head on the table! She never took any drugs! She was a good mum, a good person, unlike you and your awful wife!”

“You son of a-”

“Dad! Can I have twenty quid?”

The new voice emanating from downstairs drew both their attention, giving Harry a momentary reprieve from the hulking figure poised above him, mid lean with his hands extended forward like meaty claws, ready to grab him once more.

Harry quickly scrambled backwards like a crab, jumping to his feet and running for the bathroom just as Vernon regained his bearings, charging after him with thunderous footfalls. Harry managed to slam the door and push in the lock a second before the door shook violently on its frame, hinges rattling.

“Open the door this instant! You little shite! You don’t lock me out in my own bloody house! Open this door or I’m breaking it down! Open it!”

Harry backed up slowly, limbs trembling. He’d seen his uncle work himself into a state before, but never a violent rage like this, never where Harry legitimately feared for his life. He panted lightly, nerves frazzled, glancing about for a weapon or escape route. His eyes fell on the window above the toilet. It was small but it opened, and Harry was just skinny enough to squeeze through if he maneuvered carefully enough.

Harry leapt onto the toilet lid, carefully stepping onto the back of the tank. The door shook violently again and again, creaking beneath the weight of pounding fists as Harry slid the window open. He’d blocked out most of his uncle’s screams and threats but his ears perked up at the softer voice that was now in the hall, approaching.

“Vernon! What are you doing?”

“Stay out of this! That bloody twit has insulted me for the last time!”

“Please, luv, just calm down for a-”

“Don’t tell me what to do! Someone has to teach that boy a lesson and by god it is going to be me!”

“I understand but maybe we should- ah!”

Harry’s head swiveled around in shock at the sharp slapping sound immediately followed by a feminine shriek.

“How many times do I have to fucking say it? Stay back, Tuney, or I swear I’ll break both your necks! Now go back downstairs and stay there!”

Harry faced the window as he heard his aunt’s soft footsteps recede, followed by the rattle of the
knob. “I know you can hear me, boy. There’s nowhere to go. Come out this instant and I’ll only punish you once. Drag this out any further and I’ll make it last all night.”

The cool, almost calculating way in which his uncle now spoke sent chills down Harry’s spine. He quickly hoisted himself into the frame and thread his bony arms through, grasping the shingles. He was on the second floor but luckily the roof was flat enough in spots to navigate by foot until he reached the side terrace. He’s already scaled out the second floor windows a handful of times, though this was his first trip through this particular exit.

“I said open the fucking door!”

And the rage fueled Neanderthal was back. His voice became muffled as Harry slid through, pausing to work his shoulders and chest past, finally breathing a sigh of relief when he fully emerged.

To his shock the deafening sound of splintering wood sounded behind him, he spun around and watched Vernon crash through the door, a gaping hole where the knob should be. He stormed in and gazed around madly, his face an overripe plum with malice written in every line. His eyes fastened to the open window and locked with Harry’s terrified emerald gaze.

“You fucking leech!” He charged for the window and Harry sprung to his feet, narrowly outstepping the grasping hand that shot out, desperately grabbing for his ankle. He held his arms out for balance and kept his eyes avered down, eyeing the shingles with trepidation, quickly cutting a path across the house.

“He’s on the bloody roof! Dudley, get outside and watch him!” And then the grasping hand disappeared and the sound of thunder receded as his uncle no doubt made a beeline downstairs.

Harry’s heart was in his throat as he finally reached his destination, limbs shaking so badly he could barely keep his grasp on the cross hatched terrace, ivy poking him in the face as he scaled down, leaping the last few feet with raw adrenaline surging through his veins.

The back door crashed open nearly as loudly as the bathroom door had, eliciting a yelp of fear he couldn’t contain.

“Dad! Dad he’s getting away! He’s heading for the fence!”

“Get him!”

Harry heard the sound of pounding footsteps behind him, barely discernible over the blood rushing through his ears. He had no fear of Dudley catching him, the overweight boy only expended physical energy when he walked to the bathroom after playing hours of video games.

But the second set of charging footsteps flooded his nervous system with unbridled terror. Vernon may have been overweight as well, but he was tall, and his long legs would make short work of the backyard.

Harry leapt as he reached the fence, hands grasping the tops of the posts as he hoisted himself up. The fence rocked suddenly, once, hard, as Vernon rammed into it, either unable to check his momentum or trying to knock Harry down, which he was nearly successful in doing. Harry clutched the top of the posts for dear life, trainers battling to find purchase against the wood as he pulled himself higher.

“Get down here!”

He felt fingers graze his ankle, fingertips catching the back of his shoe and pulling hard. Harry pulled
his leg up at the same time, straddling the fence and releasing his foot from the trainer. Vernon gazed at the grass stained shoe in his hand with a dumbfounded expression before barking in anger and tossing it over his shoulder. But whatever expression he wore next was lost to Harry as he hopped over the side, landing in a crouch in the neighbor’s garden.

He knew his uncle wouldn’t cause a scene out in the open, he was too obsessed with image to risk the neighbor’s knowing the truth about what happened in his home. Still, Harry wasted no time cutting across the strange backyard, hopping their fence in turn until he landed on the hard sidewalk.

He took off full speed ahead, no destination in mind, one shoe on his feet and hellfire at his back.

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**Thursday July 14, 2005**

“You’re having a spot of luck is all, don’t get too comfortable.”

Harry laughed, keeping pace behind his former mentor as they ascended the spiral staircase.

“A spot of luck? More like kicking your arse.”

“Please! Chelsea beat a 10-man Uni, after a bloody draw at the League! I would hardly call that bragging rights.”

“Oh come on, old man, they were already in the lead! You know I hear a lot of whining and complaining, sounds about right coming from a United fan.”

“Now listen here you smarmy ingrate-”

“Don’t hate me because your team’s for shite this year.”

Sirius shook his fist before Harry’s face even as a wide grin split his own.

“Cheeky little bastard.”

“I assure you nothing about me is little.” Harry winked and Sirius tossed his head back with a bark of laughter.

Harry chuckled alongside as they made their way to the top floor, pausing before the blood red door. Harry started to fish the keys from his pocket but stopped short, glancing at Sirius.

“Who am I kidding? Ten to one odds Luna’s already inside.”

Sirius smirked. “Fifty to one Nev scalds himself with coffee when she says good morning to him.”

Harry shook his head but couldn’t suppress a smirk. “Leave off. He’s finally enjoying his work, I don’t want to make him feel uncomfortable.”

“I think it’s a bit too late for that, can’t be comfortable pitching a tent every time a bird glances at you.”

“Like you would know about that.”

Sirius laughed again, cut short by a new voice, muffled behind the door.

“I think it prudent to inform you gentlemen that sound travels quite well through this rather inept barrier.”
Harry felt the blood drain from his face upon recognizing the deep baritone. Sirius laughed harder.

“Wanker!” Harry hissed, punching him in the arm as he threw his own weight against the door, pushing it open.

He was relieved to see only Dumbledore inside. Harry wasn’t sure he could survive the embarrassment had the subjects of their amusement overheard them. He was positive Neville wouldn’t.

“Good morning, Sir.”

Dumbledore smirked. “Good morning, Harry. Sirius.”

Sirius tipped his head in acknowledgement but otherwise said nothing as he casually strode to his desk. Harry had noticed a strange tension between the two men since starting this project. He had yet to broach the subject with Sirius but he suspected it was lingering bitterness for the way Harry was dismissed from the Ministry, despite the fact Dumbledore was only the messenger.

“What brings you by today, Sir?”

Dumbledore put his hands in his pockets as he casually studied the sketch pinned to the center of the evidence wall. Harry felt himself pale a second time in as many minutes.

“I meant to tell you, I believe I saw his face. Luna drew up the sketch. Things got a bit hectic yesterday.”

Dumbledore turned around and smiled, eyes gleaming. “No worries, I understand you had your hands quite full with Draco Malfoy.”

Sirius glanced up. “Let me guess, you have spies working in his office?”

Harry glanced at him with raised brows, the heat in his voice unmistakable.

“Not quite,” Dumbledore didn’t seem phased by the scathing tone. “I have one planted in yours. And it seems she’s arriving now.”

His smile widened as the door was pushed open yet again, Luna entering with far more grace than Harry had ever managed to maintain when wrestling it open. Harry glanced back to Dumbledore, wondering how the man knew it was Luna and not Neville outside.

“Good morning everyone.”

“Hello, Luna,” Harry tried to keep the skepticism from his voice, but she noticed Sirius’s close examination of her and stopped short, glancing between them until her eyes landed on Dumbledore.

“You’ve told them.”

Harry blinked, unconsciously taking a step back from her. Her face betrayed a flash of hurt before it melted away to her usual calm and serene expression.

“I did, but I think I should expound on the explanation to alleviate any misgivings the team may have.”

“We should wait for Neville then. He was on the carriage beside mine, I tried to wait for him outside the station but he must have taken an alternative route to get here. He should be arriving any moment.”
As if on cue the sound of footsteps sounded on the landing below, approaching at a steady rate. Harry suspected Neville was quite aware of Luna’s presence on the trip over. He probably hid behind the barrier until she left, too shy to walk with her.

The room was filled with a tense and heavy silence as Neville finally entered. He glanced at all the unmoving bodies in the room, stiff as mannequins, and raised a brow. “Um… good morning?”

“Would you like a cup of coffee, Nev?”

“Enough Sirius,” Harry snapped, turning his attention back to the Senior Agent at the wall. “You have Luna reporting into you?”

He heard her shift behind him but couldn’t see her. Dumbledore shook his head. “She reports into you, Harry. You are the lead on this investigation. However I know you are quite busy and may find providing regular updates a bit burdensome.”

He tucked his hands into his pockets. “Up until now I’ve received all my reports from Luna, as the sole researcher it was obviously a natural decision. However I failed to provide her an alternative directive after the three of you joined the team. Last night she called to ask whether she should continue providing me updates directly or shift the responsibility. I told her we’d leave the decision up to you. However while we were on the phone we chatted about yesterday’s breakthroughs. Quite an amazing feet, I’d say, capturing the killer’s likeness on the first day of the investigation.”

Harry blinked, a mixture of reactions taking hold. Then suddenly Draco’s voice filtered into his mind.

*You never know if or when your current donor will cut you off, or become too controlling, dictating your every move by tightening the purse strings…* 

Harry cleared his throat, attempting to override the foreign voice in his head.

*This is still Dumbledore’s investigation. Of course he’d want updates. And he’s leaving the decision of who provides them up to me. That’s reasonable.*

*Don’t be naive, Potter.*

Harry’s brow drew together. That was new. He was quite certain Draco never uttered those last words during dinner.

*Oh great. The rich git has wormed his way into my subconscious now. Fan-fucking-tastic.*

Harry wet his lips and pulled out of his mind. “I think it’s more efficient if I provide you the updates from now on. I apologize for not thinking to do so sooner.” He spun around, smiling at Luna. “Thank you for taking over last night, Luna, I appreciate it.”

She smiled widely, relief evident in her blue eyes. “Of course, Harry. I should have informed you of the previous reporting structure yesterday, it slipped my mind.”

Harry believed her, he was certain she didn’t possess a malicious or devious bone in her body. “Like I said, it’s not a problem.” He looked to Dumbledore. “Moving forward I’ll provide you daily reports.”

Dumbledore nodded, smile still affixed to the lower half of his face but his eyes glowing with a piercing intensity. Harry felt his spine straighten. “That’s not why you’re here.”
It wasn’t a question. He felt some invisible shift in the air, a silent warning. Dumbledore tipped his head in confirmation.

“Last night there was another killing.”

Harry jolted. “If fits the M.O.?”

“A high powered businessman and his two bodyguards, though I think it safe to say they were collateral damage. All three methods of homicide were rather unique, flashy if you will. One guard had his carotid artery severed, another was poisoned with a powerful toxin, and the suspected target was asphyxiated.”

Harry blinked. One of these things was not like the other. Sirius spoke up from his desk. “Strangulation sounds a bit mundane compared to the others, no?”

Dumbledore kept his eyes on Harry as he spoke. “He wasn’t strangled. He was choked with a sex toy. He was bound to a four post bed and his body showed several signs of trauma. There was also toy paraphernalia inside him when the paramedics arrived on scene.”

Ah, that sounded more like it.

“Where did this occur?”

“Vienna.”

“We have to go there,” Harry couldn’t help the eager note in his voice. His mind was racing, his heart as well. His eyes drifted past Dumbledore to the sketch on the wall. “We have to leave as soon as possible, while the evidence is still fresh.”

Dumbledore smirked. “My thoughts exactly. Who would you like to bring?”

Harry didn’t miss a beat. “Everyone.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Don’t you need someone to remain behind and man the fort, continue the London based investigation in your absence?”

Harry blinked. “Oh, yeah, I suppose-”

“Er, Harry?”

All head’s swiveled to Neville, who turned bright red under the attention. “Um… I was just going to volunteer to stay behind. I have everything set up here anyway, if you need any research support I’ll have more resources at my disposal.”

Harry nodded. “Good idea, Nev.” He looked to the blonde still standing in the middle of the room. “Luna, would you mind staying behind as well, work with Nev on getting through the Club list?”

She tipped her head. “Certainly.”

Harry’s eyes landed on his remaining team member, who was smirking like a fool.

“Guess that means it’s you and me kid?”

Harry nodded. “Better call Rem.”

Sirius was already holding his cell, standing and heading for the door. “Way ahead of you. He’ll
want me to bring back those chocolate torte things no doubt.”

As Sirius slipped out of the office Dumbledore stepped forward, catching Harry’s attention once
more. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Luna walk to Neville’s desk, leaning down to murmur
something to him. Harry got the impression she was distracting the nervous man on their behalf.

“Harry,” Dumbledore began in a low voice, prompting him to lean in. “I realize the majority of your
career has been focused within our Government. I must warn you that there will be a different set of
protocols and red tape to deal with in Austria.”

Harry furrowed his brows. “They won’t let me see the body?”

“Not that. I’ll call ahead to my contacts and permit you entry. I’m referring to the response to the
killing itself. The victim was Corban Yaxley, an international financial advisor and British national.
He had many high power clients throughout the world, including within the Austrian government.
There may be opposing interests at play.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t understand what that has to do with finding the killer. Unless you
suspect one of his client’s orchestrated the murder?”

Dumbledore’s eyes held an inner light that was impossible to look away from. “There was a separate
investigation being launched against Yaxley, suspecting him of selling confidential information to the
Russians. He was privy to a great many secrets given the nature of his work, knowing where money
was coming from and where it was going. He was likely to have had as many powerful enemies as
allies, and it can be quite difficult discerning one from the other. I want you to be on your guard the
entire time you’re there, trust no one apart from Sirius and your own instincts, do you understand?”

Harry took a deep breath, the weight of the warning falling upon his shoulders like a lead cloak. He
nodded. “Trust no one. Got it.”

Hermione stared out of her window with a dull gaze. She watched the street slowly awaken,
pedestrians cutting paths to their cars or the local cafe, desperate for their morning boost of caffeine.

The air was murky. It seeped in through the gaps in the sill and filled the room with fog. She
breathed it in and felt the smoke permeate her lungs. It traveled through her ears and filled her head,
slowing her thoughts and clouding her vision.

She’d been wearing a hole into her rug for hours. After Green left she and Tom lapsed into a
momentary stupor. In the quiet she first took stock of his bruised face and busted lip. She’d been so
preoccupied with being drugged and kidnapped and held at gunpoint that she’d somehow missed the
minor injuries to his face.

She’d ushered him to her bathroom and tended the wounds, and then noticed how utterly exhausted
he looked. She allowed him use of her bed but was too wound up to lie beside him. She instead took
to pacing her living room, thoughts in a tangle, emotions raging within her, making her borderline
hysterical and yet strangely separated from her body.

She replayed the night’s events over and over in her mind until she could see the scene playing out
before her on the furniture even now, could feel the cold bite of metal pressing into her temple, the
unwavering and menacing presence at her back, a chilling voice discussing the merit of taking her
life as though deciding what entrée to start with.

She recalled the absurd conversation that followed. She remembered her heart lurching in her chest at
Green’s bizarre statement, breaking her from the numb stupor that had set in as the men continued
their discussion as though she wasn’t in the room.

“The catch, my dear boy, is that Hermione has to help.”

She blinked, rearing back in her seat and looking between the two men in rapid succession. Green was poised as ever, but Tom looked as incredulous as she felt.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me, Tom.”

He shook his head. “Impossible. What you said makes no sense.”

Green’s predatory grin remained and his piercing gaze shifted to her, pinning her in place as effectively as the gun.

“Doesn’t it? Always such a reactionary child, this one, unable to think past short term gratification.”

Hermione drew in a sharp inhale, squirming beneath his studious examination. Green sighed and looked back to Tom.

“You see, Tom, you’ve put us all in an untenable position. Hermione knows too much thanks to your short sighted yearnings. She is a threat to the organization. So I must ensure her silence. I can do that one of three ways. Kill, threaten, or implicate. Which also lends you three possible choices.”

He smiled again, eyes lethal.

“The first, and most simple mind you, is that I threaten Miss Granger. But not with her own life, no. It will be much more effective if she knows your life is at stake, which it will be if word gets out that you’ve exposed our organization to an outsider. So to maintain her continued silence I must keep you tightly within our folds. That means you’re in for life, Tom. And you’ll never be able to communicate with Hermione ever again. We’ll simply rewind the clock and go back to the way things were before you stupidly threw them into chaos. Except you’ll be much more behaved, knowing that I know about her.”

Hermione’s breathing was shallow, eyes darting to Tom. But he wasn’t looking at her, instead watching his handler with narrowed eyes.

“I see neither of you are quick to jump on that one so allow me to propose the other two. The second, and slightly less simple option, is I kill Hermione. You would of course still be free to leave the organization if you so desire. But I suspect you’ll be more keen on killing me in turn. This will lead to one or both of our demises and for that reason it stands as my least favored choice.”

He sighed deeply, trading the gun to his other hand as he continued to aim the weapon almost as an afterthought.

“The third and final option is to implicate her far enough to make going to the authorities as unappealing to her as it is for the rest of us. At that point the two of you are free to leave, travel the world and take adorable photos kissing beneath the sunset and drawing hearts in the sand. I really couldn’t care less, as long as I know you’ll be keeping an eye on her, ensuring she doesn’t play the martyr and bring us all down with her. And I know what a keen survival instinct you possess, Tom. If anyone can guarantee her continued silence, it’s you.”

Her head was reeling. She clutched the armrests like a vice. Tom was frustratingly silent, so still he didn’t seem to be breathing. Green’s focus once more shifted to her, a smirk playing at the corner of
his lips.

“Decisions, decisions.”

She blinked, opening her mouth but not knowing what to say.

Tom beat her to it.

“I’ll stay. Just let her go.”

She looked at him with wide eyes, jaw snapping shut, teeth clinking together. Green glanced back as well, head tipping thoughtfully.

“Is that so? You wouldn’t like to discuss it first?”

Tom’s face pinched with irritation, muscles tensing.

“There’s nothing to discuss.”

“Do you feel the same way, Hermione?”

“Don’t talk to her. Don’t even look at her. Just let her go. I said I’ll stay and you know I honor my word.”

Green laughed once, sharply. “You eventually get around to honoring your word, yes. But it’s the choices you make during the interim that tend to leave me on edge.”

Tom’s fists clenched at his sides. “You gave us three options and we picked one.”

“You picked one. I have yet to hear what dear Hermione has to say on the matter.”

“I told you not to-”

“Do we have to decide now?”

Both men’s heads snapped to the side to stare at her. Her voice sounded weak from disuse but she swallowed and cleared her throat, trying again.

“Can we talk about it… in private?”

Tom’s eyes drilled holes into the side of her head so she kept her focus on Green, whose gaze was only slightly less intense at the moment. He grinned.

“Very sensible. I can see how well you balance each other.”

She continued to hold his stare in silence, nails digging into the upholstery.

“Very well. I’ll give you one day. I’ll expect an answer by tomorrow evening.” He turned to face Tom once more. “And if you try anything clever during that time then I’ll be choosing the least attractive option for us all, do I make myself clear?”

Tom remained silent, rage barely tamped down, so Hermione wet her lips and spoke on his behalf.

“We understand.”

Green nodded, eyes still fastened to Tom. “Thank you, Hermione.”
From the corner of her eye she saw Tom jerk in his seat but he managed to settle down as Green stood before them, gun still aloft.

“Well, it’s been an interesting day followed by an even more exciting evening. Wouldn’t you say?”

Neither Tom or Hermione spoke. Green laughed. “Quite right.”

He slowly made his way towards the exit, still facing them and pointing the gun squarely at her chest. “I’ll leave you to your privacy.” He opened the door and paused in the frame. “Oh, and Hermione?”

She sucked in a sharp breath, eyes darting from the gun to his eyes.

He winked.

“It was lovely to meet you.”

Back in the present Hermione blinked out of her stupor, tearing her tired gaze away from the living room and facing the window once more. More cars darted along the road, more smoke filled the sky from neighboring factories. People went about their daily lives, their daily business, blind to her turmoil.

She shifted as she heard a noise in the bedroom, crossing her arms over her chest and staring resolutely out the glass. Tom was awake.

*Tom*...

She’d been equal parts trapped in reliving last night as well as the last fifteen years of her life, a messy montage of scenes in varying clarity and focus. Tom had been the center of her world for so long, her only companion, and then he’d crushed her all at once, so completely, leaving her heart torn and bleeding for years to come.

She’d finally managed to pick up the pieces and sew the wound shut, building a new life and finding enjoyment in her hard work and success, at last feeling hopeful for the future, only for Tom to return and rip the rug out from under her, tipping everything into… what had Green said?

Oh, that’s right...

**Chaos.**

The word aptly described Tom. Everywhere he went he incited chaos and pandemonium, bringing some with him and taking some home to tuck beneath his pillow at night. He was a destructive force that held the fate of her life in the palm of his hand, simply a word uttered from his lips could be the difference between her living to see another sunrise.

It wasn’t fair.

It wasn’t fair that all this time later he still had so much control over her. She didn’t ask for this. For his return. For any of it. She had been happy. She was a great student with a bright future, she was so much better off without him.

*I can still have it all back.*

*We’ll tell Green we want to set things back the way they were before. I’m better off without Tom in my life. I see that now. I’ll say goodbye this morning and tell him to deliver our answer to that*
psycho.

*I can have everything back the way it was.*

She heard footsteps down the hall and in the glass she saw Tom’s reflection as he stepped into the room. He wore the same dark, tailored clothes from last night, wrinkled and hair slightly mussed. But his eyes were sharp, focused, holding her gaze in the window pane. She swallowed, heart beating faster, skin flushed.

She felt her eyes swell with tears as every assertion she’d just made crumbled to dust in her hands, blowing away with each quickened breath.

*I hate him.*

*I hate him I hate him I hate him-*

*Fuck.*

*I love him.*

She blinked, wiping at the corners of her eyes and trying to rein in her emotions before slowly turning to face him.

His stormy eyes held her in a steady silence but his stiff posture and clenched hands hinted at an inner battle raging within his heart and mind as well. She swallowed past the tightening in her throat and drew her shoulders back, expression determined as she spoke.

“*I’ve made my decision.*”
Thursday July 14, 2005

“Damn. They did away with the place on the corner. Replaced by another highrise. Rem’s gonna be devastated.”

“Why don’t you try another bakery? I have a feeling there’s more than one in the city.”

“You don’t understand, he’s in love with the sachertorte from that place. Some old family recipe passed down for a thousand years or some shite. He’ll know the difference.”

“A thousand years, huh? Fascinating. I guess all that saturated fat explains the short life spans.”

“If I go home empty handed I’m going to have a short life span.”

Harry glanced over, eyeing Sirius from head to toe. “Nah, you’re plenty old enough to kick the bucket without causing a stir.”

“Careful now, I may be twice your age but I’m spry enough to push you in front of a bus.”

“Lucky for me your senses are too dull to see or hear it coming. Hold on, I think that’s the place.”

They slowed their pace along the sidewalk, peering up at the large hotel ahead.

“The Paradies. That’s it alright. Bloody hell it’s posh.”

“Yaxley was loaded, and liked to flaunt that wealth, according to the profile Luna pieced together. Who’re we meeting again?”

Sirius groaned. “Dawlish.”

Harry raised a brow. “I take it you know him.”

“Unfortunately. And speak of the pain in the arse, here he comes.”

Harry glanced up at the man approaching from the hotel entrance. He appeared a decade or so older than Sirius, dark grey feathering his hair, deep crow’s nests at the corners of his eyes, which were narrowed upon both men, but mostly focused on Sirius.

“Yep,” Harry muttered, plastering on a smile. “He definitely knows you.”

“Shut it,” Sirius whispered sharply, then spoke loudly to the approaching figure. “John, bloody hell, look at you. You’re fucking ancient, mate.”

The man scowled. “And you’re shockingly still alive. Seems everyone lost out on that bet.”

Sirius flashed an impish grin. “Never go against a Sicilian when death is on the line.”
Dawlish blinked, looking perplexed. Harry rolled his eyes.

_Fucking hell._

“Hello there,” he interrupted, stepping closer. “My name is Harry Potter, thank you for agreeing to assist us. I can’t tell you how much we appreciate it.”

Dawlish’s hawk like gaze flickered to Harry, inspecting him from bottom to top, posture still tense. “Yes, well, I owed Dumbledore. I don’t like being in anyone’s debt. Least of all men like him.”

Harry straightened, desperate to dig in further, suss out the nature of their relationship, the debt owed, but knew time was of the essence.

“Well, the help is appreciated nonetheless. May we go in?”

Dawlish nodded once, stepping back to keep pace beside them as they approached the doors to the lobby.

“I can get you five minutes, that’s it.”

Harry bit back a groan, resisting the urge to nip the hand feeding him. Five minutes wasn’t ideal, but it was better than nothing.

“We’ll make it work,” Sirius spoke beside him, head tipped back to study the detailed mural painted on the ceiling. Harry glanced up. This place was posh alright. Reminded him a bit of the fancy French restaurant where he met Draco. It was like stepping into another world. He wondered how people who lived this way on a daily basis found satisfaction in the simple things, if that was even possible for them. The thought saddened him a bit.

He blinked, returning to the matter at hand.

“Since our time upstairs is limited do you mind giving us a quick run through of what you know?”

Dawlish’s face flashed in a scowl, there one instant and gone the next. Harry waited patiently, the group walking quickly towards the lifts. The lobby held several uniformed officers but otherwise it seemed it was running business as usual. Dawlish noticed the direction of Harry’s gaze.

“The murder occurred on the penthouse level, we were able to close down the top floor and allow the rest to remain open. We have video footage of our suspect, they weren’t a guest at the Hotel so we saw no reason to shut them down entirely.”

Harry’s heart lurched.

“Video footage? You have his face?”

Dawlish nodded. “Most of it. He was wearing sunglasses and kept his face averted from most of our cameras, but the one behind the registry counter captured him from the front.”

“May we see it?”

“Dumbledore told me you’d be interested in the footage, we’ll stop by the security room afterwards.”

They stepped into the lift and Dawlish drew a large gold key from his pocket, inserting it in a special lock and pressing the button for the penthouse level.

“The killer had access?” Harry asked, watching Dawlish pocket the key once more.
“No, a staff member took him up. He stopped by the front desk and gave the name Rigel Black. Mean anything to you?”

Harry rose a dark brow. “Can’t say that it does. Sirius?”

Sirius shook his head. Harry glanced back to Dawlish as they quickly ascended.

“Was he taking the place of the real Rigel Black or was Yaxley expecting the killer?”

“We’ve ran cross references through the city and so far have come up empty. If someone else was coming, they never arrived. Right now we’re leaning towards the theory Black was a pseudonym he used to pose as a sex worker, hence the late hour of the visit. He had a black case, we suspect he brought the kinky shit with him.”

Harry glanced at Sirius who mouthed “kinky shit?” with a smirk.

The doors dinged open and they all stepped out to the hall leading to the double doors of the suite. The area was crawling with more officers, crime scene tape running from one end of the wall to the other.

“Like I said, I can grant you five minutes, do try and keep quiet and out of sight, I may owe Albus a favor but I don’t want the entire precinct knowing about it. I assume it goes without saying, but touch nothing.”

Harry nodded, placing his hands in his pockets for added assurance. “Of course, it’ll be like we aren’t even here.”

Dawlish scowled again, this time the expression lingering on his face before nodding to the officers guarding the doors. They quickly opened them and allowed the three men entry.

A crime scene photographer was hunched down, taking photos of the cream colored shag rug in the center of the room. Various place markers tagged the floor, walls and furniture. It was impossible to miss the splash of bright red across the far wall, staining the pale damask wallpaper.

They won’t be able to scrub that out.

Harry shook the inane thought away, stepping around the photographer to study the rug as well. Sirius stood beside him, eyes intense as he scrutinized every detail. As much as the man liked to poke fun at tradition and crack jokes on the job, he took his duties very seriously and was a bloodhound in the field. Harry felt a swell of confidence with his mentor by his side.

“Looks like one of the guards fell here,” he whispered to Harry, who nodded in agreement. The body outline was traced in a sooty chalk substance, standing out vividly against the light rug. The body was quite large, and the absence of any blood spatter hinted further at the cause of death.

“Must be the one who was poisoned.”

Sirius spun on his heel and headed towards the blood splashed wall, Harry following in his wake. The body outline on the wood floors was done in white, this body also quite large.

“One in the living room, one in the hall. Living room guy was poisoned first, went down, second guard attempted to shield the target, was stabbed in the neck,” Harry whispered, mostly to himself, mind racing as he reconstructed the murders in his head. “Why such different modes of killing? One so detached and the other so brutal and intimate.”
“Depends on who was doing the killing. Maybe he considered both methods intimate.”

Harry glanced sharply at Sirius, something he said triggering a whisper of thought in the back of Harry’s mind, but it was too intangible for him to grip and pull to the front. He blinked, desperately chasing the notion but finally letting it sink to the bottom of his subconscious.

“Sorry,” he muttered, Sirius watching him. “Thought I was having an idea.”

“Looked painful.”

Harry studied the blood splatter, eyes following the trail along the hallway. The red arced across the wallpaper, ending somewhat abruptly in one area. He blinked, studying the blunt edge of a crimson tail. His eyes darted to the pictures hanging along the wall at regular intervals.

“A frame’s missing.”

“Hm?”

“Look here. There’s three pictures along the wall, evenly spaced apart, but there’s a gap of space right before the bedroom.”

Sirius tilted his head. “Interesting. We’ll have to speak to management, see if they normally hang three or four pictures. Unless it was already bagged for evidence.”

Harry shook his head. “Look at this place. It belongs on a magazine cover. They wouldn’t leave a design flaw that obvious. And if it was collected they’d have tagged it.”

“We’d hope. I don’t put much faith into Dawlish and his men.”

Harry raised a brow but let his curiosity over the comment abate while he crouched down, studying the baseboard. His eyes widened. He patted his pockets and groaned.

“Shite, you have gloves on you?”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “What do you think?”

Harry glanced up, spotting a crime scene analyst at the end of the hall, case in hand.

“Hey, mate, you have an extra pair of gloves?”

The man looked up, startled, and then nodded, setting his case on the nearby table and withdrawing the latex.

“Cheers,” Harry nodded, standing to grab them, blowing air into the opening and quickly snapping them over his hands.

“Nancy Drew find something?” Sirius asked, stepping closer.

Harry crouched back down. “Maybe.”

He quickly glanced in either direction, seeing no sign of Dawlish or eyes otherwise focused on him. He leaned forward and wiped his finger along the baseboard. He inspected the glove.

“Clean.”

He leaned over and wiped a stretch of baseboard a foot away, already seeing the build up of dust
“Baseboards are the most commonly overlooked item by cleaning staff.”

“And you know this how?”

“Jeopardy.”

“Ah.”

“This section was scrubbed clean but not the rest of the hall. Directly beneath the missing photo.”

Harry pushed to his feet with a muffled grunt, peeling the gloves off and shoving them into his pocket. “The killer took it with them. It probably broke during the struggle. They cleaned up the evidence.”

Sirius glanced down the hall into the chaos of the living room. “They missed a spot.”

Harry sighed, brows pinching. “It may have been covered with their DNA, easier to discard the broken glass than wipe each piece clean. We need to make sure Dawlish knows.”

Sirius looked reluctant for a moment.

“What?” Harry asked, curiosity peaked to its limit. “What’s the deal between you and Dawlish?”

Sirius shook his head. “Nothing. Nevermind. We’ll tell him on our way out. We still have a few minutes left, let’s check out the bedroom.”

Harry nodded, letting the matter drop for now. They stood aside and allowed another photographer to pass them, exiting the bedroom. Another officer stood just beyond the entry, looking supremely bored. He nodded to Harry and Sirius once and then took up gazing out the window.

“Were the curtains open when you arrived?” Harry asked the man.

The officer looked a bit flustered at being addressed, but cleared his throat and shook his head. “No… Sir,” he didn’t recognize the two men but he obviously didn’t want to take any chances offending someone high ranking. “The light was poor so we opened the curtains.”

Harry nodded, stepping past him and examining the bed. There was no marked outline but they needn’t chalk to see exactly where Yaxley had been slain. The sheets were stained a shade darker in the rough outline of a torso and legs, a heavy sweat stain. Between the bottom prongs of the stain were two other puddles, soaked through the fabric and likely soaking the mattress beneath. Urine and blood.

“Poor bastard,” Sirius muttered.

Harry couldn’t help but agree.

He walked to the head of the bed and leaned closer to the posts, examining the gouges in the wood.

*Where the restraints were. He tried like hell to free himself.*

The thought twisted his stomach, a lead weight sinking to the bottom. During Harry’s final exams following his Ministry training he was noted as someone with above average empathy. Several of his teachers told him this was a weakness, a hindrance. An effective Officer was someone who could separate themselves from the crime, detach emotionally and see the evidence without prejudice.
Harry disagreed. His attachment to each victim drove him harder to seek justice. It was a heavy burden to bear, to be sure, but empathy was a powerful motivator for Harry. And it went both ways. It also allowed him to put himself in the killer’s shoes, the killer’s mindset. And that was a highly effective tool.

_He poisoned one guard, stabbed another, and then brutally assaulted the target…_

It didn’t add up.

_Think, think it through, the answer lies in the center of the maze…_

Harry glanced at the open door, the other two crime scenes visible in his line of sight, between the throngs of people milling about.

_He poisoned the first guard, he’d of had to or the man would have tried to stop him from stabbing the second._

_No shots fired. No marked bullet holes. It’s possible neither man was armed but I doubt it._

_The target was bound… he maintained his ruse long enough to get Yaxley isolated alone._

_Did he kill the target first? Why didn’t the guards hear it? Maybe they were used to those kinds of sounds when their boss was having sex…_

_Or maybe he choked Yaxley first-_

_No. It wouldn’t have been fun assaulting a corpse. This man enjoys inflicting pain, terror. He’d want to see his victim thrash and beg for mercy._

Harry sighed.

_But it doesn’t fit with Lucius’s murder. He bled out within minutes, there may have been terror to be certain, but what he did to Yaxley is an entirely different-_

Harry blinked, the distant whisper returning, slightly louder but still unintelligible.

Harry didn’t want to lose it again. His instincts were usually on point, he just had to discern them first. He tried to stay within that line of thought, hoping the voice would speak clearer.

_It doesn’t fit with Lucius’s killing. Maybe it fits more with Narcissa’s… but he was in a rush then. Here he was able to take his time. Yaxley was probably the last victim, that’s why he drew it out._

_So he killed the guards first. But how the hell did he start with the man in the living room? Wouldn’t they have wondered why he was leaving the bedroom without Yaxley?_

Harry swallowed, the voice growing slightly louder, he reached desperately for the line, to grasp hold and hoist it to the forefront of his thoughts. It was still frustratingly out of reach.

_Come on, come on, the answer is here, I can feel it._

He studied the bed without really seeing it, thoughts racing a mile a minute. Sirius had moved to the dresser, studying the countertop, wiped clean and shiny.

_He tied up Yaxley, let’s say he gagged him, or maybe knocked him out temporarily. Then he went outside and made it to the living room before he was stopped by the first guard, who he poisoned. The second guard saw this so the killer abandoned his first victim to stab the second, and then_
He sighed. It was a possible scenario, but hardly satisfying. The pieces fit but felt crammed into position, not a seamless flush.

*I’m missing something. I know I am…*

He ran a hand through his hair in frustration.

“Time’s up.”

Harry glanced up, Dawlish stood in the doorway of the bedroom with an expectant look.

“Did the guards have weapons?” Harry asked without preamble.

Dawlish blinked, stiffening at the unexpected question, then his seemed to regain his senses. “Yes.”

Out of the corner of his eye he felt Sirius watching him. He pressed forward.

“Were the weapons still on them?”

Dawlish was silent for a long moment, making Harry grate his teeth.

“One of the guards. The one who was poisoned. The stab victim’s gun was found under the table.”

Harry blinked, feeling more pieces slide into place, but the overall picture was still indiscernible. He sighed, knowing if he forced the matter further he’d only lose sight faster. It would come to him, he just needed to give it a bit more time.

“Like I said, your five minutes are up. Come on.”

Harry reluctantly followed, glancing over his shoulder one more time to study the bed, eyes lingering on the blood stain.

___

Bella sat at the corner cafe opposite the hotel, taking a drag off her cigarette, tapping her nails along the metal table top.

She hated waiting. Loathed it. Life was too short to waste time sitting around. But alas, she had instructions, and she knew from experience it was better to bite the bullet and do as Green instructed rather than face his wrath, which inevitably led to more suffering than if she just completed the original task to begin with.

It had been a while since she’d worked with the man. He had helped train her and served as her handler immediately following her “graduation”, but within a few short months he cast her to the side to devote himself entirely to Tom.

That was the way of things, wasn’t it? Picked up, used, and discarded for the next best thing. She normally didn’t let such things get to her, not anymore. But the blow of his rejection had hit her particularly hard. She’d been quite young still, jaded by the world, mistrustful of everything and everyone. Then he’d appeared in the night like a radiant guardian angel, delivering her from purgatory into her own personal heaven on earth.

He’d been the first man she trusted in years, devoting herself entirely to pleasing him, striving for his praise and acceptance. He’d loved her once, she was certain. Cared for her like a daughter. But he couldn’t deny his heart’s true longing for a son. Every man longed for a son. Sons were always
worth more than daughters.

And so she was cast out, given a new handler, and easily forgotten.

She fantasized about slicing his throat, cutting off his head, his cock, his limbs. She hated him with a fire so red hot it devoured her insides, leaving her nothing but a shell of hatred and agony.

And then years later, out of the blue, he reappeared, tapping her for a mission he claimed he only entrusted her to see through. She was his special girl, his darling one, he was so proud of her, had been following her career from the shadows all these long years…

And just like that, Bella was once more laid at his feet like a sacrificial lamb. She loved him, she loved him, she loved him. She would do anything he asked, if only he’d love her back.

If only he’d love her as much as he loved Tom.

Before this mission was through, she’d drain every drop of love from his heart.

And then she’d drain every drop of blood from his body.

Harry held his breath as they stood in the tiny security room, hands tucked firmly in his pockets to prevent himself from fidgeting with anticipation.

“Marcus, pull up the footage from last night,” Dawlish instructed, voice and expression bored, a startling contrast to Harry’s almost giddy enthusiasm.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Were you working last night, Marcus?” Sirius asked.

The man shook his head. “No, Sir. I work days.”

And then the screen was flickering, a new image appearing. Harry’s heart raced as he leaned forward.

“This is lobby view,” Marcus explained, hitting a button on the grid and bringing the picture to life.

Harry watched with bated breath as a tall, lean figure entered the lobby, dressed dark as night, black briefcase in hand, head averted down. Harry’s body throbbed with adrenaline. He couldn’t see the face but the hair, the height, the frame, it was all a match to who he saw that night in the Hospital bathroom.

He swallowed, taking a step forward. “Can you show us the view of his face?”

“Yeah, we caught a front view from the reception desk.”

He pressed another few buttons and the image changed once more, now the man was walking towards them, stride carefree and confident, broad shoulders back and dashing smile transforming his face into a handsome disarming mask. Harry blinked as the man changed course at the last minute, opting to visit the male employee instead of the woman he had clearly been on path towards.

“Did we talk to the employee?”

Dawlish cleared his throat. “We talked to the witness, yes. He is the one who provided us with the name Rigel Black.”
Harry narrowed his eyes on the screen. “Can you zoom in?”

The picture enlarged, the face drawing nearer, nearer... the sunglasses blocked his eyes but the nose, the mouth, the chin and cheekbones...

“What do you think?” Sirius asked, examining Harry as closely as Harry examined the screen. “It’s him.”

He felt a thrill race along his spine at his own confirmation. He looked to Sirius, eyes wide and gleaming. “It’s him.”

“It’s who?” Dawlish asked, brows drawn. “You know the assailant?”

Harry shook his head. “He’s the suspect in another investigation we’re running. I can’t elaborate, Dumbledore will have to fill you in.”

Dawlish looked supremely unsatisfied with that answer but Harry disregarded his ire, too excited to care. “Can I see the footage of him leaving?”

Dawlish’s face transformed into a neutral mask. “No.”

“No?”

“There is no footage of him leaving. He must have used a back exit. There’s no cameras at the service entrance.”

Harry tilted his head. “Fascinating.”

“Is it?” Dawlish’s tone was scathing.

Sirius stepped closer, eyes narrowing. “Obviously. Don’t you find it interesting he knew enough about this place’s security to avoid being seen leaving, but he had no qualms about being filmed arriving?”

Dawlish blinked, shoulders drawing back. “I- well... perhaps he fled through the back for a quick escape.”

“After taking his sweet time torturing and killing a man, I don’t think he was too flustered,” Sirius bit back.

Marcus shifted uncomfortably between them, drawing Harry’s attention back to the screen. “What about footage of him entering the room? Are there cameras on the penthouse level?”

Marcus glanced up at Harry, looking slightly nervous. “Um... yes...”

Harry raised a dark brow. “Yes?”

Marcus cleared his throat, glancing desperately to Dawlish. Harry turned to face the man as well. “What?”

“The footage has been lost.”
“Lost?” Sirius practically shouted.

Dawlish glared. “The system is old and outdated, there’s many glitches throughout the day. Sometimes it skips or records over previous footage—”

“You don’t really believe that,” Harry interrupted, incredulous.

“There’s nothing to believe. It’s fact. Isn’t that right, Marcus?”

Marcus blinked with owlish eyes. “Um… yeah. It’s an old system. The network has a bunch of bugs. They keep saying they’re going to fix it but—”

“The footage was either erased or altered by the killer, I have no idea why you’re trying to conceal that fact,” Harry snapped at Dawlish, fists clenching at his sides.

“Harry—” Sirius placed a hand on his shoulder but Harry shook it off.

“This is ridiculous! You can’t seriously—”

“Harry!”

Harry’s jaw snapped shut, furious eyes locking with Sirius’s. His mentor shook his head. “The footage is gone. Let’s move forward.”

Harry blinked, swaying on his feet with the force of his frustration, but he read the message in Sirius’s eyes clear as day and was reminded of Dumbledore’s warning.

*Trust no one.*

His jaw ticked as he slowly faced the screen, shoulders tight. “Fine. Can I see the footage of the lobby?”

“Of him entering?”

“No, of him waiting.”

Marcus glanced up. “You can’t see his face any better than when he entered.”

“I’m not interested in his face.”

Marcus blinked, perplexed, but started pulling up the footage. Dawlish sighed. “You’ve already seen his face and confirmed his identity, enough of this. I’ve given you plenty of my time, tell Dumbledore we’re even.”

Harry glanced over with narrowed eyes. “Is there a reason you don’t want me to see the lobby footage?”

“Excuse me?” Dawlish hissed, at the same time Sirius muttered his name in warning.

Harry bit his tongue, facing Marcus once more. “I just need to see the lobby footage and we’ll leave.”

There was a tense silence before Dawlish bit out a sharp “Show them, so they can get the hell out of here.”

Harry ignored the brooding figure at his back to examine the video before him. The dark figure was
leaned against a marble column, facing perfectly away from the camera.

*By design. He knew this place like the back of his hand before entering.*

His head was obscured by a large vase on display beside him, but the long line of his body was mostly in view. His posture looked bored.

“Can you fast forward?”

Marcus obliged, the image flickering slightly as it sped up. Harry didn’t dare blink.

“There! Wait, go back a few seconds. Okay, stop! Alright, play at normal speed.”

He felt both Dawlish and Sirius lean forward, closely examining the video as well.

Harry’s eyes were transfixed, a triumphant grin breaking across his face as he watched the scene play before him.

His heart beat through his chest, veins flooding with an overwhelming surge of adrenaline as all the pieces finally slid into place, flush and seamless at last.

But he didn’t trust Dawlish enough to speak his revelation aloud. So instead he looked to Sirius, eyes bright. “We got what we needed. Let’s go.”

Bella watched the men leave the hotel, walking closely, speaking in hushed voices. One was a darling little lamb with a wild mane of hair, the other a rugged older fox with a carefree air about him, both gloriously beautiful. Naturally she fantasized about all the sounds they’d make beneath her.

*_This must be them._

Green had told her to keep an eye on the hotel, noting any non locals paying a visit to the crime scene. Especially anyone of British nationality. She wasn’t close enough to hear them speak, but she knew they met with that horrid little detective waiting outside.

*_It has to be them._

Still, better to be certain. She’d hate to disappoint Green, after all.

Best to take a closer peek.

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**Monday February 23, 2004**

“*It can’t be that bad.*”

“You don’t understand, dad’s still mad I didn’t major in pharmaceutical chemistry. He’s going to spend the whole time making undercutting remarks, and he’s so good at those, it drives me mental.”

“But you majored in biochem, it’s closely related.”

Padma shook her head. “Not to him. He wanted me to focus on the business side of things, as far as he’s concerned I’m a glorified researcher.”

Hermione stared ahead at the path they cut to their next class. “How long are they staying for?”
A week. We’re going to have a hell of a time hiding Pavarti. And Lav. Mum and dad would have kittens if they knew they were living with me. Shite, I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

Hermione bit her lip, indecision bubbling up within her. Then she released a long breath, steeling herself.

“The girls can crash at mine while your parents are in town, if that will help.”

Padma looked at her, eyes wide behind her glasses. “Really?”

Hermione nodded. “I spend most nights at Victor’s anyway, a shame to pay rent on a place that sits empty. They can share my bed or one of them can take the sofa.”

“That’s brilliant, Mione! Thank you, seriously. I’ll talk with Parv about it tonight.”

Hermione smiled, cheered by her friend’s beaming smile. Their friendship had been slow to develop over the years, but after Carmen’s move to America Hermione had been bereft of female company, and Padma had steadily filled that void. Their friendship was leaps and bounds away from what Carmen and her shared, but it was still special nonetheless, and it made her feel good to help Padma out.

“So, things are going good with Victor then?”

The change in topic threw Hermione off, the smile fading from her face. She cleared her throat and tucked a curl behind her ear, fishing for the easy fall back line. “Yeah, things are great.”

Padma studied her, the same way she would a slide under her microscope. Her watchful gaze missed nothing. “Uh huh. Take a breath there, Mione, your enthusiasm is overwhelming.”

Hermione smirked, glancing sideways at her. “Things are actually really good. I just…” she trailed off, biting her tongue. She’d told Padma about her past growing up in the system from the age of nine on, but she certainly never told her about Tom. As far as the girl knew Victor was Hermione’s first love.

He was certainly her first relationship, and in a lot of ways his companionship saved her. She had been drowning in a pit of misery that she couldn’t escape from. His love had pulled her free, given her new direction, new purpose.

Hermione loved Victor. Of that she was certain.

She just wasn’t positive whether she loved him the same way he loved her. She held back from him, she knew she did. She couldn’t give him all of herself, try as she might, losing countless nights of sleep wishing she could erase her past, or at least the memories. If she forgot about those seven years then her heart would be free, untainted, free for Victor and only Victor.

But she held on, keeping the celtic pendant in the velvet box it came in, stashed in her underwear drawer. She pulled it out and examined it at least once a week, against her better judgement. It was like a sick addiction, pulling her in, poisoning her veins and making her crave the hit time and time again. It hurt to look at it, but the pain sustained her, fed her aching heart. She knew she should get rid of the thing. And she knew she never would. And she hated herself for it.

But she didn’t know how to articulate any of this to Padma, nor did she want her dirty secret getting out. Discussing it made it real, gave the monster teeth and claws with which to destroy her. Even Carmen thought the necklace was long gone, that Hermione was finally free of the ghost and happily entangled in a healthy, tangible relationship.
Hermione wouldn’t be able to bear the shame of her best friend knowing the truth. Or worse yet, of Victor discovering her heart’s betrayal.

So she shook her head again, plastering on a smile. “I’m just tired, late night studying for Slughorn’s exam. Things are fantastic with Victor. Say, did you see that posting on Slug’s wall about tutoring positions?”

She hoped the change in topic was subtle enough to deter the keen girl at her side. Padma took the bait, most likely out of sympathy for Hermione, but at least they were onto a safe topic.

She faced forward while she half listened to Padma’s response, glancing at the students milling about in the large field that sat in the middle of campus. It was a miniature park, complete with trees, bushes, and a small pond with decorative fountains at the center.

And suddenly, a strange sensation took hold.

She glanced around, wondering if maybe someone from her program was nearby. She recognized a few faces from passing but their focus wasn’t directed upon her. She tried to shrug off the notion but couldn’t. The fine hair on her arms stood on end, the air around her shifting, sound narrowing. She blinked, glancing about once more, certain someone was watching her.

She rapidly scanned the sea of faces and bodies looking for something, anything, familiar, a set of eyes upon her-

Her heart lurched.

She did a violent double take, eyes honing in on a figure across the field.

Leaning against a tree.

Watching her.

He wore sunglasses, face obscured by the shade of canopy, but surely-

It couldn’t be him.

No no no it just couldn’t be him.

Was it him?

She stopped dead in her tracks the moment she spotted the stranger, clad in dark jeans and a grey polo, mirrored aviators covering the top half of his face and arms casually crossed over a lean chest. He was at least thirty yards away, the details of his face unclear, try as she might to squint. But something about the posture, the black hair, the fact that he was staring at her…

He’s just looking in your direction. You don’t know who or what he’s looking at.

It can’t be him.

It can’t be it can’t be it can’t be-

Is it him?

She leapt out of her skin when a hand touched her arm.

“Mione, what’s wrong?”
Padma’s voice had become a distant buzz, the chatter of the crowd following suit, making Hermione forget her companion was even there.

“Are you okay?”

Hermione swallowed, losing sight of him as Padma stepped in front of her, waving a hand before her eyes.

“Shite, you’re white as a sheet? Are you ill?”

She felt cold water crash upon her head as he disappeared from her line of vision, roughly pulling her out of the trance and dropping her to the concrete floor of the present moment. She staggered on her feet, muscles locking up, adrenaline flooding her system and making her dizzy.

“Let’s go to the infirmary-”

“No!” Hermione couldn’t control the rapid pace of her heart or the volume of her voice, standing on tiptoes to peer over Padma’s shoulder, immense relief washing over her when she saw he hadn’t moved a muscle.

Padma eyed her speculatively. “Are you sure? You look a bit off-”

“I’ve got to check something,” Hermione unceremoniously pushed past Padma and began cutting a stilted path through the grass, knees weak.

Padma blinked in her wake, expression perplexed. “Um… okay…”

Hermione was too engrossed to bid a proper farewell, everything around her falling away, except for him. She forgot where she was, her entire world solidifying to two distinct points in the universe, a vast cosmos between them, reality existing in the space between heartbeats.

She swallowed, throat tight, eyes unblinking, terrified he’d disappear. She gasped as the figure stood away from the tree, turning around and starting his own path across the grass. In the wrong direction.

Oh god no…

His long legs ate up the ground quickly, lengthening the distance between them.

So she broke into a run.

Her bag bounced against the back of her thigh painfully.

So she shrugged it off her shoulder, tossing it to the grass, the flap opening and books spilling free, narrowly missing a girl laying on a blanket reading.

Hermione panted, lungs burning, eyes clouded with hope and fear, terror and want. The world tipped on its axis, propelling her faster and faster, closer and closer-

And suddenly, he was right there.

Right here.

Here here here here here

She skid past him, unable to check her momentum and narrowly avoided running into him head first. She stumbled in the grass, people sitting nearby ceasing their conversations to stare at her in surprise
and annoyance. She gasped for breath, squinting against the bright sun shining directly in her eyes from where it sat high in the afternoon sky, directly behind his head.

His face was cast into shadow, features a black mask, his posture leaning away and then closer, arms reaching out-

_He’s here._

_He’s here he’s here he’s here-

“You alright, Miss?”

She blinked, body going rigid as a board.

The stranger stepped closer, head blocking out the sun, face finally coming into focus.

He reached up and removed his sunglasses.

“Miss?”

She opened and closed her mouth, heart stuttering painfully in her chest. The stranger peered at her curiously, eyes narrowed. She watched in a dazed stupor as he slowly backed away, sparing her one last parting glance before resuming his path across the grass.

She swallowed, blinked, and felt the strength leave her body. She lowered herself to the grass in a graceless heap before her knees gave out. The swelling of emotions that filled her moments before dissipating all at once, leaving her cold, numb, weightless.

She never considered herself a religious person, but in that moment she felt her soul separate from her body, peeling away from bone, muscle and tissue, rising up, up, up, and float away on the stray breeze.

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**Thursday July 14, 2005**

Tom inhaled deeply, turning his face into the wall of softness, warm notes of vanilla and cinnamon filling his senses.

He sighed in contentment, muscles tensing and relaxing as he stretched his limbs out, consciousness slowly taking hold.

He reached his arm out, unsurprised when his fingertips met cool empty sheets. He was used to sleeping alone, rarely letting bedmates spend the night. And his dreams were never tangible enough to touch, the apparition at his side a hazy mirage that turned to dust and air when he tried to make contact.

Still, Hermione’s soothing and sensual scent surrounded him so completely he reached for her on instinct.

_Hermione._

Thinking her name awoke the rest of his mind, eyes snapping open. He glanced quickly around the room, the events of the last 24 hours crashing upon him like a dead weight.

Of all the ways he imagined waking up in Hermione’s bed… the universe certainly had a dark sense of humor.
He sat up with a groan, rubbing his shoulder. He’d been so flush with adrenaline throughout the
night he didn’t realize his fight with the bodyguard had pulled a muscle.

Last night…

_Bloody hell._

He sighed, rolling his head along his shoulders, stretching his neck. His mind pulled up flashes of
memories, each one making his heart stutter painfully in his chest. Walking in to find her with Green,
a gun at her head… Bella’s delighted laughter as he fled the hotel… the ultimatum Green gave them,
disguised as an act of mercy…

He glanced beside him, at the space he’d left empty hoping she’d join him later in the night.

_She didn’t come to bed. She probably stayed up all night. Thinking._

He was terrified of what conclusions she’d drawn in the wee hours of the morning, traumatized and
sleep deprived as she was.

He’d tried to fight his exhaustion as well, wanting to finish the conversation they’d started after
Green left, but his mind kept drifting and drifting, until it was a struggle to form coherent sentences.
He’d been awake all of the previous night, spurned by his fight with Hermione and his pending
Vienna trip. Added to events of the Yaxley mission and subsequent confrontation with his handler,
he’d been running on fumes.

He struggled to remember where they’d left off, the scene more hazy as the hours progressed. He
went back to the clearer memories, starting with his handler’s departure.

“Oh, and Hermione?”

Tom’s fists clenched tighter.

He suppressed a growl as Green winked at her, smug bastard that he was.

“It was lovely to meet you.”

As soon as the door clicked shut behind her kidnapper Hermione deflated, doubling over in her chair
and gasping for breath, one hand pressed to her chest, clutching her heart.

Tom shot out of his seat as though it was spring loaded, pushing the table aside so he could kneel
before her, taking her hands in his and trying to catch her eye, but they were closed, tears leaking
from the corners.

“Hermione, look at me.”

She shook her head frantically, body starting to shake.

He was going gut Green alive. In that moment he vowed to kill the man tortuously slow, bloody and
excruciating.

“Sshh,” he hushed, pulling her out of the chair and onto the ground, into his lap. “I’ve got you.
You’re safe.”

She choked on a sob, but as she tipped her head back to look at him he realized it was a miserable
laugh, hazel eyes wide and glimmering with tears. “Safe? Are you joking? He’s going to kill me!”
“No, he isn’t going to touch you.”

“He already touched me when he drugged and dragged me here! I have no idea how he got me across the city. I was paralyzed when I woke up, Tom. Paralyzed. I’ve never been so terrified in my life.”

Tom fought back his rising anger, it wouldn’t help the matter for her to see him slip into a homicidal rage. He swallowed, waiting a heavy beat to regain composure.

“I’m sorry, Hermione. I’m so sorry this happened. But I promise, I’m going to fix it, I’m going to protect you.”

She blinked, staring at him in a heavy silence that left him feeling raw and exposed.

“That’s the first time you’ve apologized to me. And meant it. At least I think you mean it.”

Now it was his turn to blink. He rapidly scanned his memories, but gave up the effort after a few seconds, finding it pointless to argue the point. She was probably right, apologizing wasn’t in his nature. So instead he ran a hand over her hair, fingers threading through the curls and caressing her scalp.

She used to run her fingertips through his hair and over the planes of his face when they were young, a gentle, soothing gesture that always relaxed him, brought him down from whatever emotional peek he was skirting. He normally shied away from physical touch, except for when it came to her. Still, it was more often than not that he was the one reaching out and grabbing her, pulling her along somewhere. So he savored the few occasions when she took the initiative.

He’d only ran his hands though her hair a handful of times in their youth, luxuriating in the feeling of her soft curls, the gentle moans she tried to stifle. As he took up the practice once more he wondered how foolish he was in not partaking in the pleasure more often back then, every day.

_I was always trying to keep my distance, keep her at a distance... fool that I was._

“I should have taken you and ran.”

He didn’t know the words had been floating on the surface of his thoughts until they were spoken, his chest loosening with their release. Her eyes had closed beneath his gentle touch, weight slumped against him, but now they opened, head tipping back with alertness.

“Green said we can’t run.”

He shook his head. “No. When we were young. I thought about running all the time.”

She studied his face, eyes searching, a flicker of sadness appearing in their depths. “I know. I was always terrified I’d wake up one morning to find you’d gone, fled into the night without leaving a trace, other than memories to haunt me. I suppose that happened anyway.”

His eyes watched her mouth as she spoke, noted the downturn of her lips while he brushed curls back from her face, continuing to glide blunt nails along her nape. “I dreamed of leaving from the moment they brought me there. I ran away four times before you arrived. I never tried again.”

She sighed, leaning her head against his chest. “Maybe you should have. Then you’d never have met Green.”

“Then I wouldn’t have you.”
He felt her body shudder, he ran a hand along her arm, trying to chase away the chill though he knew it wasn’t the temperature that made her tremble. She sniffed, rubbing at her eyes, more tears streaming with the fresh wave of emotion. “Maybe that would have been best. For us both.”

Tom blinked, body going rigid. He shook his head. “I wouldn’t trade our time together for anything.”

She was silent, shaking lightly in his hold, but not attempting to push him away which was a pleasant contrast from their parting interaction the night before.

“I dreamed of you for years,” she whispered, voice resigned with sadness. “I dreamed of you for longer than I actually knew you. How pathetic is that?”

He held still, straining to hear every word, remaining silent. “I spent more time fantasizing about the idea of you than I actually spent with you. It’s madness. If it were someone else I’d tell them they were crazy. Obsessed. But I lived with the secret for eight years. Eight years.”

So did I.

He sat frozen, hands resting on her hips, listening to her shaky breath.

“It was like a sickness. It is a sickness. And I’m so tired of it.”

She pulled back slowly, gazing up at him with an expression that absolutely gutted him. “Aren’t you tired?”

His jaw remained locked, heart thudding painfully beneath his rib cage.

“I…” she trailed off, shaking her head. “It’s just too much to process. I was drugged and kidnapped… there’s a grenade in my living room… “ she closed her eyes, running a hand over her face. “It’s just too much.”

His arms tightened around her for a brief moment before slowly separating, releasing her from his hold. He felt a strange stillness take over, the air around him shifting, time stopping. He released a slow breath.

“I’m going to tell Green it’s over. You’ll get your life back, Hermione. Starting tonight.”

His voice sounded far away, like he was watching a scene play out on a stage he stood upon. Her eyes snapped open.

“But you’ll be forced to continue killing. He said you’ll never be able to leave.”

“There’s no alternative.”

She scooted back, out of his lap and sitting before him on the floor. “There has to be another way.”

“If there is I’ll find it. But I won’t involve you in this any further.”

She studied him, brows drawn. “I’ll never see you again, will I?”

His fists clenched at his sides. “No.”

The silence that followed was deafening.

Finally she moved, reaching out a hand, fingers hovering an inch from his face. “Your lip, it’s
bleeding.”

He blinked, having forgotten about his injury from earlier.

“I’ll help you clean it up.” And then she was pushing to her feet, walking to her bathroom without a glance in his direction. He lingered a moment longer on the floor, watching her walk away, and felt a cold settle into the marrow of his bones.

His memories became scattered after that. He recalled her pressing a wet washcloth to his lip, holding it in place while she swept her other hand gently across his swollen cheekbone. He remembered murmuring something to her, and her nodding in reply, but he couldn’t recall what he’d said.

And then she was pushing him into her room, insisting he sleep as he was useless on his feet. He’d told her to join him, and then refrained it as a request upon the sharp look she gave him. She said she’d be in later, she wanted to get her home back in order first, erase the memory of Green’s invasion. He hadn’t believed her but had laid down and closed his eyes anyway, quickly falling into a few hours of fitful sleep.

He ran a hand over his face, groaning. Mentally preparing himself to say goodbye.

He reluctantly stood from the bed, every step to the door and down the hall another step along the plank, hovering over the turbulent sea, sharks at the ready.

He saw her standing in front of the windows, pensive. He caught her eye in the pane’s reflection and his heart stuttered. She was so beautiful.

She spun around, pinning him with a look of determination that rendered him silent.

“I’ve made my decision.”

He blinked.

Of course you did, little one. There’s only one option to be had.

She shook her head as though reading his thoughts.

“No. I’m not letting that psychopath sink his claws into you any deeper.”

Tom opened his mouth, stepping forward but she held up a staying hand.

“Just wait. I’ve thought about it, and I think I have an idea.”

He raised a brow. “An idea?”

She nodded, recrossing her arms. “An idea of how to get you out. But you’ll need my help. We’ll have to work together.”

His muscles tensed, wanting to go to her but respecting her need for space. For now.

“I’m not dragging you into this any further.”

“It’s too late for that. Green already knew about me, now he’s going to use me against you for the rest of your life. My life will always be in danger, every time you step out of line the noose will tighten around my neck. I’m just as entangled as you are now.”

He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. She was right and he hated himself for it.
“There’s no going back, not really,” she continued. “I’ll just be leading the illusion of a normal life, knowing it could end at any moment. There’s only one way we’ll both really be free.”

His eyes snapped back to hers, gaze sharp.

“What are you saying?”

She drew her shoulders back, arms lowering to her sides, pulling together every ounce of bravado she could muster. It was supremely adorable. And arousing.

“We have to beat Green at his own game.”

“Want to tell me what the hell that was all about?”

“Hang on, wait until we get across the street, in case Dawlish sends spies out after us.”

Sirius smirked. “Not a fan either, I see.”

“He’s detestable. The footage was lost? I’m more amazed he managed to say that with a straight face.”

“He’s a snake in the grass. I was a bit surprised he agreed to meet with us at all, debt or no. Now it’s starting to make more sense.”

Harry lifted a brow. “Care to explain?”

“You first.”

Harry glanced over his shoulder for good measure, seeing no obvious tail in sight, and somehow he got the impression Dawlish’s men would be blatantly obvious in everything they did.

“You saw the suspect glance at his cell phone in the footage?” Harry asked in a hushed voice.

Sirius eyes were bright, realization setting in. “An all clear message.”

Harry nodded. “He wasn’t working alone. The murders upstairs follow two different patterns, someone who likes to draw out and savor their victim’s death, and someone who likes to get it over with quick and brutal. Two distinct signatures, two distinct killers.”

He glanced at his mentor for affirmation. He could see the wheels turning behind Sirius’s eyes. “I would go a step further. Hacking closed circuit cameras isn’t especially difficult, at least according to Nev, but to do so without the guards noticing they’d of had to commandeer the security office. If they’re smart they’d have a person designated for just that task, a ground floor lookout.”

Harry blinked, the implications astounding. “Bloody hell. We’re talking about a team of professionals.”

“We suspected we were looking for an organization.”

“Yeah, but to send at least three people after one person… Yaxley must have been in deep.”

“Makes sense. Albus told you he was being investigated for collusion with the Russian government. He was probably implicating some very powerful people.”

They fell silent as a group of tourists walked the opposite way, guide books and cameras out.
“You wanna grab a cab back to the hotel?”

Harry checked his watch. “What time are we meeting with your contact?”

“Not for another two hours.”

Harry nodded. “Alright, let’s head back. Maybe we can catch a quick nap.”

“And I’m the old man.”

Harry smirked, raising his hand to hail a taxi. “Okay, now it’s your turn. Tell me about Dawlish.”

Sirius tucked his hands in his pockets and stepped back as a cab rolled to the side of the street in front of them. Harry stepped off the curb to open the door and heard Sirius gasp “Shite!” under his breath.

By the time Harry looked over his shoulder he only saw the retreating figure of a woman and a flash of blood red lips as she called “Entschuldige!” over her shoulder.

Sirius’s eyes lingered on her for a moment. “Bloody young people, probably texting, can’t walk a straight fucking line.”

Harry rolled his eyes, opening the car door. “You backed into her, Galahad.”

“She veered into me!”

“I’m sure she did. Now, Dawlish?”

Sirius groaned under his breath and slid into the backseat next to Harry.

“We have a long history, too long to go into, but I can summarize by telling you he’s always been the gormless, cock faced mingebag you met today.”

The driver glanced at them through the rear view mirror, brow raised. Harry smiled.

“Steigenberger Hotel, please.”

Neville sighed, scratching another name off the list and rubbing at his eyes.

It had been a long morning followed by an even longer afternoon. He and Luna had arrived at The Serpentine Country Club several hours ago and had persuaded management to allow them a few minutes with each of their employees, commandeering one of the conference rooms to conduct interviews.

Or rather, Luna had convinced the manager to allow them to monopolize their room and time. She had that way about her, an ethereal quality that was impossible to resist.

He flushed just thinking such a thing, glancing at her over the top of his clipboard with guilt ridden eyes, as though she could read his mind. She glanced up as well, no doubt sensing his eyes upon her, and smiled so beautifully it made his stomach clench.

He smiled back, more nervous than anything, and quickly averted his gaze, trying to piece together his scrambled thoughts.

He was humiliated by the effect she had on him. He desperately wished he could control it, feeling like a prepubescent teen in her presence. He just wasn’t used to girls. Pretty girls. Working with
pretty girls.

_Oh god, I even sound like a prepubescent teen…_

_Kill me now._

He worried his bottom lip as he thumbed through his notes from the last interview, adding a few additions to the margins, trying to bring his focus back to the relevant work.

But it was to no avail, the blonde’s presence dominating the room, distracting him from each interview. Not for the first time he cursed himself for spending so many years sequestered in the Ministry IT division. If you could even call it that, the busy work he was assigned day after day. He had been isolated with machines for so long he didn’t know how to interact with people anymore.

Luna took the reins for the interviews, leading the conversations while Neville took notes, admiring her intuitive nature, the insightful questions she asked, catching small details and disparities that he missed. She was brilliant.

He cleared his throat, trying to distract his mind from traveling further along that train of thought. He was already beat red, he didn’t need his entire head catching fire and setting off the sprinklers.

“We’re missing something.”

He glanced up, blinking. “What?”

Luna tilted her head, eyes scanning the notes on her own pad. “We’re missing the caterers. We’ve talked to all of custodial and most of the set up staff, but the servers we spoke to weren’t working the event that night.”

Neville studied his own notes.

“What about that bartender?”

She shook her head, golden hair shimmering beneath the inset lighting. “We should have more wait staff, the event was huge, where are all the servers?”

He sat silently, watching her, sensing she was talking out loud more for her own sake than his. Sure enough she glanced up, gaze drifting to a spot behind him as she twisted the pen cap between slender fingers. “I bet they outsource. Makes sense, less overhead.”

Her cornflower blue eyes locked with his, making his heart stutter, much to his frustration. “I’ll speak with management, find out if another company was here that night.”

Neville nodded, then smirked. “The list is never going to end, is it? We’ll have shown the sketch to half of London before we find a lead.”

She smirked as well, though her expression held an edge of determination his lacked.

“It just takes one lead to find him.”

“How late does your date have to be before it’s safe to say you’ve been stood up?”

“I wouldn’t know. We should take the average from all the times it’s happened to you.”

Harry took a sip of his coffee. “I’ll have you know I was only stood up once, and it broke my heart. I
“That’s brutal. I’m sorry to stir up such traumatic memories.”

“It’s better to have loved and lost. Also, I think it’s time we call it. We’ve been stood up.”

“Perhaps he walked in and spotted your hair. It’s enough to send any man running for the hills.”

“Must have been it. Do you want to call him?”

Sirius groaned, fishing his phone from his pocket and taking a swig of his lager. “Suppose so. Fuckin’ bell end probably won’t answer.”

“Ah, Sirius, how I’ve missed your colorful vernacular.”

They both spun around in their seats, gazing up at the new arrival.

“Igor, you arsemonger, you’re over an hour late!”

Sirius stood and pulled the tall Russian in for a hug as they both laughed. Harry watched the exchange with amusement. They broke apart and the stranger’s eyes shifted down.

“Ah, you must be Harry.”

Harry nodded, holding his hand out. “I am indeed. It’s a pleasure to meet you Karkaroff. Sirius has told me about you.”

“I hope not. We agreed to take the stories to our graves.”

Harry smiled. “Sounds about right. Thank you for joining us.”

“Oh stop kissing his arse, Harry. Igor owes me, we don’t have to wine and dine him to get our information.”

Igor’s eyes remained fastened on Harry, a smile curving his lips.

“At least the boy has manners, you could stand to learn a few things.”

He slid into the chair across the table. His thick black brow and beard gave him a cartoon villain quality that was only exacerbated by the dim lights of the pub, casting shadows across the hard lines of his face.

“I apologize for my tardiness. I had to shake a tail I picked up at the Embassy.”

Harry raised a brow. “Who’s following you?”

Karkaroff glanced at Sirius and back to Harry. “The Austrian government, of course. Yaxley’s murder has caused quite the stir.”

“Then let’s waste time reminiscing about our misspent youth another time,” Sirius said, leaning back and sipping his lager. “On the phone you said you had pertinent information regarding our investigation.”

Harry sat forward eagerly, eyes bright behind his glasses. Karkaroff’s dark gaze scanned his face with great precision, making Harry feel distinctly uncomfortable under such intense scrutiny. The
Russian smiled once more, teeth gleaming. “Such a shame to cut straight to business, when I haven’t seen you in so many years.”

Harry blinked, realizing Karkaroff was speaking to Sirius while staring at him. He glanced at his mentor with questioning eyes while Sirius merely rolled his, pinning the man with a sardonic expression.

“I’m sure you’re devastated. But we’re working on a top secret investigation and you’re being stalked through the city by Dawlish and his merry band of idiots, so I think it best if we not linger in a public house.”

“I agree. What I have to tell you cannot be shared in such a public venue anyway. There are spies in every corner.”

Harry glanced around the empty pub, then looked back to Karkaroff. “Are they hiding in the walls?”

There was a beat of silence and then the Russian threw his head back and laughed, loud and deep. Harry watched him in confusion. His joke wasn’t that funny.

Sirius sighed, casually resting an arm along the back of Harry’s chair and shaking his head.

“Stop bullshiting us, Igor. You said you had information that was time sensitive and asked to meet us here, today, and you’re already an hour late. We’re not beating around the bush any bloody longer.”

The Russian wiped at his eyes, still recovering from his manic laughing spell. “Oh, Sirius, always so ser-”

“Don’t!” Harry said on instinct, hand slapping against the table. The other two men looked at him sharply. He felt a slight blush stain his cheeks. He cleared his throat, settling back in his seat. “He makes the bloody pun enough on his own.”

“And obviously it’s hilarious every time,” Sirius said in a bored tone. “Now cut the shite, Igor. Why did you ask us here?”

The Russian’s amused expression fell, brow creasing. “Do not forget it is I who do you the favor. I could sit on this information and the British government would be none the wiser. Thumbs up their asses.”

Harry blinked.

“Come now, Igor,” Sirius grinned, leaning forward on his arms. “We’re old friends. Remember Kazan? I helped you out of a pretty tight bind.”

Karkaroff scoffed, shaking his head. “Always bringing up fucking Kazan…”

“Not to hold over your head, just as a gentle reminder of all we’ve faced together. Now come on, mate, stop jerking our chain.”

Harry shoulders tensed, frustrated with the delay. “What do you know about Yaxley?”

Karkaroff was silent for a long beat before he finally relented.

“I did not know him personally, but I knew of him. He was popular, smart, well liked among his clients. Though he was rumored to have a bit of a Napoleon complex.”

Harry’s mind filed away each detail carefully. “Any idea who would go to the effort of hiring a
professional assassin to take him out?"

Karkaroff directed the entirety of his dark gaze upon Harry, a smirk playing at his lips. “Are you ready for the plot twist?”

Harry braced himself. That didn’t sound good.

Karkaroff laughed. “His official cause of death is listed as heart failure.”

Harry blinked, mouth hanging open. Sirius voiced his thoughts.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!”

“Sorry, old friend, not even I am so devious. My department requested a copy of the autopsy report, I saw it with my own eyes not two hours ago.”

Harry shook his head in disbelief. “That’s… that’s ludicrous. Surely they mean his ultimate cause of death was heart failure due to the trauma of his torture?”

Igor reached over and grabbed Harry’s mug, fingers brushing Harry’s hand as he pulled it from his grasp. “I do not wish to flag down the barman. Do you mind? My throat is dry.”

Harry’s brows drew together, the request throwing him for a loop, but he quickly regained his senses and nodded, thoughts consumed with the recent news. He didn’t see Sirius narrow his eyes, shooting Karkaroff a warning glance, which the Russian ignored, sipping at the half empty, mostly cooled beverage.

“I’m afraid the details of Yaxley’s ordeal were left out of the official report. There is no mention of another party being involved.”

Harry was reeling. “That’s- that’s-” he couldn’t think of anything appropriate enough to capture just how insane this all was.

Karkaroff watched Harry over the rim of the mug, eyes dancing with mirth. “It is better for Yaxley this way, no?”

Harry sputtered. “Better? How is brushing his homicide under the rug better for him?”

The man shrugged. “I doubt he’d want the sordid details of his sexual deviances published across every major paper from here to the Atlantic. Tell me, I didn’t get to see the body- did he really get fucked to death?”

Harry felt his chest tighten, along with his fists on the table. Sirius spoke before Harry could answer, his mentor’s posture was still relaxed but his eyes burned bright with focused intensity.

“You said you saw the report? What exactly did they say triggered his heart failure?”

Karkaroff’s smile widened. “That’s the best part! They apparently couldn’t get around the fact that certain parts of his body displayed signs of… well… naughty pastimes, we’ll say. So they said he was in his hotel room, buggering himself with a toy, and went a bit too far, if you will, causing such pain it triggered cardiac arrest.”

Harry shook his head, pulse throbbing. “And what about his guards? Let me guess, one fell on the knife he was using to cut his apple, but what of the other? How do they explain the deadly poison that entered his system?”
Karkaroff took another sip from Harry’s mug, looking supremely entertained. “What guards?” he asked innocently. “Oh, you mean the private security he hired to escort him through the city?” His grin put the cheshire cat to shame. “Yes, those chaps were safe and sound downstairs, tucked into bed like good little lads. They of course were deaf to the commotion taking place an entire floor above them. And poor Yaxley wasn’t able to make it to his panic button before his heart stopped.”

Harry sat numbly, blood drained from his body. Sirius leaned forward, silent, no doubt taking it all in as well.

Karkaroff laughed. “You have to admit, it’s not that far off from what happened.”

“Not that far off?” Harry snapped. “This was a blatant assassination, there were three victims brutally murdered, that fucking cover story is-”

“Harry.” Sirius placed a hand on his arm, waiting until Harry looked at him with his jaw still hanging open, and then tilted his head in the direction of the bar. “Let’s not fill the whole neighborhood in.” The bartender was glancing their way as he wiped down the counter.

Harry inhaled sharply, trying to rein in his anger. He cleared his throat and looked back to Karkaroff. “Yaxley was into S&M play, he preferred being the submissive, which requires at least one other person to be the dominate. It’s a contract about trust. It doesn’t make any sense that he’d be performing the acts on himself, little less to the point of extreme pain. It’s a shoddy cover up if there ever was one.”

Karkaroff raised a brow. “Impressive. You know your kinks.”

Harry rolled his eyes, leaning back in frustration. The Russian shrugged. “Nevertheless, it’s a PR nightmare. No one wants to be associated with a dead pervert. Least of all a murdered pervert.” His smile widened at Harry’s scowl.

“You’ve made your thoughts on the matter quite clear, Igor,” Sirius spoke up, face pinched. “Sounds like you have quite strong opinions for someone who didn’t know the man. Sure you weren’t working with him?”

Karkaroff’s eyes gleamed. “Would I lie to you?”

Sirius watched him steadily.

“Your suspicion wounds me. I was telling the truth earlier, I only knew of him through the grapevine. But my associates were more closely involved. They also happen to be the ones in possession of his autopsy report. Take from that what you will.”

“So he was feeding information to the Russian government,” Harry cut in, tired of wading through the bullshit. “And now they want to distance themselves from this spectacle, so they’re letting his murder go by the wayside.”

Karkaroff shrugged. “He was a British National killed on Austrian soil, what involvement does my government have in the matter?”

Harry felt his blood pressure hit the maximum limit. Surely his head would pop off his body, steam billowing from the stump of his neck. He didn’t trust himself to speak.

“So why the hell call this meeting if you have no new information to provide?” Sirius asked, eyes narrowed.
“I also wasn’t lying when I said I’m being followed. The polizei want no loose ends on this matter, if I’m spotted speaking with you I’ll be in a world of trouble with both governments. I do have information to share, but I can’t do so here, we’ve lingered in one place too long.”

Harry’s nerves were wearing thin. “Where then?”

Karkaroff pinned him with an intense stare, grinning. “There is a restaurant I frequent called Verga, I know the owner and am afforded extra privacy when I dine. Meet me there tonight and I will tell you everything I know.”

Sirius tapped his knuckles across the tabletop. “What time?”

Karkaroff tore his eyes away from Harry to glance at his old friend. “I think it better if Harry attend the meeting alone. It will attract less attention. And I suspect Dawlish will have assigned you a tail as well by now. Better to lead them astray, don’t you think?”

Sirius raised a brow, watching the man silently. Harry sighed, ready for this exchange to end. “Fine, whatever it takes. What time can you meet?”

Karkaroff winked at Sirius and then looked at Harry. “Eight o clock sharp. And wear a suit jacket.”

Harry fought back a cringe. Two upscale restaurants in as many nights. His own personal hell.

Karkaroff pushed back from the table and stood, straightening his pristine blazer. “Sirius, always a pleasure, my friend.” He nodded with a smug grin, then turned. “I will see you later this evening, Harry. I look forward to conversing about this matter further.”

Harry felt unsettled by the gleam in the Russian’s eye and bid him farewell through clenched teeth. Why couldn't anything in this investigation run smoothly?

Sirius watched him walk away, glancing back to Harry as soon as the door shut, amusement marring his features.

Harry raised a brow, supremely frustrated by the entire exchange and seeing no humor to be had.

“What?”

Sirius shook his head, grabbing his glass and tipping his head back to finish off the last of his lager.

“What is it?” Harry asked again, annoyance coloring his tone.

“You realize he wants to fuck you?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I hadn’t caught that small detail,” he reached out and tapped the coffee mug Karkaroff had been holding throughout most of the conversation. “What a brilliant detective you are.”

Sirius leaned back, fishing his wallet from his jacket lining. “Just be careful, yeah? Igor isn’t a bad guy but sometimes he likes to pretend he is.”

“I have no idea what that means, and I don’t particularly care unless it pertains directly to this case.”

“Ouch. What crawled up your arse and died?”

Harry sighed, running a hand over his face. “Shite. Sorry. I’m just reeling from everything Karkaroff
told us. I can’t wrap my head around it. The level of corruption is astounding.”

Sirius smiled sardonically as he threw a few bills onto the table.

“Welcome to politics. Now let’s swing by the morgue and check in with our good mate Yaxley. Don’t worry, we’ll make sure you have plenty of time to prepare for your date.”

Harry shook his head. “I hate you.”
Have a biscuit.

**A/N:** Hello my sparkling sunflowers! TGIUD (Thank God It’s Update Day ;p)

I’m so excited you’re still aboard this crazy train. Kick your shoes off, get comfortable...

Enjoy.

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**Thursday July 14, 2005**

“Thanks, Nev. Great work. I’ll call you tonight with an update, talk to you then.”

Harry ended the call, sliding his phone into his pocket.

“Don’t you look chipper,” Sirius said, glancing over his shoulder as Harry entered the viewing room.

“Nev and Luna finished talking to the Club employees.”

“That was fast. Anything come up?”

“No yet. But they found out the Serpentine used a third party to supply the wait staff. They’re meeting with someone from the company this afternoon to get information on who was working that night.”

Sirius cocked his head to the side, idly studying the grey feet of a corpse laid out before him.

“Nifty.”

Harry glanced up to the room’s third occupant. Third living occupant, anyway.

“Sorry to step out. It was relating to the investigation.”

The woman tipped her head. “No worries. They aren’t going anywhere.”

Sirius bark of laughter echoed off the tiled walls. Harry smiled as well, though the woman’s expression remained stoic.

“Yes, lucky that. Please, go ahead.” Harry stepped back, allowing her room to walk in front of him, leading the way deeper inside.

They passed several empty metal tables and several occupied metal tables, bloodless limbs peeking out from beneath white sheets. The room was chilling, and not just because the thermostat was set to thirteen degrees celsius.

Harry was no stranger to dead bodies, his experience dating back to his mother’s lifeless corpse when he was twelve. But stepping into the morgue always jarred him. He’d ventured into plenty over the course of his career, identifying bodies, looking for evidence, speaking with doctors and medical examiners. But for some reason he never got used to it.

The woman stopped before the back wall, facing a series of small metal doors. She grabbed one of the large handles and pulled, revealing the top of a head. She reached forward and grabbed the base of the metal table, sliding it out to expose the rest of the body.
“This is Elias Bauer, thirty four years old, cause of death asphyxiation brought on by a severe allergic reaction.”

Harry blinked, eyes darting up to lock with hers. Her expression remained blank, indifferent, but her eyes held a flicker of light from some invisible source in the room.

“I’m sorry, Miss Bones, is it?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re the medical examiner?”

“Forensic technician. The pathologist was unable to join us for this private viewing.”

Harry’s jaw tensed. “I’m sure they were,” he bit out.

“And what exactly are they saying this dear boy was exposed to?” Sirius asked, leaning against the wall on the other side of the body. “Peanut butter? Or was the poor lad stung by a bee in the middle of the penthouse?”

Miss Bones sighed, shoulders rigid as she adjusted her stance. “I’ve been instructed to share the details of the official autopsy report and nothing else.”

Harry’s chest tightened, he struggled to keep his hands loose at his sides. “You know that he was the victim of homicide. Your boss is working with the people trying to cover it up.”

Her eyes darted back to his, unwavering. “And who would that be? The police?”

Harry held her gaze. “Among others.”

“Powerful people then,” she tipped her chin up, gazing down her nose at him even as she stood a half foot shorter. “People I’m not keen to cross.”

Harry breathed in and out deeply, averting his focus to the body. The victim’s build was massive, toned muscles straining through pale, bloodless skin. There were tattoos marring both biceps and right pectoral, but on the left side, just beside his heart, was a prominent bruise.

The poison’s point of entry.

“I won’t ask you to risk your career,” Harry began slowly, voice patient. “But I will ask you to speak off the record, unofficially, to help us track the people responsible for these homicides. If they aren’t caught they’ll continue killing.” His eyes lifted to her. “The information you provide could be instrumental in helping us find them before they find their next target.”

She held her stoic expression for one beat, two beats, three beats…

And then she blinked, looking away, inhaling sharply through her nose. Harry watched her carefully, noting the minute differences in her posture as she seemed to deflate before his eyes. She gazed at the body, eyes unmoving, though he could see the wheels turning behind her eyes.

He didn’t say anything else, didn’t dare move, and out of the corner of his eye he watched Sirius fall into a similar stillness, both men watching her carefully.

Finally she stepped forward, hands reaching out to rest along the edge of the metal table beneath the body. Her jaw flexed as she gazed up, expression wary.
“If they find out I went off script they won’t just fire me. I’ll be blacklisted. Given shite references. I’ll never work in the medical field again.”

Harry nodded. “Then we’ll have to make sure they never find out. I won’t say a word, neither will Sirius. We gain nothing by exposing you, but gain everything by working with you.”

The room fell silent except for the heavy whirring of the a/c unit and electrical hum from the overhead lighting. She chewed on her cheek, eyes averted, and then slowly nodded.

“Call me Susan. My boss calls me Miss Bones.”

Harry knew that was a can of worms he didn’t have time to open, though it didn’t take use of his keen detective skills to gather she both feared and abhorred her boss. But he also recognized the double meaning of the request. Referring to her by her first name changed the tone of their conversation, separated her from the role of compliant subordinate.

“Thank you Susan. We appreciate it.”

“I’d rather you pretend it didn’t happen.”

“We can do that,” Sirius said, casually examining his nails. “In fact, I don’t remember who we spoke with when we came here, do you, Harry?”

Harry smirked, “We didn’t speak to anyone, don’t you recall? We knocked on the door but must have just missed everyone. We had a full docket for the day so we decided to skip the morgue and move onto the next part of our investigation.”

Susan smirked as well. “I hope you’ll sound slightly more believable if actually questioned.”

“I’ll have you know I’m an award winning actor,” Sirius scoffed, glancing up with a dramatically raised brow. “Played King Richard in the school play and received a little golden figurine.”

“Wow, a little golden figurine. I’m sure your mother was never prouder,” she said without missing a beat.

Sirius’s grin split his face in half. “We’re gonna get along like a house on fire, luv.”

Harry stepped closer to the body, drawing both their focus. “Okay, Susan, what can you tell us about what actually happened to Mr. Bauer?”

She blinked, amused expression evaporating. She swallowed lightly, reaching for the clipboard on the table beside her. She flipped through a couple pages and scanned the text.

“His system was full of a toxin which acted similar to an anticholinergic, affecting involuntary muscle function, in this case his heart, causing tachycardia.”

Harry walked around the table, studying the bruise. Sirius leaned over for a closer look as well.

“Any idea what kind of toxin? Something recognizable?”

She flipped to another page, humming under her breath as she scanned a finger along a chart.

“We ran a metabolite panel, his labs showed high amounts of tropane alkaloids, which are the active ingredient in anticholinergic drugs. But at these levels, for someone of his size, it couldn’t have been a pharmaceutical grade medication. The amount needed to kill him would be tremendous. And given the delivery method, it had to be a homemade cocktail-“
“Delivery method?” Harry’s eyes snapped up. “You have the injection tool?”

She nodded. “It was still stuck in his chest when he was brought in.”

She set down the clipboard and walked to a metal cabinet in the corner, pulling keys from her white coat to unlock it. Harry stood at alert, barely containing himself from running after her to look over her shoulder. His body thrummed with excitement, anticipation.

This was their first real piece of evidence left behind by the killer, or at least one of the killers, if his theory was correct.

Susan searched through a series of clear plastic bags on a shelf before finding the one she wanted, carefully tugging it free and shutting the cabinet, walking back much too slowly for Harry’s liking.

His eyes were fixed on the bag, trying to see through the excess plastic, but the item itself was small enough to be concealed by her fingers. She came to a stop at the end of the table and held the bag aloft. Beneath the bright lights the object inside gleamed.

It was a long, narrow golden stick. Harry blinked, leaning forward to get a closer view.

“May I?”

She nodded, relinquishing the bag to his grip. He held it up to the light, closer to his face, Sirius at his back.

“What the bloody hell is that?” the other man asked, voice near Harry’s ear.

Harry tilted his head, examining the fine filigree detail etched along the length, the swirl detail at the wide end, the dried blood at the sharp tip.

“It was the mode of injection,” Susan replied. “The inside is hollow and the end is a depressor, a fancy syringe if you will. Obviously not meant for veins. I’ve never seen anything like it, my money’s on custom made.”

“I take it the design is meant to conceal its true purpose,” Harry muttered, eyes narrowed as he turned it around and back again. “But I don’t know how convenient it is walking around with a chopstick in your pocket. Not to mention the sharp end, you’d be more likely to inject yourself.”

Susan blinked, looking from Harry to Sirius and then back to Harry, brow raised.

“What?” he asked, handing the bag back to Sirius so he could inspect it to his heart’s content.

She blinked once more before shaking her head. “Men.”

“My sentiments exactly,” Sirius murmured. “Care to elaborate, luv?”

“It’s a hair stick.”

Harry glanced over his shoulder at the item in question. “A what?”

“A hair stick. A beauty accessory.”

Harry’s head snapped back around, heart racing.

“For long hair?”
She nodded.

Harry’s lungs were pumping as he spun around, eyes locking with Sirius.

“I knew it…” His emerald gaze glowed from within. “There’s a second killer. A woman.”

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Monday December 8, 2003

Leave.

Just go.

There’s still time.

Tom took a deep breath, releasing it in a puff of white smoke against the frigid air.

This is a colossal mistake. You know it is.

You haven’t fucked it up yet. Go now while there’s still-

His heart lurched as the doors to the building ahead opened. He stiffened against the tree he half leaned against, half hid behind. People started to exit in pairs and groups, chatting animatedly, books in hand and bags on shoulders.

He’d been lingering on the University campus for nearly two hours, waiting for her lecture to end.

Before that he spent two days gathering every bit of information he could find... her elected major, her class schedule, her student aid.

He spent four days tracking her current whereabouts, looking up her address and every listing of her name in public record.

He spent two weeks talking himself in and out of looking her up before finally caving into the urge.

He spent six months obsessing over the prospect of finding her, watching her from afar, surrendering to the devil on his shoulder, painfully desperate for just a glimpse, a small piece to sustain him for the next span of millenia.

He spent nearly seven years without her in his life.

That was all about to end today.

Right now.

Within seconds.

His system flooded with adrenaline, stealing his breath. He wanted to turn around and run yet his feet kept him rooted to the grass, frozen, unable to breathe, blink, think.

He watched.

People continued to pour out of the building, the large lecture hall steadily emptying, he scanned the faces, the tops of downturned heads, but didn’t see her.

Maybe she wasn’t in class today.
Maybe she isn’t here.

You should leave.

Turn around now.

Go.

He swallowed, heart beating an unsteady rhythm in his chest, a rising drum beat, increasing in intensity as more bodies filtered out and down the steps.

And then-

She was there.

His spine snapped straight, heart stuttering so violently his vision flashed white, blinding him, making him light headed. He pressed a hand to the tree, steadying himself, legs feeling numb.

Was she real? Or merely a figment of his imagination?

After so long fantasizing about her, picturing what she might look like all these years later…

She was perfect.

More beautiful than he imagined. Strong yet delicate, wild yet reserved. The brave, stubborn girl from his childhood had blossomed into a grown woman. Her body held more curves, still visible despite the peacoat and heavy scarf around her neck. Her hair was shorter, hitting just past her shoulders instead of running in a river down her back. The wild curls had settled, softened, tamed into thick waves. He was relieved to see the color was the same, she hadn’t dyed it. And her face bore no signs of makeup, utterly radiant in its bare complexity.

She was the same, yet so very different it was painful to look upon. He took a deep breath, leaning into the large tree, boneless in the wake of this momentous occasion, this colossal mistake.

He fucked up. He fucked up royally.

Because now that he’d seen her, there was no going back.

No point in pretending things would ever be the same. He’d be lying to himself and he didn’t bother doing that anymore, finally coming to terms with his life and the decisions that led him here.

But now everything was in upheaval. He knew he’d never be able to return to the way things were, a life without her. He’d had another hit of his drug of choice and was fully within it’s clutches once again, long legged tentacles wrapping around his limbs and throat, sealing his airway while whispering sweet nothings in his ear. He was done for.

Tom kept a steady eye on her progress from the steps of the lecture hall to the stretch of cement path connecting the various buildings on campus. She wasn’t talking to anyone, wasn’t looking around, her head was bent down and as another student moved out of the way Tom saw an open book in her hands, smaller than a textbook. She was fixated on the literature, sidestepping a lamppost and bench without breaking her gaze.

He smirked. She hadn’t changed. Warmth permeated his chest at the notion.

He wondered what other characteristics were the same, what was different. He needed to get closer, follow her, watch her. Find out more. Everything. He pulled away from the tree and started walking,
heart racing, the thrill of the hunt awakening his predatory instincts. And she was his ultimate prey.

He blended into a crowd of students walking several paces behind her, keeping his head down, face partially obscured by the collar of his coat. His grey eyes practically glowed as they locked onto her like a tracking beam.

From the back her hair was a sea of chocolate, amber and chestnut, the light radiating off the tresses and highlighting the varying shades, adding depth and gloss to the wavy mass, mesmerizing him, making his fingers twitch with the need to touch, grab, caress.

He kept his hands fisted tightly in his pockets as he maneuvered through the bustling pathway, avoiding collisions as people walked by in the opposite direction, one bicyclist nearly driving over his foot. Tom glared at the errant rider but quickly dismissed him, no time for distractions.

He slowed his pace to keep the distance between them, stopping dead in his tracks when she ceased walking, glancing up sharply from her book to glance her surroundings.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, heart beating wildly as she slowly pivoted, posture rigid. He held his breath, instincts screaming to turn around, hide behind a pedestrian, duck for cover behind a tree.

No.

He wet his lips, the moment slowing, her body turning in his direction frame by frame, the world around them melting away.

*If she turns around and sees me it’s a sign.*

*It means this is meant to be. I’ll grab her and-*

“Hey Mione!”

Tom jolted, the spell broken and the world fast forwarding around him, back to normal speed. She spun forward once more, facing away from him. Tom narrowed his eyes at the approaching figure, a tall man with coif of perfectly styled dark blonde hair and a perfectly punchable face.

“How was Hawthorne’s lecture?” The new arrival asked at normal volume, coming to a stop uncomfortably close to her. Much to Tom’s delight she took an automatic step back, tucking her hair behind her ear as she leaned her body away.

“You would know if you actually went to class, Cormac.”

The bondie smirked. Tom’s eyes narrowed.

“I planned on it, really I did. But last night was a pretty big blowout. Something you’d know if you actually attended a party.”

Hermione huffed in annoyance, looking away. “It seems I made the right decision, seeing as I’m the only one who made it into class this morning.”

Cormac tucked his hands in his pockets, eyes scanning her face. “People asked why you weren’t there. Padma said you picked up a shift at the library but she’s clearly never set foot in one or she’d know they close early on Sundays.”

Hermione shook her head. “No one asked where I was. I never go to those things, no one looked for
me.”

“I did.”

Her eyes snapped back to his, the hopeful look in his eyes making Tom’s fists clench anew.

“Well you shouldn’t have, Cormac. I have a boyfriend.”

Tom blinked, spine going rigid.

What was that?

He took a step closer, facing a group of students standing nearby so it appeared he was talking to them. He cringed at the sound of Cormac’s chuckle.

“Don’t I know it. Built like a brick wall. Is he as intelligent as one?”

Hermione huffed, taking another step back, away from Cormac and closer to Tom.

“I hate it when you do that. I’m not going to stand here and listen-”

“I’m sorry! Really, I am. I didn’t mean to- well scratch that, I did mean to. But I shouldn’t have. It’s just…” the blonde looked flustered, his easy smile fading in lieu of a serious expression.

“Nevermind. I just wanted to see if you were... “ he looked down, running a hand through his thick hair. “I just wanted to see you.”

Tom inhaled sharply.

Did you now?

He clenched his jaw, straining to hear Hermione’s response.

Slap him, luv, right across that pretty face.

Or stand aside and I’ll take care of him for you.

Instead he heard her sigh, resigned and soft, a sound he recognized from their youth. It always came before her reluctant surrender, before she rolled over and let Tom get away with his latest affront. The sound used to fill him with elation, knowing he was once more about to get his way. But now it filled him with seething rage, knowing she was about to pardon another man’s offense.

“I… Cormac, I’m with Victor. You know that, and I need you to respect it. You and I are only friends, that’s all we can ever be. If you can’t accept that then we shouldn’t socialize outside of class anymore.”

Cormac nodded to himself, eyes still averted down, a heavy beat of silence permeating the bubble they created for themselves, the throngs of students and faculty chattering around them a white noise fading to the background.

Then the blonde blinked, a flip switching as he perked up, posture lifting and sly smile curving his lips, eyes bright once more. “I’ll be good, I promise. Anything to stay in your good graces, milady.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but even from his peripheral Tom could tell she was relieved. She still hated being at odds with anyone, yet another trait that hadn’t changed, much to Tom’s chagrin.

“Dolt. Meet me outside the rec hall in two hours and I’ll give you my notes to copy.”
Cormac beamed. Fucking pillock.

“Cheers, Mione. I’ll see you then.”

She nodded, expression softening beneath his eager school boy ruse. Because it was most certainly an act, carefully orchestrated to disarm her. This windbag obviously knew how to prey upon her bleeding heart and was taking advantage not only of her emotional empathy but her dedication to learning. Tom wondered how many others buttered her up to copy her notes, how many played the hapless fool to manipulate her into doing their work.

But what Tom found truly unacceptable was this particular tosser also wanted to fuck her.

His vision spotted, limbs trembling with the pressure brewing within.

The blonde parted ways with a cheeky wink in her direction, walking right past a deadly assassin without a care in the world. It took every ounce of self control for Tom not to pull the knife concealed within his coat and slash the man’s throat open. It would be so easy.

Even simpler would be walking past him from the opposite direction, slashing into his femoral artery. Tom’s blade was sharp. His victim wouldn’t even realize what happened until he lost feeling in his leg, his weight buckling beneath the useless limb. Tom imagined the astounded terror on that perfect face when he saw the river of blood soaking his pants, marking his path along the sidewalk.

Better yet, Tom could follow him around campus for a while, wait until he got him somewhere secluded, the men’s room perhaps, and really go to town on him.

He sighed with longing as the man rounded the corner, disappearing from sight. Tom’s eyes cut back to Hermione, heart jolting when he saw she was facing his direction, but her eyes were averted to the side, still darting around the grass, the crowded pathways, the line of buildings ahead.

What is she searching for?

Who is she searching for?

He swallowed thickly.

Does she feel me?

He had cut it close earlier, standing in the middle of the walkway as she slowly turned, awaiting, beckoning exposure. But now his muscles tensed, second thoughts plaguing him. He wasn’t prepared to risk discovery so soon. Not just yet.

There’s more I have to do.

He released a sharp breath as she finally turned around, shoulders slightly drawn, and resumed her previous path. Away from him.

Things I need to find out...

He let her go, watching her retreating figure with sharp, determined eyes.

Starting with who Victor is.

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Thursday July 14, 2005
A knock sounded at the front door.

Tom took a deep, steadying breath, hand hovering over the knob as he mentally braced himself. Going toe to toe with the man on the other side of the barrier never ended well for him. He was a master of deceit, always knowing when Tom was lying.

So the key to winning was simple. Yet it took Hermione pointing it out to him.

Don’t lie.

Which meant the conversation to follow was going to take every ounce of cunning Tom had in him.

He released the breath and opened the door, fighting back a cringe upon seeing the wide grin and knowing glint in the other man’s pale green eyes.

“Ah, Tom. How lovely of you to invite me over. So ahead of the deadline as well. Dare I say you actually missed my company?”

Tom couldn’t temper the scowl that marred his features. Green chuckled. “I thought as much. Did you invite me over to kill me then?”

Tom rolled his eyes and stepped away from the threshold, giving his handler room to enter.

“I hope we can have tea before attempted homicide. I’m rather parched and would fancy a biscuit or two before we commence battle.”

“You know where the kettle is. This isn’t a social call. And since when have I ever had biscuits?”

“I keep a roll of hobnobs hidden in the cabinet above your fridge.”

Tom raised a dark brow. “You keep biscuits hidden in my kitchen?”

Green started cutting a path to said cabinet, speaking over his shoulder. “Certainly. If I stored them out in the open you’d have thrown them out.”

“Yes. Because it’s my bloody kitchen.”

“I feel as though this is becoming a circular argument.” Green leaned past the fridge and easily reached the high cupboard with his long limbs.

Sure enough his hand emerged with a pack of chocolate Digestives. Tom shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose as he sighed.


“Have a biscuit, Tom. You’re always cross when you’re peckish.”

“Let’s just get this over with.”

“Do I have time to brew tea?”

Tom inhaled sharply, jaw flexing, scathing words burning in his throat.

“Remember, above all else, stay calm…”

Hermione’s voice quelled his raw nerves, her breath ghosting down his neck, the echo of delicate
fingers running a trail along his scalp and down to his shoulders.

“He’ll try to rile you up. You’re easier to read when you’re angry. Anger makes you emotional. Don’t let him win.”

He swallowed, chest deflating on a slow exhale, blood pressure dropping as he recalled her parting words earlier that day.

“Just stay calm.”

He locked eyes with his handler, the man’s smirk infuriating, but Tom let it roll off his back, forcing himself not to react.

“Of course,” Tom replied smoothly, “There’s always time for tea.”

Green blinked, expression revealing his perplexion for a full beat before he masked it. It was enough to send a thrill of triumph singing along every vein in Tom’s body.

That’s right, old man. Suck my co-

“Excellent. I’ll make two cups.”

And then he was maneuvering through Tom’s kitchen without a moment’s hesitation, knowing the layout better than the owner.

Tom walked to the edge of the tiles and stood, watching carefully, arms folded.

“How I love it when you brood,” Green said with a smirk, filling the kettle from the sink. He glanced up as he turned the faucet off. “It’s one of the few moments you’re silent.”

Tom held his gaze. “If only you would take up the practice.”

“Yes, I’m sure you’d love that.” Green set the kettle on the electric stove, turning the dial. “So I take it you and Hermione came to a decision?”

Tom remained silent as Green opened another cupboard to peruse his tea collection. “You never restock. When’s the last time you’ve stepped foot inside a market?”

Tom continued to watch.

Stay calm.

Her voice kept him tethered to sanity.

“You are really committing to the strong and silent guise aren’t you? What a shame you couldn’t go through this phase when you were eighteen.”

“Enough.”

“My thoughts precisely.”

Tom sighed, rubbing at his eyes. “At this rate I wish there was a fourth option, for you to put me out of my misery.”

“I’m not sure Hermione would agree.”
Tom’s posture stiffened at the sound of her name on his lips. He couldn’t hide his annoyance. Green finally settled on a tea selection, shutting the cabinet.

“How did you know about her?”

His handler raised a gray brow. “You either greatly overestimate your abilities or greatly undervalue mine, more likely some combination of both.”

Tom squeezed his biceps where his folded arms rested, channeling the pain to keep his expression blank. “Or perhaps you’ve been spying on me.”

“Spying? You mean like the cameras you have planted throughout her flat?”

Tom squeezed so hard he was certain there’d be bruises marring his flesh come tomorrow.

“I comb my home once a month looking for devices. And I never let you out of my sight when you visit.”

“Yes, but you’re out of town quite a bit. And I have a key.”

“I like to think you have more important things to do with your free time besides watching me take a shite each morning.”

Green cringed. “Must you be so utterly crass, Tom?”

“You have no problem shooting someone in the head but you can’t abide a few swear words?”

Green sighed, shaking his head. “It’s about standards. Morals. A man must have his own set of principles to which he measures decency by.”

Tom blinked. “So cutting a body into pieces and dumping it in the river is good etiquette as long as you keep your language clean?”

Green shrugged lightly, glancing at the kettle. “That’s obviously an extreme example, but there are most certainly varying degrees of propriety when it comes to-”

“Please,” Tom held a hand up. “For the love of god just shut up already.”

“Very well, Tom. Why don’t you take control of the conversation. Please, tell me why you called for this meeting.”

Tom’s jaw ticked, he felt it and forced his muscles to loosen, relax, erasing his defensive stance.

“After you left, Hermione and I talked…”

“You can’t lie to him, Tom. He knows you too well.”

“And we came to a mutual decision.”

“You have to trick him by telling the truth.”

“She’s going to assist me with the final three assignments.”

Green’s expression was unreadable in the silence that followed. Tom worked to keep his face the same. His handler's pale eyes seemed to glow for a moment, irises lit from within, and a shadow passed across his stoic face. Tom kept his breathing even, paced. Finally, the spell broke as Green
smiled, teeth gleaming.

“Wonderful. I knew you’d reach the same conclusion I had.”

“Of course you did.”

Green’s smile didn’t falter. “So what else did you talk about in the hours since I left you?”

Tom took a deep breath, spine straightening. “Most of our evening was spent doing other things.”

“Ah, I see. You comforted her with sex?”

Tom blinked. Hearing Green utter that word was decidedly disturbing to his ears, even as it was spoken with indifference.

“I don’t kiss and tell.”

“Hm. You don’t kiss at all, as I remember you telling me once. Which aligned with your avoidance of emotional intimacy.”

Tom ran a hand over his face. “What will it take to get you to stop talking?”

“Of course most of my previous diagnoses fall by the wayside where Hermione’s concerned,” he continued as though Tom hadn’t spoken. “I imagine you have no problem aligning yourself emotionally to her. In fact, from my brief observations of your interactions, I’m certain you crave it.”

He turned around as the kettle began to whistle. “She’s your outlet for emotional expression, your only source. You formed a codependent bond in your youth you managed to hold onto all these years later. Now you want to go back to the way things were, when they were easier, when your relationship was simple.”

“Things were never simple between us,” Tom bit back, shoulders tense.

Green shrugged lightly, removing the kettle from the burner. “They wouldn’t seem that way to you, no. She was your light in the dark and thus had a profound effect upon you. But it’s all very textbook, I assure you. She became equally dependent on you. You isolated her from all other relationships, ensuring you were the most prominent person in her life, effectively making you her only source for emotional attachment. I can only imagine the damage your abrupt departure caused her.”

Tom ground his teeth together.

Stay calm…

*I’m trying. But this fucker knows just how to push my buttons.*

“Alas, fast forward eight years later and you want to set everything back the way it once was.” He poured hot water into two mugs. “But neither of you are the children you once were, and things will never be as they were before, no matter how hard you pretend.”

“No one’s pretending anything.”

“Aren’t you?”

Tom closed his eyes.
Stay calm…

Her voice sounded smaller, further away as his inner demons approached.

“Have you really stopped to consider just how different Hermione is, all these years later? How
different you are? Are you certain you’re still compatible?”

“I don’t see how any of this is your concern.”

Green dipped the tea bags into the steaming mugs. “I think we’ve already established why this is my
concern, Tom. The decisions you make affect me as much as they affect Hermione. Your life isn’t
the only one that stands to be destroyed by your impulsivity.”

Tom tilted his head sharply, cracking his neck.

“I think deep down you know this, and that’s why you’re so desperate to run, to take her away from
her current life, to erase the years of separation and start anew.”

“You’re speaking out of your arse.”

Green raised a brow, sliding one mug in Tom’s direction and dunking the bag in his own.

“Is that so? You’ve fully embraced all the changes that have occured in both of your lives then?”

Tom didn’t reply, watching his handler through a sea of red.

“In that case, I assume you’ve told her what you did?”

Tom felt his heart lurch in his chest, body rocking.

“What are you on about?”

Green smiled over the rim of his mug, fangs flashing. “You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

Tom blinked.

He can’t…

He can’t know.

Tom swallowed past the tightening in his throat.

“Ah, or perhaps you haven’t told her.”

“I…”

Green chuckled, taking an idle sip. Tom clamped his jaw shut, trying to repeat Hermione’s mantra to
remain calm over and over in his head, but her voice was distorted, like radio static.

“How do you…”

Green set his mug down, leaning against the counter and folding his arms, clearly the one in control
of the situation, as always.

“I realized you were following her well over a year ago. Granted, it had already been going on for
several months before I looked into the matter, but I suspected something was amiss long before
that.”
Tom rubbed at his forehead, feeling a steady pressure building deep inside, cleaving his skull in half.

“So I know your chance reunion at the Club last Saturday was no chance at all. You orchestrated everything, pulled her into your world by force, just as you dragged her away from Wool’s by her wrist every Saturday morning after your sessions. Dictating her every move, controlling her life. How do you think she’ll react if she finds out what you’ve done?”

Tom inhaled sharply, eyes no longer seeing Green but seeing her, backing away from him, tears in her eyes, telling him to leave, get out, never return.

Green tilted his head, studying his charge. “But that’s not all you’ve done, is it, Tom?”

Tom felt his blood run cold, eyes flickering back to his handler.

“What do you think she’ll do when she finds out what you did to-”

“What do you want?” Tom snapped, body trembling with the onslaught of rage and panic. “What do you want really? Why are you doing this to us? To me?”

Green was frustratingly silent for a short eternity before shaking his head. “I merely want to save you from destroying your life. From throwing away everything you’ve built on a whim, for some girl that isn’t even the same person you once thought you loved.”

“I didn’t think it. I did- I do- love her.”

“How can you be so certain when you’ve only been reunited for the span of five days?”

“Because I never stopped. I’ve been in love with her for eight years and even before that-”

“You’ve been in love with an idea of her for eight years, Tom. You can’t possibly know who she is now. You think because you stalked her from the shadows for a year that you’re all caught up, that everything can fit seamlessly into place? You can’t even tell her the truth of what you’ve done for fear of losing her!”

Tom took a menacing step forward, fists clenched. Green didn’t blink. “You’re angry because I’m right. You always get angry when I’m right.”

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about!”

“‘I know exactly what I’m talking about.”

His tone brokered no argument, left no room for dissent. His posture was still eased against the counter but his expression was tense, eyes bright. “I know exactly what you’re going through,” he said, tone calmer but still just as calculating. “And I’m trying to save you from making a terrible mistake.”

Tom swallowed. “I knew it. You plan on killing her anyway.”

Green sighed. “I would never go back on my word to you. If you complete the missions and still want to leave, I’ll let you go.”

“And Hermione?”

“If you want to take her with you I won’t stop you.”

Tom shook his head. “I don’t believe you. You just said you’re trying to stop me from making a
terrible mistake, why would you let us leave together?"

“Sometimes I think you act purposefully dense.”

Tom’s eyes narrowed. Green rolled his.

“I expect that by the time this debacle is through, neither of you will be keen on running off into the sunset together. I expect you’ll be ready to part ways before the first mission is complete.”

Tom reared back, chest seizing as his own hidden fear was given voice, made real.

“That won’t happen,” he said fiercely. “She’s stronger than you think.”

Green studied him for a long moment before bursting into laughter, sending chills of unease down Tom’s spine. “Oh, Tom,” he said through peels of it, wiping at his eyes. “You still don’t get it. But you will.”

Tom’s heart beat painfully against his ribcage.

“Soon enough you’ll see…” Green smiled viciously, “She’s much stronger than you think.”

Harry paused on the curb, allowing traffic to drive by before cutting a path across the street, lamp posts springing to life on either side as the sun set in the distance. Sirius kept pace beside him, long hair blowing in the breeze.

“Remember, just because he pays for dinner doesn’t mean you have to put out.”

Harry bit his cheek. “I’ll keep that in mind. What if he buys a nice bottle for the table?”

“Depends. If it’s a vintage cab you’re at least obligated to blow him.”

Harry shook his head. “Is that one of the stories between you? The one he’s taking to his grave?”

Sirius tipped his head back and laughed, face illuminated by lights. “Me and Igor? Ha! He wishes.”

“Well it seems his wishes run a bit younger these days.”

“He’s always had a taste for the young ones. Easier to manipulate.”

Harry rose a brow. “Is that so? Well he’s in for a surprise then.”

Sirius smirked. “What I’d give to be a fly on the wall.”

“You’ll have to settle for being a barfly instead. The front desk said there’s a pub across the street from Verga, hopefully I’ll be able to wrap things up by nine and will meet you inside.”

“Assuming I don’t have to shake a pig tail. Have you seen anyone following us?”

Harry shook his head. “No, but I wouldn’t be surprised if Dawlish sends someone to watch our hotel, report back when we leave town. He didn’t seem too pleased when we left this morning.”

“No love lost there.”

“You ever going to tell me what happened between the two of you?”

Sirius inhaled sharply, amusement faded. “It’s not that interesting, kid. Nevertheless, I don’t like
rehashing the past.”

Harry shrugged, dropping the subject even though he was burning with curiosity. He knew Sirius didn’t like reliving his past because it reminded him of James and Lily, his former teammates, the friends and partners he’d lost. Harry usually let the matter drop, only pushing for details when it involved his father’s final mission. Alas, Sirius had been on a different assignment halfway across the world when his father’s accident occurred, unable to shed any further light on what happened.

Suddenly Harry wondered if Dawlish knew either of his parents. He turned to Sirius, about to ask, then thought better of it. Best not to get too distracted at the moment. He needed to keep his focus on the current case, catching the killer still at large.

They approached the stairs to the U-Bahn station, the crowd of pedestrians thickening. Harry stepped in closer to Sirius, keeping his voice low so only the man beside him could hear.

“Speaking of Dawlish, I suppose we have a better idea of why he was quick to sweep the missing security footage under the rug. Without proof of another person entering the penthouse they’re able to better sell their farce of how Yaxley met his self-inflicted end.”

Sirius nodded. “Looks like the killer did them a favor when they covered their tracks.”

Harry glanced at him sharply. “You don’t think…?”

Sirius held his gaze, expression dark. “That Dawlish is working with the killer? I can’t speak definitively on that, but my gut tells me no. If they had access to police resources there’d be much cleaner methods of taking out the target on his own. But that doesn’t mean Dawlish doesn’t have ties to whatever organization is behind this mess. At the very least someone higher up the chain of command does. Somebody with authority signed off on that fake autopsy report. We need to find out who.”

Harry nodded. “You think Dumbledore would have more sway getting through the red tape?”

Sirius sighed, staring ahead as they walked between the tramlines, maneuvering around people as they went.

“I’d like to keep him out of the investigation as much as possible. Let’s see if Igor can dig anything up for us.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Let’s see if I can convince him, you mean. What the hell’s going on between you and Dumbledore anyway?”

Harry kept his voice light, uninterested, trying to mask the burning curiosity that had been plaguing him for days. Sirius raised a brow, glancing back.

“What do you mean?”

Harry mirrored his expression, unconvinced. “You know exactly what I mean.”

Sirius faced forward again, strides lengthening. “Nothing is going on. We just have a long history. We used to be very close.”

They slowed their pace as they neared the platform, a large group of people milling around the center waiting for their train to arrive.

“He told me he used to work closely with mum and dad, that he trusted them with his life.”
Sirius nodded, expression carefully devoid of emotion. “That’s true.”

Harry rocked on his heels, hands in his pockets as his eyes bore holes into the side of the man’s head. Sirius groaned. “Why can’t you ever leave well enough alone?”

“He’s my new boss and is funding this investigation. I need to know what kind of man he is. If there’s a problem between the two of you-”

“There isn’t a problem,” Sirius said sharply, rendering Harry silent. “I used to consider the man a second father. A first really, considering my actual father was absent the majority of my life. Dumbledore was- is- a great man. A powerful man. He wants to save the world. He just goes to questionable lengths to do so.”

Harry blinked, swallowing lightly, trying to process Sirius’s words. He opened his mouth to ask for more information when a sharp whistling sound filled the air, the bright lights of the train approaching. People surged past, surrounding them from both sides and effectively destroying their bubble of privacy.

Harry closed his mouth but his emerald gaze spoke volumes.

*We’re not done talking about this.*

Sirius’s slightly annoyed, slightly amused expression answered.

*As if I could be so lucky.*

Harry smirked in return, facing forward as the train pulled in, brakes screeching.

“I’ll let you go ahead,” Sirius said loudly above the chatter of people disembarking and those waiting to board. “I’ll catch the next one, put some distance between our arrivals.”

Harry nodded. “If you don’t hear from me by nine give me a call, fake an emergency.”

Sirius grinned. “And if you decide you need the rest of the night to work an angle, just shoot me a text.”

Harry fought the urge to roll his eyes. “It’s the eggplant emoji, right?”

“I prefer the rooster myself, Rem usually goes for the mushroom-”

“Enough!”

Sirius’s bark of laughter could be heard across the platform as Harry walked away, shaking his head in mortified amusement. He loved his unofficial uncles, he loved that they were in love, but he did not want to picture them expressing that love. He could barely tolerate seeing his parents kiss when he was a boy.

He waited idly at the back of the crowd as it slowly moved forward, people boarding. Finally Harry was able to step on, finding an opening in the center of the carriage. He grabbed the overhead rail as the doors slid shut, the speaker’s announcement delivering its message in German and English.

He sighed, ready for this dinner to come to an end before it began. As the train started to move he tipped his head to salute Sirius farewell through the window, exchange a parting look of shared amusement.

But when he looked to the place Sirius last stood, he saw no one.
Bella turned her face to the side, expelling a steady stream of smoke as she walked across the street with a crowd of strangers, safely encased by the sea of bodies.

She ran her tongue along her top row of teeth, humming low in the back of her throat. She’d had a song stuck on her mind all day but to her great frustration couldn’t remember the lyrics, only the tune. She hated when that happened.

She flicked her cigarette to the side, winking at the woman who gasped in scandalized outrage as the butt bounced off her leg. The woman continued to glare daggers, whispering sharply to the man walking beside her, pointing in Bella’s direction until they lost sight of her as she rounded corner, trailing after her prey.

The boys walked fast, long legs eating up the pavement quickly. Bella was tall for the average woman but these lads were tall for the average man. Also, she was wearing her heeled boots, marginally slowing her pace as she maneuvered the uneven cement and clusters of pedestrians.

They were too far back to hear, but she’d determined their identities earlier in the day when she eavesdropped on their conversation as they left the Paradies Hotel, confirming they’d visited the crime scene. Green had instructed her to stay back, look and not be seen, leave as soon as she established their presence.

So naturally she took it upon herself to bump headlong into the older male at the first opportunity. He had sly, devilish good looks and a firm physique she took great pleasure colliding with. He was probably twice her age but obviously took care of himself, his body. She appreciated that about a man. Women were expected to keep themselves maintained and primped at all times for the delight of the opposite sex, yet men were held to no such standard. A societal double standard that irritated her to a minor degree, yet only a footnote on her long list of grievances.

Of course Green would have an aneurysm if he knew she was trailing them through the city hours later, merely for the thrill of it. She wondered if she’d find the task half as exciting if it wouldn’t upset her former handler so. She took great pleasure in eliciting reactions from the man. If she couldn’t get his attention by being a good girl and following his rules, then naturally she’d have to rebel. What else did he expect?

She slowed her pace as the boys turned to the side, heading down the steps to the metro. Once she lost sight of their heads she proceeded behind them, face carefully averted down as she tracked them from beneath her dark lashes.

The older one was superb, a smooth, aged scotch that erupted tendrils of fire down her throat, igniting warm in her core. But the younger one was a tender little morsel, fresh and radiant, brimming with energy and life. And his eyes… they were mesmerizing.

She’d was blessed and plagued by men with hypnotic eyes. First Green with his pale green, clairvoyant gaze that stripped away every layer until she was rendered transparent beneath his scrutiny. Then Tom, with those treacherous storm grey stare that mirrored a raging sea or turbulent sky, challenging and overpowering her with just one look.

But as beautiful and terrible as those gazes were, the emerald eyes of this stranger were even more gorgeous, more breath taking, more haunting.

She wanted- no, needed- to get a closer look. She needed to feel those eyes upon her, watching her, penetrating her. She needed to bask in their green glory, strip naked and allow them to rove every inch of her flesh. She caught a closer glimpse this morning, after bumping into his partner in the
street, but the taste had only wetted her appetite. And her womb. The boy was perfect, and she wanted him.

But most of all, she wanted his eyes.

Neville crossed his feet at the ankle, shifting uncomfortably in the chair. He was still getting used to these in person interviews, they were awkward enough at the Club but being in a stranger’s flat was decidedly out of his comfort zone.

“Thank you for meeting us on such short notice, Ms. Edgecomb,” Luna’s voice had a way of soothing his frayed nerves.

“Marietta is fine, Ms. Edgecomb makes me sound ancient.”

The blonde smiled. “Of course, Marietta. We appreciate your time. We have a few questions to ask about the evening of July 9, last Saturday.”

“I knew it was only a matter of time before someone came knocking. Go ahead. Do you mind if I smoke?”

“Not at all,” Luna opened the file before her on the coffee table, crossing her legs. Neville sat in the chair beside her, their newest subject seated on the couch facing them.

“We spoke to the management team at the Serpentine Country Club and they informed us your team provided catering and wait service to the Malfoy retirement party on July 9, is that correct?”

Marietta managed to fish a cigarette from the carton on the table but was struggling to get her lighter to flame.

“Stupid fucking thing,” she muttered angrily, thumb spinning the sparkwheel repeatedly to no avail.

Neville shifted in his seat, exchanging a quick glance with Luna, then peering forward and awkwardly clearing his throat. “May I?”

Marietta looked up sharply, annoyed, then huffed and held out the lighter. Neville reached out tentatively and took it from her manicured grasp, giving it a shake, flicking the wheel and receiving only a dim spark. He glanced to his side and saw a box of tissues. He grabbed one off the top and flattened in over his thigh.

He held the lighter aloft and slowly spun the thumbwheel, catching the fine flint shavings that fell from the top. He continued to accumulate the dark powder for another few seconds before carefully pulling the corners of the tissue up, gathering the pile in the center and then twisting the tissue around it. He held the bundled flint before the lighter once more and this time the dull spark ignited the tissue, creating a steady flame.

He glanced up, blushing when he saw both women staring at him, Marietta with a raised brow and Luna with a beaming smile. He blinked a few times and then smiled shyly in return, holding the flame aloft so Marita could lean in with her cigarette between her lips, lighting the end and inhaling sharply.

She leaned back as Neville shook out the flame, wadding up the tissue and tucking it in his pocket.

“I have another lighter you know,” Marietta said, exhaling a puff of smoke. “Neat trick though. I bet you kill at parties.”
Neville shifted awkwardly in his chair and averted his eyes to the table while Luna leaned forward, eyes narrowed and voice sharper than he’d ever heard it before.

“Ms. Edgecomb, you were at the Club when a homicide occurred. Has anyone from law enforcement spoken to you about that night?”

Marietta’s eyes cut back to the blonde as she took another inhale from her cigarette, face pinched at the use of her surname.

“I was spoken to at the event, before leaving. I was told to leave all our equipment behind while they swept for evidence. I called the next day and they told me I had to fill out a fancy form to get it back. I drove up to the station on Monday and filled out buckets of paperwork, only to be told it’ll be another week before they can return our property. A week! Can you believe that? The posh bastard wasn’t even killed in the dining hall, unless someone stabbed him with one of our knives. Oh christ, they didn’t, did they? That’ll be terrible PR.”

Neville blinked, opening and closing his mouth.

“No, Lucius Malfoy wasn’t killed with one of your knives,” Luna said, tone flat. “So am I to understand you were questioned at the scene by a uniformed officer?”

Another cloud of smoke dissipated through the small living space. “Yes, a female officer, young, terrible skin. She asked if I had seen anything and if all my staff were accounted for. She looked as frazzled as her hair. Didn’t seem very intuitive. I could have been the killer for all she knew, and she sent me on my merry little way without so much as a pat down.”

“Were they?”

“Were they what?”

“All accounted for.”

“Oh, my staff? Yeah. I mean, they were scattered throughout the venue, but I did a roll call before leaving, everyone who showed up for their shift was still there when the police arrived.”

“And did any of your staff claim to see anything of note?”

Marietta shrugged. “If they did they didn’t tell me. I told them to report anything suspicious to the police before dismissing them. A couple girls were shaken up, crying, but they’re rubber spined, doesn’t take much to get them in a state.”

Luna’s brow pinched together, Neville would almost say she looked angry, but the emotion seemed so out of place on her face he thought perhaps she was merely distraught.

“Have you been able to work any other events since Saturday, without use of your equipment?” he asked, trying to give Luna a break from her lead role in questioning for a few moments.

Marietta leaned against the couch, posture loose and expression bored. “Most of our jobs are on the weekend, we’re pre-booked for the next four months. Elite Events is a pretty big bloody deal, we’re set to expand into Leeds and Glasgow by this time next year. If those fuckers at the Scotland Yard don’t return our equipment by next Saturday you better believe I’ll-”

“So you haven’t worked any other events?”

She glared, not appreciating the interruption, delaying her response with another long drag.
“No, we haven’t. Our next booking is this weekend.”

“How do you contact your employees? Is there a predetermined schedule so they know which events they’re meant to work?”

“We call them and let them know, or they can call in and check. We’re working on building a new website that lists the schedule but it changes so frequently we’re still tracking it by hand. Lazy arseholes cancel at the last minute, show up late or don’t show up at all. We have to call around looking for fill-ins half the time. I should fire the lot of ‘em. Good help is impossible to find.”

Neville scribbled a few notes on his pad, watching Luna out of the corner of his eye open the folder once more, grabbing a sheet of paper.

“Ms. Edgcomb, do you recognize this person, from the Club or anywhere else?”

She handed the sketch over, still leaning forward in her seat as Marietta studied the image.

“Bloody gorgeous, isn’t he? Is this the killer? No wonder he lured the rich snob away. I’d have followed him into an alley already filled with bodies. No, never seen him.”

Neville’s brows lifted but Luna’s expression gave nothing away as she retook the sketch.

“I’ll leave this copy here with you, in case you recall something later on.”

“No need, luv, I’d remember a face like that. The party was full of handsome blokes, the Malfoy heir was in especially fine form. Those magazine covers do him no justice. He’s even more beautiful in person, if you can imagine that. He was surrounded by an equally attractive entourage, had most of the girls tripping over their gowns, making fools of themselves. Gold diggers no doubt, heard that he’s single again, desperate to align themselves with London’s most powerful family after the Royals themselves. Well, I suppose they aren’t as powerful now, considering two thirds of them are dead…”

Neville struggled to follow her tangent, wondering if she had a point to make or was merely talking to herself.

“Anyways,” she seemed to remember there were others in the room with her. “Like I said, I remember every good looking guy I crossed paths with that night, and if I had come across someone with that face, I’d have remembered them as well. I didn’t see him.”

Luna nodded. “I understand. I’d still like to leave the photo with you, all the same.”

Marietta shrugged, leaning forward to stub out her cigarette in the ashtray. “Whatever floats your boat, I suppose.”

“Would you be able to tell us who was working the event that night?”

“Of course. I keep superb records.”

“We’d like to meet with the employees who were present, have a similar conversation with them and show them the sketch. How many would you say were on staff that evening?”

Marietta leaned back again, crossing her arms, face pinched in concentration. “Mmm… I’d say about thirty.”

Neville sighed internally. The list just kept growing.

“I’d have to swing by the office to grab the information, I don’t have it here.”
“Of course. We greatly appreciate it.”

“If I help, can you get my equipment released sooner?”

Neville leaned back, mouth opening to reply, only to snap shut as Luna’s pleasant voice rang out. “Of course. We’ll get right on it.”

He glanced to her sharply but she continued staring at Marietta, expression sweet as sugar, but he detected a ripple of derision hiding beneath the surface, more attuned to the subtleties in her moods the longer he studied her.

“Good. It’s bullocks, keeping it hostage like that. Lazy detective work.”

Neville cleared his throat. “When can you have the list by?”

She sighed, grabbing her pack of cigarettes for another smoke. “Come to the office in an hour and I’ll meet you outside with the papers. I checked off names as people arrived for their shift. I’m pretty sure I still have the list on my clipboard.”

“It’s the eggplant emoji, right?” Harry asked stoically, fighting back a grin.

Sirius smirked, knowing just how to elicit a reaction. “I prefer the rooster myself, Rem usually goes for the mushroom—”

“Enough!”

Sirius laughed as his godson raised both hands, practically sprinting to the other end of the platform. He never got tired of embarrassing him. It was decidedly easier to do in his younger years, when he was a hyperactive bundle of sensitivity and emotions as all teenagers are. But Sirius still managed to make his blush from time to time, and took great pride in doing so.

He leaned against the advert plastered wall as Harry sidled up to the back of the crowd waiting to board. The underground station was bustling, people getting off work or heading out to avoid home for a few more hours. He casually scanned the surrounding faces when he noticed a sight that made him do a double take.

A woman.

Something about her gave him pause. She had a sharp, angular face, darkly outlined eyes and ruby painted lips. Her obvious youth and beauty aside, she stood out from the crowd like a dark beacon. It was the intensity that radiated from her, an invisible aura surrounding her being, potent even at this distance.

He tilted his head, studying her more closely. She held herself with such an absolute stillness he found it eerie, especially compared to all the movement around her. People talking, fidgeting, eyeing the train and its passengers, eager for their turn to board. She on the other hand didn’t flinch, didn’t blink, didn’t seem to breathe. She was like a store mannequin, styled and posed and left to blend into the background.

But perhaps what stood out the most to Sirius, and the small detail that had captured his attention in the first place, was that her shrew gaze was fixed on Harry.

And in that moment, in that instant that his eyes found her, carefully stationed amidst the crowd as she was, he knew with absolute certainty that she was following them.
His instincts kicked into high alert, screaming at him, warning him, but his driving need to protect Harry overrode everything else. He stood away from the wall, keeping Harry in his peripheral as he watched her, stalked her like the predator he once was, back when he built a career upon tracking targets through cities, mountains, across oceans.

He slipped behind a crowd of people carrying large instrument cases, talking animatedly amongst themselves. Harry was finally boarding the carriage and the woman was poised to strike, her limbs breaking free from their frozen stasis, her intent to board behind his godson clear as day.

Sirius leapt, deft and agile, a cheetah protecting its young.

“Finally,” he said with a smile, hand grasping her upper arm and halting her forward movement. She went rigid beneath his touch, head snapping up and dark eyes locking onto his. “There you are, dear, I thought we were meeting outside-” he stopped abruptly, releasing her and stepping back. “Oh, I’m terribly sorry, I thought you were someone else.”

The train doors shut, the engine firing to life as it started to pull away.

Her eyes flashed, a shadow crossing her features, gone in an instant, but Sirius recognized it for what it was. Her true face. Then the mask slid into place, beautiful and disarming, a true work of art. She smiled, head tilting. “That’s quite alright. No harm done.”

Sirius blinked. Her voice sounded familiar, though he couldn’t place it. He wondered if she was one of Dawlish’s lackeys, sent to track their whereabouts.

His eyes fell on her long, dark hair.

Or perhaps she was their second killer.

He nodded, easy grin in place. “Sorry again, luv. Have a good evening.”

“You as well.”

And then she spun on her heel, hair flowing behind her as she cut a quick path to the exit, heels clicking against the pavement. He timed her steps, heard the slight increase in her pace as she rounded the corner, and felt a thrill seize him.

It had been years since he’d worked in the field, his last promotion at the Ministry kept him chained to a desk most of the time, his direct reports participating in most of the ground work. He missed it, the adrenaline rush that took hold when in pursuit of a target. It had been too long since he felt that excitement take hold.

But tonight, he was on the hunt once more.

Harry took a deep breath as he followed the hostess through the front of the opulent restaurant, feeling a strong wave of deja vu as he was reminded of making a similar trek on his way to dine with Draco the night before. It was bizarre to think his conversation with Malfoy had occurred a mere 24 hours ago. It felt like another lifetime.

He raised a brow as he was led past the sea of diners to a narrow hall at the other end, which opened to a small, private room with a few tables scattered throughout, only one of which was occupied.

Karkaroff beamed at Harry’s entrance, eyes openly roaming his frame, much more obvious than he’d been at the pub. As Harry approached he noticed the warmth in the Russian’s cheeks and the
gleam in his eyes, and he didn’t credit himself with putting either there. Harry suspected the man was well plied with his drink of choice.

“Harry Potter!”

Harry did his best to hide his cringe behind a smile. “Karkaroff, fancy seeing you here.”

The man threw his head back and laughed, quite loud and extravagant. Harry glanced to the hostess with an apology in his eyes, feeling a sense of dread fester in his gut when he saw her gaze was equally sympathetic.

She quickly scurried away as Harry took his seat across from the still laughing Russian. He sighed, glancing about the room, feeling both exasperated and amused that Karkaroff had afforded them such privacy. Harry would use it to his full advantage, asking the hard hitting questions point blank.

He allowed the man a few more moments of uninterrupted amusement before cutting in. “Ok, Karkaroff, we’re alone. What do you know about the Yaxley killing-”

“Please, call me Igor.”

Harry sighed, leaning back in his chair.

“I’d prefer to keep this as professional as-”

“Come now, you’re nearly two thousand miles from home, loosen up a bit. Have a drink.”

He raised his hand in the air and peered at a spot behind Harry’s shoulder. Harry turned his head just in time to see a door in the wall open up and a man appear, poised and alert.

“Another round, bring one for my guest.”

Harry blinked, still processing the hidden door that blended seamlessly into the wood paneling. The waiter bowed slightly at the waist and then spun on his heel, disappearing the way he came before Harry could form a response.

“The owner keeps a private stock of Zyr for when I’m in town. It is delicious, distilled from winter wheat and rye, so smooth you hardly know-”

“That’s fantastic,” Harry snapped, facing forward once more. “But can we get back to Yaxley?”

“Patience, my dear man. Did you think I was going to give away all my secrets without a proper glass of vodka in hand?”

Harry sighed deeply, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “I have a lot of work to do, Karkaroff-”

“Igor.”

Harry held his amused gaze for a heavy beat. “Igor,” he relented, voice flat. “I don’t have time for games or small talk, time is of the essence and if you don’t have anything useful to share then I really must be going.”

The Russian tilted his head, dark eyes sparkling beneath the chandelier. “I’m sure you hear this all the time, but you have breathtaking eyes.”

Harry shook his head as he pushed away from the table, about to stand when Karkaroff’s next words rendered him frozen.
“They must be from your mother. Your father had brown eyes, if I remember correctly.”

Harry blinked, spine rigid as he settled back down into his chair. Karkaroff smiled, revealing his top row of teeth, proudly victorious in capturing Harry’s full attention.

“You knew my father?”

Karkaroff leaned back, drawing out the moment, his prey ensnared. “I met him once, when we were young men, barely out of boyhood. You look just like him. When I first laid eyes on you I thought perhaps I was seeing his ghost.”

Harry leaned forward. “How did you meet?”

The hidden door swung open and the waiter emerged with a tray in hand, breaking the spell. Harry blinked, watching the man set a chilled glass of clear liquid before them both before backing away, looking to Karkaroff.

“Thank you, please give us some privacy.”

The man was eager to disappear again, if his half sprint to the exit was any indication. Karkaroff picked up his glass, slowly turning it, admiring the liquor beneath the light.

“Cocktails are such a travesty, are they not? Vodka is meant to be consumed in its raw, unaltered form. Some choose to age it in a barrel, letting it sit for a generation in the hope all the impurities will evaporate before the alcohol does. Then there’s the technical approach, distilling the liquid to its greatest purity and filtering out everything but the ethyl and water. Both methods are a fine science, a work of art, and to destroy such creations with bitters and sugar syrups should be a crime punishable by death.”

He brought the glass to his lips and took a slow, steady sip, watching Harry over the rim.

“You were telling me how you knew my father?” Harry couldn’t keep the annoyance out of his voice.

“Please, have a taste, tell me if you like it.”

Harry sighed. “I don’t drink vodka, I wouldn’t know quality.”

“You will appreciate this one, I assure you.”

Harry took a deep breath, grabbing the glass and taking a small sip without preamble, expression unchanged. Karkaroff raised a brow, smirking. “What do you think?”

“It’s fine.”

“Fine?”

“Look, Karkaroff-”

“Igor.”

“Bloody hell,” Harry closed his eyes, running a hand over his face. “This was a bad idea. I’m going to-”

Harry blinked as his pocket buzzed, the vibration startling him silent. He reached for his phone, tension easing when he saw Sirius’s name flash across the screen. It wasn’t nine o’clock yet but
perhaps his mentor had psychic abilities, predicting how desperate Harry was to leave. Regardless of the reason, Harry would seize any opportunity to bail.

“Oh thank god, I have to get this.”

“Wait!”

Karkaroff’s sudden outburst jolted them both. Harry glanced up, brow raised as Karkaroff lowered his raised hand, as though reaching for Harry and then thinking better of it. “Just wait… I really do have information for you. I’m… I’ll behave. I promise.”

Harry watched him for a long beat, the phone continuing to vibrate in his hand. He reluctantly pressed the end button, sending Sirius to voicemail and sliding the bit of plastic back in his pocket.

“Ok, start talking.”

Karkaroff smiled, reaching back to fish something out of the jacket draped across his chair back. Harry blinked as the man set the small item on the table and slid it across the table cloth, removing his hand and revealing a small black container.

A ring box.

Karkaroff’s smile was obscene, eyes dancing with amusement.

“First, open your present.”

“Hey, kid, I hope you aren’t roofied and stuffed in a trunk. I’m not at the pub across the street, I’m….” He glanced up, searching for a street sign.

“I’m passing the corner of Hauptallee and Oswald, heading towards the river, a big park is up ahead on the right. Another metro station on the left. Doing a bit of sight seeing while I trail some pretty little bird that was spying on us at the station. She was about to board behind you before I intercepted.”

He narrowed his eyes, keeping her in his sights as she walked twenty meters ahead, seemingly oblivious to her surroundings.

Sirius wasn’t so convinced.

“She took off like a bullet after I confronted her, I’ve been following ever since. Give me a ring when you get this.”

He ended the call and slid the bit of plastic back into his pocket, ducking behind a standing metro map when she came to a stop at the intersection, hidden among a group of pedestrians waiting for the light to turn.

He took the opportunity to examine her again, this time seeing past the innocent guise, trying to suss out just what kind of creature dwelled within the sheep costume. She was tall and lean, well toned, a fact he could make out thanks to the tight clothing she wore. She carried herself with poise and confidence, as she should, sporting a body like that and a face to match, but there was something else… some other quality to her that he couldn’t quite articulate, but he felt it down to his marrow.

She was dangerous.

Like the golden hair stick, slender and elegant, flashy and bright. And full of poison.
He had nothing to base it on, but his gut instinct screamed that this was their girl. This was their
assassin.

At least the female half of the duo.

Sirius glanced around for the uptenth time, wondering if her male counterpart was nearby, stalking
him through the city as Sirius stalked her.

*Shite, for all I know she's leading me to her den of snakes.*

Yet when she continued her path across the street, Sirius fell into step behind her without hesitation.

This murder investigation had international implications, it was perhaps one of the biggest cases he’d
ever worked and it only seemed to be getting crazier by the day. He had no idea how far this thing
went, how deep the roots were, how many governments were involved, corrupted, but he suspected
the fallout would be massive. He couldn’t afford to let their one viable lead slip away, not when he
had her in his sights.

Sirius had always been a bit too brash for everyone’s liking. He’d been told countless times by his
superiors that he needed to think things through more, understand consequences, rein in his tenacity.
He’d agree to their faces and then continue to do whatever the hell he wanted in the field.

Despite the numerous slaps on the wrists he always managed to bounce back from whatever ledge he
jumped off. It wasn’t until James and Lily died that he made a concerted effort to be more
responsible, weigh decisions more rationally, avoid overly dangerous situations.

For Harry’s sake.

He and Remus were all the boy had left at the time, all he had even now. Sirius refused to leave the
boy alone in the world, discarded and lost. He knew what that felt like first hand, and would never
allow James’s son to know it as well.

It had been sixteen years since he lost his best friends in the course of a weekend, since his world
was shattered and reformed, a grotesque mockery of what it once was, a daily reminder of all it could
never be.

But he still had Harry, and that’s what got him through the depression, the anger, the confusion.
Harry was a beacon of light that guided him through his darkest hours, he owed the kid everything.
And he was so goddamn proud of him, of all he accomplished despite the trauma of his youth.

Had he known what was happening at Lily’s sister’s house he would have kicked the door down
and taken Harry back immediately, fuck the courts. But Harry had been careful to hide the bruises,
lie about the family dynamic. Sirius could tell something was off with the boy but he stupidly
chalked it up to depression following the loss of his parents, something Sirius was also experiencing.

He hated himself almost as much as the Dursley’s for not asking more questions, not being more
observant. He was a bloody Intelligence Officer for christ’s sake, and he missed the most important
clues to ever cross his path. He’d never forgive himself.

He remembered the day Harry approached him with trembling limbs, apprehension radiating from
every pore, asking Sirius if he could move in for good. He already spent the entirety of his summers
at his house, the majority of his holiday breaks as well. But the custody arrangement required Harry
live during the school year with his aunt and uncle.

The request was benign enough, but the way in which it was delivered, the way Harry couldn’t bear
to meet his eye, everything clicked into place, all at once. And Sirius knew, knew with absolute and horrifying certainty, that Harry was being abused.

He regretted the events that followed. He regretted them because he knew he should regret them, but he didn’t, he savored the memory and he knew that made him a terrible person and even worse role model, but he couldn’t for the life of him muster two fucks.

After Harry had admitted to the abuse, revealed the bruises, the scar along his arm he kept carefully hidden by his sleeve, Sirius had saw red. Pure, viscous, molten red. He blinked and suddenly he was storming out of the house with his keys in hand. He blinked again and he was driving like a maniac along the streets with only one destination in mind. Another blink and he was charging up the Dursleys driveway.

The following moments were like flashes in the dark, a few seconds of clarity followed by a consuming blackness. He was banging on the front door, shouting through the wood. Then he was throwing a brick through the front window, climbing through the frame, charging across the living room, dodging a swinging fist, holding Vernon by the neck, choking the life from him, his round, red face turning blue, eyes bulging, veins popping, Petunia screaming, beating him on the back, Dudley yelling from upstairs.

The police came, Sirius was put in cuffs, Remus picked him up at the station, not saying a word the entire drive home, but his eyes spoke volumes, making Sirius bristle with shame and anger. Dumbledore had pulled some strings to get Sirius released, and had assisted with getting the courts to amend the custody agreement. Charges were never pressed against Sirius for the attack or the Dursleys for child abuse. It was a draw that Sirius still felt sick about but was willing to move past because it allowed him to keep Harry year round.

It also put him further in Dumbledore’s debt, as much as his former mentor assured Sirius that wasn’t the case, that he expected nothing in return. Sirius knew the man well enough by that point to know Dumbledore’s help was a double edged sword. The man’s selfless acts of kindness had a way of sneaking up on you later, when he tapped you for a favor years down the line. He never mentioned a debt, but you felt guilty, obligated, knowing that you owed him and he was there to unofficially collect.

Which is why he wanted Harry as far from the man as possible. He’d tried so hard to keep their paths separate while working at the Ministry. And low and behold, fast forward a few years and Harry was reporting directly to him, without even the benefit of having Sirius as a buffer.

Sirius didn’t know how to articulate his concerns regarding Dumbledore without sounding like an ungrateful arse. When Harry pushed for details he thought it better to avoid the topic altogether, seeing no benefit in poisoning the waters between Harry and his new boss. As much as Sirius loathed the situation, they needed the man’s help, his support, and it was best to keep the past separate from the present.

Still, Sirius wanted to solve this case as soon as possible, allowing Harry to cut ties with Dumbledore and move forward. And after solving this case the Ministry was sure to reconsider their brash decision to fire Harry. Sirius wanted nothing but great things for him, and he still felt responsible for the way Harry was dismissed, for not providing better guidance, just as he still felt guilty for not noticing the abuse sooner, for not protecting him better.

So now, Sirius followed this mysterious stranger through the city streets with unwavering focus, single minded determination, because somehow he knew capturing her would be a salve for all their wounds.
He quickened his pace as she rounded another corner, disappearing from sight. He rounded the same corner a moment later, holding his breath, braced for impact, and released it upon seeing her several yards ahead, walking between a gathered crowd waiting outside a nightclub.

The muffled, thumping bass made his body vibrate as he stood at the top of the street, watching her approach the entrance. She skipped the line entirely, walking to the front door. Sirius thought she was about to head straight in when the bouncer held up a staying hand, stopping her in her tracks.

Sirius started heading down, grinding his teeth in agitation when the bouncer gave her a thorough once over and then opened the velvet rope, allowing her entry. Others in the line grumbled their disappointment, one woman in a tight mini skirt waved her arms around quite animatedly before a word from the bouncer silenced her. Sirius approached the man, wishing like hell he still had his badge.

The bouncer cut him off at the pass.

“Rückseite der Linie… back of line,” the hulkish man said in broken english, pointing to said line which wrapped halfway around the building.

“I’m with British Intelligence, MI6,” Sirius said in his most authoritative voice. “I’m pursuing a suspect wanted for multiple homicide, let me through.”

The bouncer didn’t so much as blink. “Back. Of. Line.”

Sirius sighed, weighing his options. It had been a long time since he’d been without the benefit of his badge and position. Still, there had been plenty of occasions in his youth when opposing forces didn’t respect the badge or position. Sirius’s standby response had always been brute force, throwing the first and last punch.

But violence didn’t seem to be the answer here. One, this man looked like he ate rocks and falcon eggs for breakfast, and two, Sirius was just as likely to get arrested when the actual authorities showed up. And with his stellar luck it was sure to be Dawlish leading the brigade.

So, with great annoyance and reluctance, Sirius stepped back and headed for the end of the line, pulling his phone from his pocket as he went.

“Harry, it’s me again. Christ, if you’re bound and gagged then you’re having a slightly more exciting evening than I am, but it’s a close match. I followed La Femme Nikita to some night club down by the river.” He craned his neck to read the neon sign hanging over head.

“Das Magische Haus,” he repeated slowly, smiling. “The Magic House. Excellent. Hopefully she doesn’t perform a trick and disappear. I’m stuck in the line, apparently my roguish good looks can’t compete with hair gel and a mesh tank top. I’ll call you when I get eyes on her again. Over and out.”

He hung up the phone with a sigh.

Damn. He’d hoped the kid would answer this time.

But he shouldn’t have been surprised, when Harry set his mind to something nothing deterred his focus, and he was determined to shake answers out of Karkaroff. Sirius could only imagine what was transpiring in the restaurant between him and the mad Russian.

He smirked, knowing Harry was probably giving the man hell. Not for the first time he thought about how proud he was of the boy, of the man he had become, really no thanks to Sirius. Harry practically raised himself.
I should tell him that. How proud I am. I don’t say it enough.

He watched the line inch along at a snail’s pace, groaning in agitation. At this rate the mystery woman would have plenty of time to give him the slip and walk to Germany. He shook his head at the thought.

Somehow he knew she wouldn’t be going anywhere.

Somehow he knew she was still inside.

Waiting patiently.

Harry gazed at the ring box for several long beats before glancing up.

“What the hell is that?”

Karkaroff grinned, leaning forward. “Open it and see.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t have time for whatever game this is.” And started to stand once more.

“You were right. Someone fiddled with the facts. Disregarded evidence. But it wasn’t us.”

Harry sighed in frustration, once more stopping mid retreat. He waited for Karkaroff to continue, still poised to leave.

“Unless I want to anger my superiors and lose my job I can’t take this any further. You on the other hand…”

Harry finally relented, spinning around and facing forward.

Karkaroff folded his hands beneath his chin, elbows propped on the table, eyes glittering. “What I am about to tell you cannot be repeated, if word gets back to my bosses-”

“You have my word.”

Karkaroff held his gaze for a long moment before nodding. “I believe you. And I trust Sirius.” He sighed, eyes roaming Harry’s face for a moment before locking with his eyes.

“Yaxley had been working with us, I can’t divulge the details of the arrangement because I’m not privy to them. But it involved top level security, so whoever he was turning over on must be a pretty big fucking deal. You know the kind of work Yaxley did?”

Harry shrugged. “Not in detail. I only know he was a financial advisor, whatever that entails.”

“It entails knowing the coming and going of money for several multi million dollar corporations as well as private individuals.”

Harry swallowed, his mind firing to Draco, wondering if Yaxley handled the financial information for Malfoy Enterprises.

Is there a connection? A common thread between Yaxley and Lucius’s murders?

He pushed the thoughts aside, focusing on the present as Karkaroff continued.

“The Russian agent Yaxley was working with, Belikov, is also dead.”
Harry blinked, sitting up straighter. Karkaroff sighed, “Two days ago. A blatant homicide that’s also
being swept under the rug to conceal any ties to collusion. They don’t want to make enemies of
whoever Yaxley was tied to.”

Harry drew in a slow breath, thoughts spinning. Before he could think of what question to start with
the other man smirked, leaning closer.

“I was able to get my hands on more than just the autopsy report.” Karkaroff nodded to the box,
sitting forgotten on the table. “I’m in possession of the last piece of evidence Yaxley turned over to
his Russian contact.”

Harry felt a bolt of electricity seize him, animate his limbs, he wasted no time reaching forward and
flipping the lid, heart skipping a beat at the contents within.

A silver thumb drive, glinting in the light.

“Belikov’s office was turned upside down. Someone was looking for that. They didn’t know he’d
already dropped the thumb drive to me the day before for safe keeping.”

Harry glanced up sharply. “That’s what has you on edge? You think the killer is after you, too?”

Karkaroff smirked, tipping his head. “Considering Yaxley is also dead, I think I have just cause to be
a bit skittish. As of this moment no one knows that Belikov gave me the thumb drive, no one but
you. And now you have it. So the way I see it, you’re the one the killer will be after.”

Harry held his gaze, eyes intense. “You didn’t show this to anyone else in your office?”

“My government wants to drop the investigation, cutting all ties to Yaxley. They will pursue this no
further, and would only destroy the contents of the thumb drive. I, on the other hand, would like to
see justice for my associate, my friend, and I will sleep easier knowing the person who wants this
information enough to kill for it is no longer prowling the streets. The only way for you to have this
information free and clear is if no one else knows it exists.”

Harry blinked, glancing down as the thumb drive and running his fingers along the casing. “Did you
look at it?”

Karkaroff laughed, though it was without humor. “I admit I am a weak man, unable to resist
temptation, and curiosity is the greatest form of temptation there is, is it not?”

“Is that a yes?”

Karkaroff sighed. “I glanced at it. Though I didn’t understand the majority of what I was looking at.
But there were a few highlighted items that caught my attention. I think they’ll catch yours, as well.”

Harry inhaled sharply, bouncing in his seat, desperately wishing he could plug the thumb drive into a
computer and start looking through the contents now. Karkaroff tipped his head, watching with
amusement. “I knew this would excite you. No regard whatsoever for your own safety. So much like
Sirius, and your father.”

Harry blinked, glancing up from the box and searching the Russian’s face with open hunger,
desperate to draw out more information. Karkaroff was right. Curiosity really was the greatest form
of temptation there was.

Karkaroff smiled, his teeth appearing sharper than moments before. “If you want to know, you need
only ask.”
Harry took a deep breath, leaning forward and opening his mouth to respond, when his phone buzzed a second time. He snapped his jaw shut, rearing back and fumbling for the device, missing the look of irritation that crossed the other man’s face at the interruption.

Harry swallowed upon seeing Sirius’s name flash across the screen yet again.

“Shite, I need to get this-”

“Don’t you want to know about your father?”

Harry looked up, eyes wide. “Of course-”

His phone beeped, displaying two new voicemails from his mentor.

“Come now, Harry,” Karkaroff prompted, desperate for his attention. “You’ll be seeing Sirius after this, surely he can go an hour without your company?”

Harry blinked, hand gripping his phone tightly. Then it beeped anew, the alert sound different this time. A text message. It glowed brightly in the center of the screen.

**CALL ME**

He shook his head, glancing up. “I’m sorry, Karkaroff, this is important.”

The Russian sighed, leaning back in defeat as Harry rose from his chair, heading for the hallway as he dialed Sirius’s number.

The phone rang once, twice, and then there was a beat of silence followed by a burst of thumping bass so deafening Harry had to hold the phone away from his ear, cringing.

“Harry!” He heard his name vaguely shouted through the commotion.

“Sirius? What the hell is that noise? Are you at the pub?”

“No, I’m at the magic house!”

“The what?”

“The magic- nevermind! I’m about to get in, listen to your voicemails, alright?”

“You’re headed into a club?”

“Get a cab and get down here!”

“Sirius what are you-”

“I’ll text you when I find her!”

“Find who?”

And then the line was dead. Harry stared at his phone in a dumbfounded stupor for several beats before blinking, shaking his head and dialing his voice mailbox. He was halfway through listening to the first message before he was rolling his eyes and groaning.

“Sirius, you dumb shite.”

He marched back to the dining room and pinned Karkaroff with the full force of his frustration.
“What’s happened?”

“Sirius is being a bloody idiot, I need to go save him from himself.”

“Sounds about right.”

“I’ll have to end our evening here, I’m afraid. But thank you for entrusting me with this,” Harry said as he scooped up the box, tucking it into his pocket. Karkaroff sighed dramatically, a smirk playing at his lips.

“Perhaps you can show your appreciation by having a drink with me before you leave Vienna.”

Harry shook his head in exasperation, laughing despite himself. “You are determined, I’ll give you that.”

Karkaroff smiled innocently. “I merely want to wish you safe travels.”

“You’ll have to do that here then. You said it yourself, it’s best if we aren’t seen together. Especially while I’m in possession of the thumb drive.”

The Russian nodded. “Very well. I am able to recognize a losing battle when I see it. I bid you farewell, Harry Potter.”

Harry smiled, letting a bit of genuine appreciation shine through. “Farewell, Igor.”

Karkaroff’s delighted laughter followed him out of the room.

Bella weaved between a throng of dancers gyrating along the dance floor.

She kept one eye on the entrance of the club, wetting her lips with anticipation.

She’d been thoroughly shocked when the Fox had snapped its jaws around her arm at the metro station, not expecting such a bold move. It had been her own fault, to be certain, being as distracted as she was by the pretty little Lamb waiting to board the train. She’d been so keen on following the lad she’d forgotten about the older gentleman at her back. She thought she had blended deep enough in the crowd to render her invisible.

Alas, the Fox showed cunning prowess. It thrilled her to no end. She left the station immediately, telling herself she’d be a good girl, would follow Green’s orders and leave them be.

Unless the Fox followed.

If he followed her, then what choice did she have but to set a foxtrap? Surely Green would understand. Afterall, the man saw her face, her true face at that, if only for a moment, and the Lamb had seen Tom’s. Together is was a powerful combination that would simply not do. Green would tell her to take care of the problem. She knew he would.

Still, she didn’t bother calling her handler. Better to act now and beg forgiveness later. She was so very good at begging. Almost as good as she was at making others beg.

She sidled up to the far wall, flashing lights, booming bass and stale sweat overloading her senses. She posted her back against the black bricks, her dark clothing rendering her practically invisible.

That is until a pretty young thing stumbled back on stiletto heels, crashing right into the spider’s nest. Bella’s lightning reflexes allowed her to catch the flailing girl before she hit the floor. Her pupils
dilated as she helped steady her. The girl was delectable, skin a rich, burnt umber, hair wild and lustrous. Her eyes were lost, glazed as she peered around, widening when they landed on her savior.

“Oh! I’m so sorry!”

Bella smiled. “No worries, luv. You managed to make falling on your arse look sexy.”

The girl blinked, then her face cracked open to unleash a delighted laugh, her intoxication showing around the edges as she rocked unsteadily on her feet. Bella’s hand was still clamped around her upper arm, similar to the manner in which the fox had grabbed her earlier. Bella was the predator again, back in familiar territory, the thought comforted her.

“Who are you here with?”

The girl blinked again, face showing her confusion before she shrugged lightly, glancing about and then pointing to a random corner of the club.

“I came with my friends.”

Bella’s eyes never left the pretty doe. “Who were you dancing with?”

The girl giggled, obviously perplexed by the questions but too tipsy to resist answering. “Some bloke with a blue shirt…”

Sure enough, the man in question appeared at the edge of the dance floor, watching the exchange with hungry eyes, no doubt thinking he’d just hit the jackpot and was going to be taking two beautiful women home tonight. Bella’s smile widened, fangs descending. The man blinked, stumbling on his feet.

“That simply won’t do.”

The girl spun around, brow raised. “I’m sorry?”

Bella laughed, deep and melodic, leaning in to whisper in the girl’s ear.

“You’re far too beautiful for that idiot. I have a little business to take care of, when I’m done I’ll find you.”

The doe blinked rapidly, brows pinched. Bella pulled back enough to pin her with a smoldering look that made her gasp, wetting her lips on instinct.

“I- I’m not… I’m not- I don’t like women…” she trailed off helplessly, lost to the heat of the wolf’s gaze.

Bella smirked. “Of course not, poppet. Who does? Women are unequivocally awful. Almost as bad as men.”

The girl shook her head, brows pinched, but let out a nervous laugh all the same, going along with the joke, then fell deathly still as Bella leaned in and planted a kiss on her full, sweet lips.

A few moments later she pulled back to whisper hotly against her mouth. “I’ll still make you cum harder than any bloke who came before me.”

The doe sputtered and blinked, then fell silent and leaned in to kiss Bella once more. Past her wild hair Bella saw a familiar face enter the club at last.
The Fox had arrived.

The Wolf was eager to play.

She broke the kiss, tongue retreating from the honey filled cavern of the doe’s wet little mouth, and ran her fingertips along its pretty face. “Don’t go far, sweet one, I’ll be back soon.”

The girl blinked heavy lidded eyes and nodded, trapped in a trance, watching the wolf saunter away.

Bella couldn’t contain her excitement. First her dinner had followed her home, and then dessert had stumbled so innocently into her path. The universe was finally paying her back for all the shite it dealt her for years.

She kept to the perimeter of the building, watching the fox stand on tiptoes, peering as far out over the sea of bodies as he could, searching searching searching…

**Should I make it easy for him?**

She tilted her head, watching.

**No… This one wants to play, so we’ll play.**

She felt a bolt of electricity steal up her spine as the DJ started a new song, the music radiating the walls and shaking the floor. She listened for several seconds and started to laugh hysterically when she realized it was the same tune she’d been humming earlier.

The universe really was paying her back, sending her yet another sign.

This was going to be a night to remember.

She liked this fox, the challenge he presented, his boldness in trailing her so openly through the city. He knew she’d be waiting for him. They were one in the same, both hunters, both equipped with fang and claw. But this one possessed a keen mind, was a strategizer as well as a fighter, a worthy opponent. It had been ages since she’d faced someone worth her time and effort.

She almost regretted what had to be done. His cheekbones stood out beautifully beneath the colorful flashing lights. His expression illuminated in blue, then violet, then red. A handsome man, what a shame she wouldn’t get the opportunity to see him come undone beneath her.

Still, she’d get her fix. She would unravel him, one way or another.

He moved agily through the crowd, narrowed eyes bouncing off one face to the next. It was fascinating watching someone look for her. She licked her lips with anticipation as his face slowly turned in her direction.

She could have hidden, had plenty of time to duck for cover. But she stayed out in the open, allowing the beam of rotating light to cross her form entirely, bringing her face into stunning clarity, allowing his eyes to fall upon her, laser focus honing onto her location.

He stood stock still, body frozen, muscles tense, eyes locked with hers. She tipped her head and grinned, malevolent and perversely beautiful. His jaw ticked, expression darkening, and surged forward, pushing against the cluster of dancers to cut a path to her.

She threw her head back and laughed, her heart adopting the rhythm of the song, her song, and watched him slowly make his way across the packed floor.
She was tired of waiting, she wanted him now, wanted to dance with him before the music ended. She leapt away from the wall and landed in a deft pounce, tail swishing back and forth, ears tipped back, teeth bared in anticipation, and started making her way towards him.

The beat picked up, bass pounding a war march as they neared, closer, closer, closer-

The light show exploded overhead as the chorus began, song peaking, the strobe beams firing rapidly in every direction, like gunshots illuminating the night. The smoke blasters roared to life, filling the club with a shimmering fog that caused the crowd to scream with excitement, bodies surging harder, faster. Bella lost sight of the fox for a heart pounding moment, but then the cloud of fog dissipated and he was right there.

Standing right in front of her.

The wolf pounced, the fox darted, teeth and claws bared, snarling beneath the bright moon. The animals surrounding them were oblivious to the danger at their backs, the battle of beasts happening in the center of the forest.

Bella swung at his face with her blade carefully concealed in her palm. He caught the glint of light on metal and caught her wrist, reflexes impressively fast. She laughed with chaotic joy and spun deftly, he lost his grip but quickly recovered by driving his elbow into her side, making her gasp sharply in pain and tip on her heels, barely able to keep her balance.

She watched him with narrowed eyes, jumping back in and slashing low, drawing his focus to her blade wielding hand, just as she’d intended. She quickly wrapped her other hand around his neck, pulling in close like a lover whispering a secret, and used his large frame as a counter weight as she hung off him.

He leaned over slightly with the force of her pull, arms reaching to push her away, but not before she jammed her knee sharply upward and into his diaphragm. The air left him in a sharp whoosh as the sound of cracking ribs filled her ears, close as she was. Her momentum drove the bone backwards to stab into his organs and the sensitive bundle of nerves in his solar plexus, making him buckle in pain.

She stepped back, smiling victoriously, then blinked in surprise as he slowly unfurled, face taught with obvious pain but determination glinting in his eyes. She was impressed, that move usually crippled men twice his size.

His breaths were labored, short, and looked to be excruciating. She’d collapsed one of his lungs. But he held his ground, eyes tracking her movements with careful calculation.

She licked her lips, flipping the blade between her fingers, the music crested and washed over them as the smoke machines once more burst to life, expelling a thick cloud overhead, dancers leaping into the air with outstretched hands as if to touch it. The battling predators charged head long at the same time.

She fainted left, threw the swing of her body into the motion, but used her tight core to maintain her balance as she veered right at the last moment. The change in direction threw him, he tried to recover but his injury slowed his movements. She swung with the knife and felt a satisfying surge of adrenaline as the blade punctured skin and muscle, sliding deep and scraping bone.

He howled in pain, teeth bared, grabbing her wrist and twisting until she too screamed out, the joint popping beneath his iron grip. She staggered back, clutching the broken appendage as he slowly reached around and pulled the knife from his side, fingers wet with his own blood. He stared at the blade for a long moment before throwing it down with a roar, charging her with murder in his eyes.
She sucked in a breath, smiling obscenely, pain always made people act foolishly. It seemed even her clever fox wasn’t above this universal truth.

She twisted out of the way at the last moment, their altercation appearing no more than a well choreographed dance move, the people around them heedless of the chaos unfolding on the floor. The colored lights illuminated the blood running down his side, marring his fist as he swung at her. She twisted away, ducking down and grabbing her spare blade from her boot with her functioning hand.

As he spun around, blinking rapidly and struggling to breathe, she leapt on him with all four limbs, clutching him closely, swaying with him as he staggered back, bodies moving in time with the thumping beat and the dancing crowd. She held his gaze for several rapid heartbeats before leaning in kissing him.

He groaned, angry, rearing his head back and sliding his hands along her body to pry her off. She bit his lip, capturing it between her teeth as she pulled her head back, nipping the flesh and lapping at the blood.

“I had to do that at least once,” she said with a cheshire grin, relishing his look of shock and revulsion.

She threw her head back and cackled. The song came to an end. She glanced back down and drove the knife into his chest.

“Come on, you stupid wanker, answer the fucking phone…” Harry sighed in irritation, ending the call and throwing the phone down on the seat, causing it to bounce and fall to the floor boards in the back seat of the cab.

He groaned, leaning over and fishing for the plastic in the dark.

“We are here,” the cab driver announced, pulling to a stop along the curb.

Harry’s fingers curled around the phone as he leaned up, eyes darting out the window. The Magic House was in full force, a crowd of people milling around the outside waiting to get in, taking a smoke break or puking their guts out in the bushes.

He sighed, paying the driver and getting out. He hated night clubs. He was going to kill Sirius for making him venture into one after the day he’d had.

Still, he couldn’t help but feel a thrill of excitement as he quickly approached the doors, wondering if Sirius really found her. Their second assassin. He wet his lips, reaching for the handle when a strong hand clamped down on his shoulder, spinning him around.

“Where the fuck are you going?”

Harry blinked, gazing up at a huge man clad in all black with a plastic ear piece attached to the side of his head.

“I need to get inside immediately, it’s an emergency.”

“Is it now?”

“Look, I’m an MI6 agent and am in the middle of an investigation-”
“Wow, you’re my second one tonight. Must be some crazy sting operation you’re running, huh?”

Harry fought back a groan, sensing this man wasn’t going to be swayed. He knew Sirius was remanded to wait in the long line, but Harry used up what little patience he had remaining on Karkaroff already. Instead he reached into his back pocket, extracting his wallet.

“What will it cost to skip the line?”

“Isn’t it illegal for agents to bribe people?”

“It’s illegal for them to accept bribes. But it doesn’t matter as I’m not an agent.”

“I thought you just said-”

“How does twenty euro sound?”

The man laughed. “Like you’re a cheap bastard.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Fifty then.”

“Make it sixty.”

Harry pinned him with his most malevolent stare but fished the bills out all the same, handing them over and pointedly ignoring the cheeky wink the bouncer gave him as he opened the door.

Harry walked through the narrow hall that opened into the main building and stopped dead, senses overwhelmed by the scene inside. The club was beyond packed, surely this was a fire hazard. The lights were chaotic, seizure inducing, and the music was so loud he couldn’t hear himself think. Did kids really enjoy this kind of stuff?

Harry blinked.

Fucking hell. I did not just say that…

He’d turned into a ninety year old man at some point it seemed. He shook his head, skull vibrating with the bass and eyes narrowing, trying to make sense of the surging mess on the dance floor below. He made his way to the main stairs and slowly descended, craning his neck, searching, dodging elbows and pushing past sweaty bodies.

He briefly considered calling Sirius again but quickly dismissed the idea. There was no way the man would hear his phone ring in this mess, and he’d already tried calling multiple times in the cab. He sighed, taking in a mouthful of sour body odor, overly sweet perfume and smoke. The latter scent made him worry about the fire code again, but then a loud mechanical roar overhead cleared his thoughts, drawing his gaze upward, and a large plume of smoke filled the club.

Lovely.

Now he was battling the sea of raging bodies and a cloud of toxic nerve gas. He was at the base of the stairs when he finally caught sight of something familiar, a brief flash. He leaned into the railing and stood on his toes and finally saw Sirius. He was in the middle of the dance floor, face looking as pinched and annoyed as Harry felt. Harry blinked, it looked like a woman was touching Sirius’s chest, running a hand along his collar bone, but he blinked and she was gone, and Sirius turned to face the opposite direction.

Harry formed a megaphone with his hands, screaming the man’s name but to no avail. He rolled his
eyes and stepped down, cutting a path through the dancers to get to him. He furrowed his brows in confusion when he saw Sirius tip to the side, his head disappearing beneath the crowd.

Harry’s heart lurched in his chest. Something was wrong.

He couldn’t tell which sound was filling his ears, the thumping bass or the rush of his own blood, but whatever it was filled his head completely, drowning out coherent thought. He was rushing forward purely on adrenaline, unbridled panic. He angrily pushed people aside, earning shocked and outraged gasps. He ignored them, eyes searching desperately for-

Sirius appeared before him, ten feet ahead, clutching his chest, black liquid coating his hands and shirt, marring his neck. Harry blinked rapidly, the overhead lights changed color and the liquid turned red.

“Sirius!” He yelled at the top of his lungs, catching the man’s eye as Sirius fell to his knees.

Harry cut through the remaining bodies and toppled to the ground as well, reaching out and pulling the man toward him. He was saturated in blood, his body wracked with tremors, eyes wide and faded, the irises turning matte, just like Narcissa’s, just like his mother’s…

“No! No! Help! Call for help!” Harry screamed, glancing up desperately. A few dancers looked down at the scene with confusion, a couple with annoyance, no doubt thinking the men were in their way. The music drowned out Harry’s voice, it blended in with the rest of the screams and hollers filling the cramped venue.

Harry clutched at Sirius’s shirt, his hands wet, he glanced down and saw blood pouring from a gaping wound in his chest. He pressed his palm against it, blood continued to seep out from between his fingers. Harry shook his head desperately, pulling Sirius against him, attempting to stand, to drag him out of the club.

He only made it a couple feet before he lost his balance and toppled into a group of dancers, knocking a woman off her feet entirety. She gazed around in confusion and then saw the blood and let out a high pitched scream.

Now they were attracting attention, people started to point and gasp, backing away, forming a perfect circle around them.

“Help! Call for help!” Harry screamed. He watched a man fumble with his phone, but when he held it up he didn’t bring it to his ear, he held it out in front of him, recording video. Harry screamed in outrage, reaching for his own phone, the wet blood making him lose his grip. The phone fell onto the black floor, lost to shadows, he scrambled to find it, Sirius wheezing breaths blowing into his face.

“Hang on!” Harry shouted, tears dripping off his jaw, landing and mixing in the river of blood still pouring out.

He managed to pick up his phone and then sat frozen, horrified, realizing he didn’t know the emergency number in Vienna. He glanced around desperately and saw that the woman they crashed into moments before was still standing nearby, watching the scene in horror, wet blood smeared across her bare calf. Harry reached out lightning fast and caught her wrist, pulling her in. She screamed and tugged desperately to free herself but Harry tugged harder, pulling her onto the ground beside him.

“Emergency!” He screamed in her face, “Dial the police! Polizei!” He forcefully shoved his phone in her hands while she looked at him with wide terrified eyes. He leaned closer to repeat his command
but she quickly nodded and started to dial with trembling fingers. Harry nodded, satisfied she understood, and turned away, gazing down at Sirius.

“Sirius, hang on! Help is coming!”

His godfather locked eyes with him, his mouth opening and closing, his throat working but Harry couldn’t hear anything beyond the deafening music. He leaned down, placing his ear next to the man’s pale lips.

“H-Harry…”

Harry nodded, clutching a handful of Sirius’s wet shirt with one hand and pressing against the wound with the other. “I’m here! I’m here!”

“Harry… my b-boy….” his voice was barely above a whisper but it became the only sound in the universe. “I’m s-so… p-proud of you…”

Harry blinked, tears dropping faster, clouding his vision. He pulled up, shaking his head like a madman.

“No! You’re not dying! You’re going to be fine! Hang on! You hear me? Hang on!”

He swallowed when he felt Sirius cold hand slide over his own, fingers squeezing, his signature smirk playing at his lips, still appearing roguish despite his waxen complexion.

“Since w-when… do I take… orders f-from you?” He attempted to laugh but started to cough up blood instead, his body seizing in Harry’s grasp.

“Don’t!” Harry screamed, voice breaking. He pulled his convulsing body closer, cradling his large frame against his chest. “Don’t you fucking leave me! Please! Please don’t leave me, Sirius…”

The music continued to play on, rattling the walls while Harry’s own body shook with broken sobs. He squeezed his eyes shut, unable to watch his best friend and substitute father bleed out before him. But he heard each broken, gurgling breath, felt each stuttering heartbeat beneath his palm, and as they both slowed Harry forced his eyes open.

Forced himself to witness. To remain present.

He clutched Sirius’s hand and held his gaze as his blood and life slipped away.
La Femme Nikita

A/N: Hello my marshmallow lucky charms! TGIUD!! I’m honored you’re still following this story. Thank you so much for your continued support.

So… I started another Tomione fic, because I’m a glutton for punishment and a steaming trash heap when it comes to the pairing. But this one is also Dramione, because I’m a steaming trash heap for that pairing as well, and figured I’d shovel the trash heaps into one big pile and bask in it. If you’d like to lounge in the trash with me there’s plenty of room, just check out my profile page.

Anywho…

Enjoy.

Friday July 15, 2005

“Harry, it’s me again. Christ, if you’re bound and gagged then you’re having a slightly more exciting evening than I am, but it’s a close match. I followed La Femme Nikita to some night club down by the river. Das Magische Haus... The Magic House. Excellent. Hopefully she doesn’t perform a trick and disappear. I’m stuck in the line, apparently my roguish good looks can’t compete with hair gel and a mesh tank top. I’ll call you when I get eyes on her again. Over and out.”

Beep.

“Harry, it’s me again. Christ, if you’re bound and gagged then you’re having a slightly more exciting evening than I am, but it’s a close match-”

Beep.

“Harry, it’s me again-”

Beep.

“Harry, it’s me again-”

Beep.

“Harry-”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize anyone was in here…”

Harry glanced up from his phone, blinking, dazed. He studied the woman standing in the doorway, his brain processing information at half speed. She raised a brow, taking an unsteady step back.

“I can come back later-”

“No.” Harry’s voice sounded strained and weak from screaming his lungs out at the club several hours earlier, followed by prolonged disuse. He cleared his throat, cringing at the raw feel.

“No,” he repeated, more steady. “It’s okay, come in.”
She nodded, smiling timidly, and entered the room, crossing the floor to the stack of monitors beside the bed.

“And how is our patient doing?”

Harry rubbed a hand over his face, stifling a groan as he adjusted on the plastic chair. “Same as last time, at least I don’t see any difference.”

She glanced down at the pale figure laid out beside her, face partially obscured by a breathing tube, chest swaddled in thick bandages, arms bare and limp at his sides.

“That’s a good thing. He’s stable.”

“He’s in a coma.”

“It’s medically induced,” she said, pressing a button on a random machine, inspecting the message on the screen, then glancing at him with sympathetic eyes.

“So he’ll wake up once they take him off the drugs?”

She glanced away. “He suffered cerebral ischemia from the blood loss, the coma is meant to prevent his brain from trying to minimize blood flow further.”

Harry sighed, noticing how she sidestepped his actual question. “So there’s no guarantee he isn’t already in a coma without the drugs?”

She opened the top shelf of a nearby cart and grabbed a few items. “You should ask his doctor for more details regarding his condition, I only know what I read on the chart so-”

“Just tell me... is he out of the woods?”

She smiled. It looked strained. “His surgery was a success, they repaired the damage to his pulmonary artery. And he’s showing increased brain activity. Those are all great signs.”

Harry swallowed, holding her gaze. “But will he wake up?”

She glanced to Sirius and then to Harry. “We can’t know for certain, but right now it’s looking positive. And with the support of his loved ones and prayer anything is-”

“Thank you.”

Harry glanced away, missing the dejected look that crossed her expression as Harry cut her off. He appreciated her kind words, but he wasn’t in the mood to discuss faith and prayer. He was rather at odds with god, had been for a very long time. And if he lost Sirius… well, as far as Harry was concerned, the man upstairs had a lot to answer for.

He sighed as she quickly left the room, leaving the door ajar behind her. He reached out and squeezed his mentor’s hand. The flesh felt cool and clammy, the skin still a waxen yellow. The blood transfusions had helped restore it from a cool grey. Harry would never forget the image Sirius painted on the floor of the club, bloodless and limp, head lolled back and eyes closed.

He was convinced he was already dead by the time the paramedics arrived, the music cut short and dance floor cleared as the entire venue was shut down and labeled a crime scene. When they’d announced there was still a heartbeat, albeit incredibly faint, Harry had been boneless with relief. He’d somehow managed to walk to the reporting officer’s car as they followed the ambulance to the
Sirius was rushed into surgery and had been touch and go for several hours. Harry had been remanded to pacing the waiting room, it looked identical to the one he’d sat in as a boy, waiting for Sirius to pick him up following his mother’s death. It was surreal and fucked with his mental state even further.

But finally the surgeon had emerged, crimson blood smearing his scrubs, and had informed Harry that his godfather was still alive and finally stable. But he was still being kept unconscious to avoid overtaxing his healing artery and lung. Harry practically sprinted to his recovery room, taking station at his side ever since, only venturing out twice, to call Dumbledore and Remus. He’d talked to both men while Sirius was in surgery, when he didn’t know if he’d live or die, and to his great shame Remus had been the one to comfort him.

He knew the man was falling apart inside, worried about losing his partner, but had held it together long enough to provide words of assurance to Harry. He felt guilty about that, and had been eager to share the good news with him following the surgery. Remus had burst into tears of relief and informed Harry he was waiting to board his flight to Vienna. Harry wasn’t surprised that Remus was on his way, but wasn’t expecting the news that Dumbledore was accompanying him. Harry wasn’t certain if the senior agent was making the trip out of concern for his former Officer and friend or because of the impact on the investigation, and truthfully, he didn’t want to know.

Harry decided he was better off keeping Dumbledore at a safe distance, maintaining a professional relationship and no more. He had nothing against the older man but something about the way Sirius interacted with him spoke volumes, despite the fact Sirius never told him anything directly. At the end of the day Harry trusted his mentor’s judgement above all others and if there was something that Sirius didn’t trust about Dumbledore, Harry figured he was better off keeping the man at arm’s length.

However thoughts of the senior agent hadn’t plagued Harry’s mind beyond the initial phone call to inform him of the situation. He had spent the last two hours sitting vigil and listening to Sirius’s voicemails from earlier that night on repeat. He had memorized each word by heart, and continued to play the messages solely to hear the voice on the other end.

He squeezed the man’s limp fingers with his own.

What the hell were you thinking, tailing her by yourself?

Harry shook his head. He wasn’t surprised, of course Sirius chased after the suspect alone. It was exactly the kind of thing he’d expect from him. It was exactly what Harry would have done if their positions were reversed.

And I’d be the one laid out at death’s door.

Harry sighed, shaking his head, filled to the brim with guilt and anger.

But mostly anger.

It was acid burning his throat, bubbling in his gut, turning his blood toxic. He replayed the nightclub scene over and over, as many times as he listened to the voicemails, until he too could picture every detail in his mind in perfect clarity. The only part he was murky on was the most vital and significant piece of information of the night.

The woman he’d seen Sirius standing with moments before his collapse.
The lights had been flashing so brightly, the music all but deafening, and his attention had been on his godfather, sparing the female figure only a passing glance. He squeezed his eyes shut, willing his brain to recall details, height, hair color, anything-

But all he saw when he replayed the moment in his mind was a blank face and a mannequin body, fuzzy around the edges, the entire image fading to dust the moment he tried to bring it into focus.

It was useless.

He knew nothing about her, the mysterious stranger, the lethal killer…

La Femme Nikita.

That’s what Sirius had called her on his last message. It stuck in Harry’s brain and now he couldn’t help but refer to her as Nikita in his head.

She thought she was clever, thought she was safe from his grasp. But he’d find her. He’d find out every last thing about her, from the name of her primary school to the last meal she ate before he kicked down the door of her lair.

And then he’d kill her.

He’d never felt such black bile fill his gut when thinking of another person. Not even the man who murdered Narcissa right under Harry’s nose had inspired such insurmountable hatred. Harry had been intent on finding the male assassin and bringing him to justice, following the letter of the law.

He harbored no such desires where the woman was concerned. She tried to take away the most important person in Harry’s life, an unforgivable crime that a lifetime in prison wouldn’t remedy. No, Harry had plans for her.

Big plans.

But first, he had to find the bitch.

“Knock knock.”

Harry’s eyes snapped up, narrowing at the familiar face peeking through the crack in the door.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Dawlish grinned, the look of pure delight marring his features making Harry’s fists clench.

“I was in the neighborhood, thought I’d stop by and see if I can finally collect on that bet. Seems he’s still a stubborn bastard, hanging on till the very end.”

“Get the fuck out of here before I break your neck.”

Harry’s voice sounded foreign to his own ears, filled with such dark malice he couldn’t recognize it. Dawlish stepped inside, holding his hands up in surrender, smile still splitting his face. “Relax, kid, I just wanted to pay my respects.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. Sirius called him kid, so did Remus from time to time. He couldn’t stomach hearing Dawlish refer to him in the same manner.

“You’ve made the obligatory visit, now leave.”
Dawlish continued to ignore the threatening presence poised to spring out of the chair, merely tucking his hands into his pockets and strolling casually to the foot of the bed, head tilted as he gazed upon the body atop with cool detachment.

“Looks like shite. Really did a number on him, huh? That’s what happens when old men venture into nightclubs, but Sirius could never accept that he wasn’t a spry young man anymore, could he?”

That did it.

Harry leapt out of his chair and pushed Dawlish away from the bed. “I said get the fuck out!”

Dawlish blinked, brows drawn, as though shocked Harry had placed a hand on him despite his many warnings. He fell into a defensive posture, which only served to rile Harry further. He’d spent the last five hours fantasizing about killing the hitwoman responsible for this mess, he was more than happy to use Dawlish as his outlet for all the pent up aggression and rage.

Harry grabbed the man by his lapels and threw him against the wall. Dawlish’s back knocked into a glove dispenser and ripped the plastic casing clear off, sending it crashing to the floor.

“Get off me you crazy fuck!”

“I told you to get out!”

Dawlish sent a knee into Harry’s gut, knocking the air from his lungs, but he was able roll away from the fist that came swinging past his head just in time. He caught the arm on its follow through and twisted, making Dawlish yelp sharply and buck away. Harry rolled with him while keeping his grip on the limb, forcing it behind the man’s back and shoving, pinning him face first into the wall and pressing his own weight against him.

Dawlish squawked like a bird, too outraged to form words.

“I said- Get. The. Fuck. Out.” Harry breathed menacingly into his ear.

“Oh my god, what’s going on here?”

Harry glanced to the door, emerald gaze landing on the nurse from earlier, her eyes and mouth wide with shock.

“I’m calling the police!”

“That won’t be necessary, my dear,” came a deep, steady voice from the hall. Harry blinked, frozen in a numb stupor as Dumbledore suddenly appeared in the doorway behind her. “The police have just arrived,” he opened his badge and held it aloft, face placid and eyes calm, even as he gazed upon the scene across the room.

“Oh… um…” the nurse trailed off, eyes flickering from the shiny badge to Dumbledore’s imposing height, then to the men still grappling in the corner.

“I’ll take over from here,” he continued, smiling serenely. “Thank you very much for your time, and I apologize for the inconvenience. The British Ministry will cover the expense of any damage caused to the room.”

She blinked several times, nodding, looking as dazed as Harry felt. “Alright then… I’ll leave you to it, I suppose. Please, call the nurse’s station if you need assistance.”
“Certainly.”

Dumbledore inclined his head as she walked past him, sending one last worried look over her shoulder. The senior agent stepped inside and closed the door at his back, gazing over at Harry with unmistakable amusement in his eyes.

“Harry, perhaps you could be so kind as to release John from the hammerlock you have applied to his person?”

Harry blinked, having nearly forgotten he had the other man pinned beneath him. He released his hold, stepping back several paces and shaking his head in disgust, both at Dawlish’s behavior and his own reaction to it. He was clearly out of sorts.

Dawlish spun around, straightening his jacket and glaring daggers. “You crazy son of a-”

“John, perhaps you could pardon Harry’s conduct in light of the situation? Though I am never a proponent of physical violence, I am certain his actions were not entirely unprovoked, would you agree?”

Dawlish opened and closed his mouth like a fish for several seconds, still stewing in his anger. Harry dismissed him, turning his attention back to Sirius, wondering not for the first time whether the man could hear what happened in his surroundings, feeling a swell of satisfaction knowing he’d have enjoyed listening to Harry wrestle Dawlish into submission.

“This is unacceptable, Albus, I-”

“Certainly, I agree. But I also find your presence here a surprising turn of events. I can’t help but wonder what your motivation is for visiting Sirius in the first place?”

Dawlish blinked, bristling at the change in topic. “I- I have every right to be here!”

Dumbledore smiled. “I never said otherwise. Only that I find it curious you’ve chosen to exercise that particular right-”

“Came to see if Sirius was still alive, wanted to rub my nose in it if he wasn’t,” Harry bit out angrily, retaking his seat by Sirius’s side.

“That’s a lie! I-”

A knock sounded at the door, loud and urgent. Dawlish fell silent, all three heads turning to watch the door open, a new face emerging.

“Remus!” Harry shot out of his chair once more, he started cutting a path towards the man on instinct but stopped short upon seeing his focus turn to the bed, expression stricken and devastating to Harry’s heart.

Harry swallowed, stepping away from the bed awkwardly as Remus stepped closer, grabbing Sirius’s and bringing it to his lips.

“Perhaps the three of us should allow these gentleman some privacy,” Dumbledore said softly, raising a beckoning hand towards Harry, who nodded and started walking towards the open door slowly.

“Rem…” he began, voice thick and strained. He didn’t know what to say, beyond the words they’d already exchanged over the phone. But he felt he needed to say something, somehow convey the
deep pain and fear that they both harbored for the man laying on the bed.

Remus looked up, locking watery eyes with Harry, holding his gaze in silence for several seconds before nodding once, acknowledging the message Harry was unable to articulate. Harry nodded in return, chest seizing painfully. Dumbledore placed a hand on his shoulder and continued to guide him out of the room.

Dawlish fixed Remus with a healthy sneer but otherwise remained silent on his way into the hallway, his only saving grace, otherwise Harry wouldn’t have hesitated to ram his head through the drywall. Once all three were outside Dumbledore gently shut the door, the beeping of machinery fading away, replaced by the buzz of conversation and footsteps filling the long hall.

“Well, I dare say you provided the nursing staff with hours worth of entertaining gossip,” Dumbledore said with a grin.

Harry wasn’t in the mood for casual banter. He pinned the senior agent with an annoyed look.

“Dawlish has no right to be here, I want him gone.”

The man in question scoffed loudly at his side. “You are in my jurisdiction, Potter! I have every right to visit the victim of a crime that occured in my city!”

Harry turned to face him, raising a brow. “So you’re acknowledging he was attacked? I thought you’d try to sweep it under the rug and say he tripped and fell on his own paring knife.”

Dawlish scowled, shoulders tensed. “You fucking little-”

“Gentlemen, please remember where you are. There are patients on the other sides of these walls trying to recover from serious ailments. Let’s take this conversation outside.”

Harry swallowed, taking a step back. “I have nothing more to say to this idiot. I can’t even call you an officer, the fact that you wear a badge is a travesty.”

Dawlish blinked, looking genuinely perplexed. “Where the hell is this coming from? I let you onto my crime scene, let you poke around the evidence, you should be grateful I-”

“Grateful! You’re willfully ignoring evidence to cover up three homicides! I don’t care how high up the order is coming from, the fact that you can-”

“What are you on about?”

Harry shook his head. “Un-fucking-believable, that you can stand there and pretend-”

“Harry!”

Harry stopped mid sentence, mouth still agape as he turned his focus to Dumbledore, standing tall and authoritative, face drawn, gaze sharp. “This conversation ends here and now. If you’d like to continue then we’ll step outside. The choice is yours. Make it. Now.”

Harry closed his mouth and sighed, feeling a presence at his back. He looked over his shoulder and saw several nurses standing at the end of the hall, gazing upon the men with trepidation. One held a walkie in her hand, obviously debating whether to use it, probably to summon security. He gazed forward once more, ignoring Dawlish.

“Let’s go outside.”
Dumbledore nodded. “A very wise decision.”

**Sunday March 7, 2004**

Hermione studied her reflection in the mirror.

The shadows under her eyes had deepened in color. It reminded her of the time Lavender had insisted on doing her makeup for a party Hermione was already reluctant to attend. The heavy smokey eye was dazzling and decidedly not her. She had fallen asleep on her couch before removing the dark shadow and mascara and during the night it had all migrated two inches down her face.

She had awoken to deep grey circles around her eyes and had laughed for a solid ten minutes, feeling more at ease imitating a raccoon than with the sultry smolder Lavender had painstakingly applied.

Her appearance now reminded her of that beauty mishap, only she didn’t feel like laughing. She hadn’t felt like laughing in a long time.

She flipped her hair to one side and shimmied the wet locks between the towel in her hands. The mirror was still fogged with the evidence of her long shower. She’d lingered beneath the hot spray much longer than it took to wash, shampoo and condition. She’d started taking longer and longer showers these days. When Victor asked her what she did in there with a cheeky wink she’d laugh and told him she used that time to unwind and clear her mind, making use of the seclusion and quiet. It was half true.

The truth was she drew out her time behind the curtain to hide. But she certainly couldn’t tell that to him.

What or who she was hiding from was unclear. Some days she wanted space from Victor, from his boundless love, his utter perfection. But most of the time she was hiding from herself. Her guilt. Her shame. Her endless shortcomings.

And most of all, her reflection.

She avoided mirrors like the plague, unable to look herself in the eye for more than a few moments, acknowledge the terrible person she’d become. But she was also a glutton for punishment, knowing she deserved the pain gazing upon her likeness induced. So she wiped away the steam from the glass and took in her reflection, her self loathing building and building with each passing second.

The door to the flat opened and closed, the sound of heavy footfalls and jingling keys echoing down the hall.

“Babe?”

She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. “In the bathroom!” she called back, fighting to keep her expression neutral.

“I passed the rental shop on the way home,” he said, voice nearing.

She opened her eyes, directing all her focus to drying her hair.

“Got that movie the guys have been going on about. Supposed to be a riot.”

She flipped her hair to the other side, resuming her towel work. “That’s great.”
She heard him down the hall and felt her heartbeat kick up a notch.

“You eat yet?”

He came to a stop outside the door, leaning on the frame, catching her eye in the mirror. She smiled. “Had some noodles for lunch. I’m still full.”

He mimicked her expression, though his smile lit up his entire face, eyes sparkling. “I don’t know how you do that. Eat one meal a day. I’m always starving.”

She shook her head. “You also burn about ten thousand calories, running around the field for hours on end. Looking through a microscope isn’t quite as physically demanding.”

He sighed, stepping into the bathroom and walking up behind her. She swallowed lightly, muscles tensing. He didn’t notice, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her back against him. He dipped his head down, smelling her hair. His smile widened. “If you want to burn more calories, I am happy to help.”

She rolled her eyes even as she laughed, gently pulling away, but pulling away nonetheless. His smile fell. “Everything okay?”

She glanced up quickly, catching his eye in the mirror. “Of course.”

She looked down, using the towel to mop up an invisible water stain in the sink. He reached out to touch her hip but stopped with his hand hovering in midair. Slowly he let his arm drop to his side.

“I missed you today.”

She blinked rapidly, taking a slow breath in. “I missed you, too.”

He watched her work in silence. The air felt thick, heavy and oppressive, it became difficult to breathe in, to see through. She wiped harder at the spotless vanity, eyes narrowed on an invisible spot, determination coursing through her. She just didn’t know what she was determined to do.

“Mione…”

His voice sounded so forlorn, so dejected, it made her chest ache and her hands tremble. She kept her face averted down, pretending not to hear him, incapable of facing her own reflection and the object of her neglect so close together.

“Luv, look at me.” He always made his demands sound like a request, always gave her the choice, so unlike…

She gasped, closing her eyes and dropping the towel to her feet.

“What’s the matter?” He gently spun her around in the narrow room, hands lingering on her waist but not touching her otherwise, his face only centimeters away. “Please talk to me.”

She shook her head, deeply ashamed. She opened her mouth but only a miserable squeak emitted. She turned red, burying her face in his chest, desperate to hide, even if that meant hiding in him.

He didn’t hesitate to wrap his arms around her, rubbing soothing patterns on her back. “It’s alright, luv, whatever it is, it’s going to alright. Tell me what’s happened, let me help you, please.”

She cried, surrendering to her emotions, unable to keep them tamped down any longer. He muttered
gentle sounds in her ear, holding her, waiting patiently for the storm to roll through. She hated herself more for subjecting him to such a sight, a pathetic break down.

She was a terrible person. A terrible liar. A terrible girlfriend. She didn’t deserve him. She was broken, defective, incapable of a normal relationship, normal love. Healthy love. And she was destroying Victor in her attempt to pretend otherwise.

She’d had a revelation on the school campus two weeks ago, when she thought she’d spotted… Him… standing beneath that tree. Up until that point she’d thought she was finally better, finally healed and ready to move on. She was prepared to give all of herself to Victor, she desperately wanted to be the girl he thought she was.

But in the space of an instant all those hopes and dreams had been shattered beyond repair. The seed of doubt was once more planted deep in her psyche, roots sprouting down down down and wrapping around her heart, pumping toxic chemicals into her veins with every beat.

She learned that day that she wasn’t over Him. She would never be over Him. Because she was weak, pathetic, damaged. He’d broken her and reformed her in his image, to his own specifications, and she was incapable of remolding herself. She’d never be the girl Victor wanted, deserved. And continuing to linger in his presence was selfish and cruel.

But she didn’t want to go. Didn’t want to face the empty walls of her own flat, the empty walls of her own life, the crippling loneliness that followed her like a black cloud everywhere she went. Each day she told herself this was it, this was the day she’d tell Victor the truth, that she’d do the right thing and set him free. But each night she found a million reasons to justify her staying, always promising herself it was just one more day. Just one more.

But Victor was observant, a doting boyfriend. He noticed something was off with her since she returned from campus that first day. She’d skirted the issue as much as she could, making up excuses when she couldn’t avoid the subject any further. Worry about class and course load was always an easy fallback, effortlessly digestible. At least up until this point.

But now she suspected Victor wasn’t going to accept her old standby responses. He knew something was fundamentally wrong, and he wouldn’t settle until she told him what it was. She struggled to find her breath, mind racing, trying desperately to think up some valid excuse for why she was having a melt down in the bathroom.

Her mind wouldn’t cooperate, her emotions too turbulent.

*Tell him the truth.*

She blinked, taken aback by the sound of her own voice in her head. The traitorous thought had popped up before, several times a day actually, but never had it sounded so appealing.

She was so tired of lying. So tired of burying the root of her pain and anxiety. She wondered if releasing the knowledge would set her free.

It was worth a shot. The worst case scenario was that Victor turned her away afterwards, demanded she get out of his life, which was what she’d been meaning to do for the last two weeks, so really, what could it hurt?

She slowly leaned away from him, gazing up with wide, tearful eyes.

“I… I need to tell you something.”
Victor watched her steadily, nodding slowly, sensing the magnitude of this moment.

“You can tell me anything.”

The sincerity in his voice only pained her further.

“I told you about my time at the orphanage…”

He was still as a statue. She swallowed.

“And I told you about Carmen…”

She pressed a hand to his chest, feeling the steady thrum of his heartbeat beneath her fingers.

“But I didn’t tell you about the boy I grew up with.”

His heart rate increased. She briefly closed her eyes, taking a deep breath, opening her lids when she felt his arms tighten around her, just a fraction.

“Did…” his jaw ticked, eyes boring in her. “Did he hurt you?”

She blinked. “What? Oh. Oh! No, no it wasn’t- he didn’t- nothing happened. I mean, he didn’t hurt me, no,” she shook her head, thoughts scattering at the mere notion of Tom abusing her. “It was quite the opposite, he was my protector, he… well, he was my only friend. I didn’t even start talking to Carmen until after he left.”

Victor’s expression softened the moment she assured him she wasn’t victimized at the orphanage, but his eyes flashed as she continued to prattle on, unable to fully articulate the strange relationship she had with the jaded boy. But once the words started flowing she couldn’t get them to stop. She kept her eyes fastened to the swell of Victor’s adam apple as she spoke.

“We were… I guess we were friends? Sometimes it was hard to tell. He was very distant, very private, liked to be in control all the time. I was scared of him at first. But then he sort of took me under his wing, taught me things, how to survive at Wool’s, how to stand up for myself against the other children, how to navigate the streets. He was… all I had for a long time. After my parents died. I was so lonely, so desperate for companionship. He became the center of my world for a long time. And then he turned eighteen and left, and I sort of… broke.”

She blinked, sucking in a breath of air, finally working up the nerve to meet his gaze. His expression was unreadable, his eyes filled with some emotion she couldn’t place. It made her nervous. Her heart started to race faster, her palm trembling where it still rested on his chest. He unwound one of his arms from her back and placed his large hand over hers, flattening over his heart.

“I am so sorry that happened, Hermione.”

She opened her mouth but couldn’t think of a response, so she merely nodded instead, fresh tears brimming.

“That must have been so very difficult, losing the one person you trusted most, especially without any family left.”

She blinked, a heavy tear tracking down her cheek, falling from her jaw to his shirt, soaking into the fabric. She followed its path with her eyes, head tipping down. His hand caught beneath her chin, lifting her face back up to meet his eyes.
“I think no less of you for this. I am not upset you opened your heart to someone else. I would be more surprised had you never cared for another person before. Your heart is so big, so giving.”

She shook her head rapidly, shaking free of his hand and stepping back.

“You don’t understand, Victor, I loved him. I loved him with everything that I am and he destroyed me. I’m broken, truly and completely smashed to pieces. I’m not fit to be with you, with anyone. It isn’t fair to you. You deserve someone who’s whole, who can take care of you and give you all of herself. That isn’t me, that can never be me.”

He stepped forward and captured her arm in his hand, gaze sharp. “Hermione, you are not broken. You are heart broken. There is a difference. You are still you, incredibly caring and kind, brilliant and hard working, determined and stubborn, that is who you are. No person can take that away from you, and this man, this boy, certainly did no such thing. I understand that you still need time to get over him, to come to terms with what happened, but please, never tell me that you are damaged or unworthy of love. That is not true. It can’t be true, because you already have my love, and I am better just for knowing you.”

She trembled where she stood, watching him with tears clouding her vision. She brought her hands to her face and crumbled, losing all strength to fight. Victor caught her and pulled her into himself, falling with her, laying in heap on the bathroom floor, rocking her gently as she cried.

Hermione curled into his warmth, allowing the sea of emotion to take her under, fill her lungs with salt water and steal her breath. She tried to focus on the beating of Victor’s heart beneath her ear, the feeling of his hands on her hip and back, the gently sounds he made to comfort her.

But all she could think in that moment was how desperately she wished Tom had fought for her like this, that he had loved her as Victor loved her.

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Friday July 15, 2005

Hermione leaned down, turning the dial and shutting off the overhead spray. She gathered her hair to one side and twisted it into a rope, draining the excess water before opening the curtain and stepping free of the tub.

She gnawed at her bottom lip, filled with trepidation. Tom had disappeared yesterday afternoon to deliver their decision to Green. She hadn’t seen or heard from him since. She’d gone ahead and taught her tutoring class on campus, as he’d instructed. She was so distracted she ended up dismissing the students twenty minutes early. She’d rushed home, anxious to see him, and been equal parts disappointed and fearful when he never showed.

She’d stayed awake as long as she could, pacing, twisting her hair, nerves on edge, but her exhaustion had finally won out, resulting in a restless slumber spent tossing and turning in bed.

Her sheets still smelled like him. It caused a painful stirring in her chest, and disturbing dreams that she couldn’t quite recall upon waking, only the dreadful sense of foreboding they filled her with even hours later.

She wrapped a towel around her body, using her hand to wipe away the steam that formed along the mirror. She blinked, taking in her reflection. She looked beat, to put it gently. Between her sleepless night spent pacing the living room two days ago and last night’s fitful slumber, she was running on fumes. Her mind wouldn’t stop racing, worrying, her heart following suit.
She sighed, stepping away from the sink and opening her bathroom door, making the short trip from the bathroom to the bedroom, adjusting her towel as she went. She glanced up and then froze, a scream tearing free from her throat before she had time to process the scene in front of her.

The intruder smirked, watching her from his seated position at the foot of her bed.

“Fuck!” she yelled, running a hand over her face. “You scared the shite out of me, Tom!”

He tilted his head, eyes gleaming in the morning light filtering through her window. “You have a filthy mouth, you know that? You never used to swear.”

She inhaled sharply, regulating her breathing and clutching a hand to her chest.

“I’m not used to people breaking into my flat while I’m taking a shower. Though I suppose I should just leave the door open since the locks do nothing to prevent strange men from finding their way inside, usually with my unconscious body in tow.”

Tom rolled his eyes, standing. “Always so dramatic.”

She swallowed thickly, forcing herself to hold her ground as he slowly approached. “You spoke with Green?”

He came to a stop not a foot in front of her, so close she could feel the warmth radiating from his body. “I did.”

She did her best to ignore his hooded gaze, which drifted down to linger on her mouth.

“And?”

“And he was pleased. At least I think he was. It’s impossible to tell with him.”

She shook her head. “That’s not what I meant. Did you get it?”

He tilted his head, eyes smoldering, frustratingly distracting. “I got it.”

Her heart beat increased twofold as his hand slowly rose, tracing the line of skin peeking through just above the towel. She slapped his hand away. “Tom! This is serious!”

He smirked, stepping closer, flush against her. “I know it is.”

“Then get your head out of the gutter! We need to-”

“...I know exactly what we need to do.”

Her thoughts scattered as his arm looped around her waist, pressing her flat against him. His hand toyed with the edge of the towel, fingertips grazing the bare skin of her hip. She blinked rapidly at the sensation, watching Tom’s head dip down, his lips barely grazing hers, hovering, his next words spoken into her parted mouth.

“I rushed this the first time. I lost control. I always lose control with you.”

She tried to swallow but found her throat had closed up. The hand that wasn’t thrumming her side like the chords of a guitar drifted up to caress her collarbone, long deft fingers tracing the line of her necklace. His pupils widened at the glint of gold, mouth curling into a hungry grin that exposed his lengthened canines.
She closed her eyes as his fingers wrapped around the back of her neck, tangling in her damp hair, his thumb resting at her pulsepoint, gently squeezing, a possessive brand that she melted into, tipping her head back on instinct to give him better access to her throat. He didn’t hesitate, mouth descending the moment her delicate flesh was exposed.

“This time I’ll go slow,” he whispered against her skin, teeth gently scraping, his tongue darting out to taste. “I’ll try to be gentle.”

The gravel in his voice sent a bolt of electricity through her center, warmth unfurling through her limbs and pooling low in her abdomen, making her thighs and sex tighten. She moaned, and the moan turned into a gasp as she was picked up, feet dangling, carried to the bed and tossed. She bounced on the matress, heart in her throat, and then narrowed her eyes on him as he drew close on perched knees.

“I’m not a ragdoll, Tom.”

He smiled, and the force of it was breathtaking, literally robbing her lungs of oxygen until her vision hazed. He crawled over her body, placing hands on either side of her head as he gazed down at her.

“You don’t like me manhandling you?”

His mocking tone and irritating smirk set her blood to boil. She opened her mouth to inform him that no, she didn’t appreciate him tossing her about like a frisbee-

He dipped down and silenced her with a kiss, his tongue sliding against her own and scrambling the last of her coherent thoughts. While he kept her mouth busy he reached a hand between them, tugging the knot of her towel loose and slowly parting the material, leaving her laid out bare before him.

She flushed red, though it was a toss up whether she was more turned on or embarrassed. She had been a nervous wreck these last two days, since Saturday really, and was eager to release her pent up aggression. It was still so surreal that this was really happening, that Tom was here with her, touching her, making love to her.

She was terrified it was all a dream she would wake from at any moment. The fear spurred her to wrap her arms around his neck, pulling him down to lay flush against her. His weight felt glorious, absolute and grounding, he kept her tethered to reality, to this moment.

A small voice in the back of her mind whispered that this was a bad idea, that they should be talking things through instead, sorting out the mess their lives had become. But she didn’t want to talk, didn’t want to be rational. That could all wait, just for a little while. Right now, she just wanted to lose herself for a few blessed moments. She wanted to get lost in him.

She gasped into his mouth when he grasped her hips and flipped them over. She blinked, gazing down at him with wide eyes, taking in this new perspective.

His pupils had swallowed the grey of his iris, a black hole at the center of the cosmos that pulled her in, she felt herself tumble over the event horizon, sinking into him fully, losing herself to his heat. She raked her blunt nails over his chest, clawing at his shirt. He let his hands fall away from her back to assist her in stripping his outer layers.

She bit her lip as she tugged his boxers down, his semi erect cock springing free, tapping against her stomach. She tentatively wrapped a hand around his length, stroking once, twice experimentally. She had done this once with Victor, and had been mortified the entire time, terrified of hurting or
displeasing him despite his many assurances.

But of course, everything was vastly different with Tom. She felt her confidence build as he made low groans in his throat, dark eyes watching her movements with sharp focus, his adams apple bobbing as he swallowed thickly. She was spurred on by the rapid lengthening of his cock, the rhythmic glide of velvet over steel, reaching scalding temperatures beneath her palm.

His hands had been gripping her bare thighs, fingertips leaving deep impressions in the flesh. But suddenly a hand released her and darted to her core. His long, deft fingers easily found her slit, a finger sliding inside, testing her readiness, earning a kittenish mewl from her parted lips, further staining her cheeks with embarrassment. His eyes latched onto her, and he certainly didn’t look amused. He looked hungry, intent clear in his fathomless black eyes.

He reached up and grabbed her hips, tugging her forward, her long damp hair swaying, tickling her back. Then his hands slid up to her waist, fingers splayed possessively, pulling her even closer, higher, aligning her in position.

“Guide me in.”

It sounded like there were rocks in his throat. She swallowed, doing as commanded, gasping as he lowered her with his steel grip, bruising her flesh. But all external sensations were overridden by the feeling of being stretched so suddenly, so fully, feeling her tight walls clamp around him, a steady pulse rhythmically drumming in her core, though she couldn’t determine who’s it was. Perhaps it was both of theirs, their hearts syncing, uniting, just like their bodies.

He guided her movements for the first few strokes, eyes fastened to where they were joined, the only sounds in the room the steady slap of flesh and her short gasps. He slid his hands up, cupping her breasts, thumbs grazing their rigid peaks.

“Lean forward, put your hands on my chest.”

She blinked, mindlessly following instruction, and gasped anew, the angle allowing him to sink deeper, his strokes hitting a new spot within her that made stars appear behind her lids. The current position lasted for another handful of heartbeats before he was once more flipping them over. She swallowed heavily, eyes wide as she peered up at him, her brow creasing as he pulled out, rearing back.

She was bereft of his warmth, reaching a hand out, he grabbed her extended wrist and in a maneuver that was fitting a martial arts film, deftly flipped her onto her stomach. She blinked, her chin hitting the soft mattress, her eyes narrowed in confusion and outrage. But before she could utter her protests he was leaning over, sliding an arm beneath her stomach and pulling her back. Another hand grasped her damp locks and tugged, tipping her head back and making her moan on instinct.

He pulled harder, the iron band at her waist drawing her back at the same time, lifting her torso off the mattress and standing her on her knees facing the top of the bed, her back flush against his heaving chest. She felt his warm breath at her ear, her head tipped back, exposing the long column of her throat.

“Grab the headboard.”

She blinked, mouth opening. He silenced her by releasing her hair and sliding a hand around her neck, fingers reaching up until his thumb slid past her lips, over her bottom teeth, pressing against her tongue. She instinctively closed her lips around the thick digit, sucking gently.
“That’s a good girl. Now grab the headboard. No matter what happens, don’t let go.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, a fresh flood of liquid warmth drenching her center, muscles clenching. She reached out blindly, hands finding purchase against the wood backing and curling over the top, and then he was once more driving into her.

She felt her eyes roll back behind her closed lids, his thumb still in her mouth, his remaining fingers keeping her chin tilted back, exposing her neck for his mouth to devour from behind. His other arm adjusted, lowering, his hand roaming until he found her core, manipulating her clit while his hips kept their ruthless pace from behind. She grasped the headboard with all she had, but her sweaty palms made her grip slip, one hand falling away.

He instantly released her mouth and throat, his hand covering hers and sliding it back into place, his fingers curling around hers, keeping them pinned to the wood.

“Don’t let go, Hermione. If you let go, I’ll lose control.”

Her eyes snapped open and she swallowed desperately, feeling a flush of heat steal over her chest. She was deeply aroused and deeply outraged, both feelings battling for dominance within her. How dare he dictate her every move? She was his partner, not his fuck toy. If he wanted to control her every limb he could get a blow up doll!

She narrowed her eyes, moaning low when a bolt of electricity stole through her womb as Tom continued to work her sensitive bundle of nerves. She bit her bottom lip as she watched his hand fall away from hers, returning to wrap around her neck, fingers gently curling possessively around her pulsepoint. And she purposely let go of the headboard, both hands dropping to the mattress beneath their gyrating bodies.

She heard an animalistic growl right behind her ear, his movements stopping all at once.

“Fuck. I was hoping you’d do that.”

She barely had time to process his words before her hips were roughly seized and pulled back into his, his thrusts deep and relentless, knocking the air from her lungs and causing her to lose strength in her arms, elbows giving way and dropping her chest into the mattress. She turned her face to side so she could breathe, gasping for breath as he pounded into her again and again and again, the heat building and coiling within her and finally snapping.

As she careened into orgasm she squeezed her eyes shut, relishing the euphoria, relishing his sounds, his loss of control, their momentary oasis from the chaos and insanity that awaited them on the other side.

Harry charged ahead of the other two men on his rush to exit the hospital’s oppressive walls. He sucked in the outside air upon reaching the pavement. It was mostly filled with smoke exhaust from a passing car, but at least it didn’t smell like sterilized surfaces.

He spun angrily on his heel, watching the other two men exit the building, Dumbledore at a casual stroll and Dawlish with shoulders and fists tight.

“Now listen here, Potter-”

“Shut your mouth!”

Dumbledore cleared his throat, stepping closer to the men circling each other like birds of prey.
“Gentlemen, is this really necessary?”

“I don’t know what his fucking problem is! I gave him free reign of my crime scene and showed him private security tapes, he should be on his knees thanking me!”

Harry reeled with the man’s audacity. “Are you insane? Or just a master bullshiter? I know about the autopsy report!”

Dawlish blinked, looking dumbfounded for an entire two seconds before his scowl reappeared. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, you stupid-”

“Yaxley’s official cause of death is a heart attack and his two guards were mysteriously absent from the crime scene, as well as a perpetrator? He killed himself? A cheesecloth cover story that blatantly overlooks three brutal homicides? Ring any bells?”

Yaxley opened and closed his mouth, brows drawn. “What are you on about?”

Harry scoffed, tossing his back in disbelief, glancing at Dumbledore with expectant eyes. “You can’t seriously believe this cogger?”

The Senior Agent tilted his head, studying both men carefully. “I’m afraid I’m unfamiliar with that particular term, Harry, but perhaps you can elaborate on this supposed autopsy report, and how you came about getting your hands on it?”

Harry blinked, flushing with fresh anger. “There’s nothing supposed about it! It’s all in the bloody report-”

“And you’ve seen this report in person?”

“Impossible!” Dawlish interjected, eyes narrowed. “I haven’t even seen the report!”

Harry glanced over to the other officer, brow raised. “You expect me to believe that?”

“Perhaps you can tell us how you came into possession of it, Harry.”

Harry blinked, wetting his lips. “I can’t.”

Now Dawlish was the one to scoff, tossing his head back in a mirror image of Harry’s previous outburst. “What a surprise!”

Harry glared daggers at the man. “I trust my source!”

“I’m sure you do, Potter. I’m sure you trust all the voices in your head.”

Harry rolled his eyes, opening his mouth to retaliate when Dumbledore stepped bodily between the two men. “I think it best if we end this discussion here, before we draw any unwanted attention. John, perhaps it is time to take your leave. I appreciate your assistance from this morning and consider our ledgers clear.”

Dawlish was still shaking his head, eyes pinned on Harry, but he reluctantly took a step back. “I’ll be seeing you around, Albus. And I strongly suggest you cut this idiot loose. He’s a liability if I’ve ever seen one, and I’ve worked personally with Sirius.”

Harry’s blood boiled at the mention of his godfather and he took a threatening step closer, only for Dumbledore’s tall, lean frame to take over his line of vision. He blinked, gazing up into sky blue eyes and an arched silver brow, watching him expectantly. Harry swallowed and stepped back,
taking a deep breath and desperately trying to rein in his emotions. Dawlish sent him one last scathing look and turned on his heel, heading down the sidewalk, shoulders drawn.

“Come now, Harry.” Dumbledore placed a hand on his shoulder, giving it a light squeeze. “Let’s take a stroll around the block, allow Remus some more time upstairs.”

Harry’s body was still rigid in its defiance, his outrage, but he forced himself to swallow and nod, reluctantly falling into step beside him as they began a leisurely pace around the hospital.

“Now, care to elaborate on this autopsy report that has you so worked up?”

Harry wet his lips, feeling torn on how much to tell Dumbledore. He knew it was a ridiculous hesitation, the man was his boss, his financial backer, had as much desire to catch the perpetrators as Harry did.

But he couldn’t shake the feeling that the man was hiding something, knew more than he was letting on. It made Harry distrustful of him, and he desperately wished he had Sirius’s counsel on the matter.

Sirius never told me to keep what Karkaroff told us a secret from Dumbledore.

But Sirius doesn’t know about the thumbdrive…

He let out a slow breath, deciding to walk the middle ground for the time being. Certain information wasn’t as pertinent as others, at least in Harry’s mind. The autopsy report was in the hands of at least two governments, and Dumbledore could easily secure his own copy with his connections.

But only two people in the world knew that Harry possessed the information Yaxley and a Russian agent were killed over.

He wasn’t ready to make Dumbledore the third.

“I can’t reveal my source, he believes his life is in danger and was very reluctant to tell us anything. We swore to secrecy.” It was a version of the truth, he just hoped his steady delivery of the information wouldn’t set off any alarm bells in the Senior Agent’s head. “You’ll have to read over the report yourself to validate his claims. I’d like to see it as well, to ensure our information was sound. But I believed him, and I’m fairly good at reading others. He had nothing to gain by telling us, other than ensuring we finish the investigation his government is lax to do.”

Dumbledore watched Harry carefully as he spoke, setting his nerves on edge. The man tipped his head, studying him at an angle. “Can you tell me which government you’re referring to?”

Harry bit his tongue.

Damn.

Of course he couldn’t get anything past the experienced Agent.

He glanced up, shaking his head. “I’m afraid doing that would make my source’s identity too easy to discern.”

Dumbledore’s mouth tipped up at the corner. “The Russians then.”

Harry’s jaw ticked.

Fuck.
Dumbledore revealed a full on smile. “And if I remember correctly, Sirius once worked closely with an Operative by the name of Igor Karkaroff. Who happens to hold a position at the Embassy of the Russian Federation here in Vienna. What a small world.”

Harry sighed, looking ahead. “I’m sorry. I was trying to honor my promise.”

Dumbledore’s smile faded but his eyes continued to dazzle in the light. “I respect your commitment to your sources, Harry. But I fail to see how revealing their name to me would put them in any danger. Unless, of course, you have reason to doubt my intentions.”

Harry swallowed, focusing on the pavement below their feet.

“Ah. I see.”

Harry’s chest tightened, breath evading him. “It’s not that…” He couldn’t find the words to continue, every lie sounding hollow to his own ears.

“It’s quite alright. A suspicious nature is the cornerstone of all skilled operatives. I myself have been guilty of considering everyone around me a suspect at one time or another. But this is no normal investigation, Harry. You are no longer a member of the Ministry. You are leading a small team that exists because I am funding it via the Ministry. Which means I must remain in the know of everything that is going on at all times so this investigation stays above board. If we get into murky legal waters our final case will hold no power, and we risk sabotaging our entire mission ourselves. Do you understand?”

Harry nodded. Of course he understood. It all made perfect sense.

He just couldn’t shake the anxious feeling he had when he thought about the man.

It was inexplicable, intangible, unfounded. But it didn’t make it any less real.

“I understand, Sir. And I apologize if I caused any offense. Let me tell you everything that happened yesterday…”

And so he did. He told Dumbledore about their visit to the crime scene, the missing photo frame, the positive identity match he made with the security tapes, the mysterious missing footage that Dawlish was so quick to brush off. He mentioned their meeting with Karkaroff in the pub, the doctored autopsy reports that both the Austrian and Russian governments were quick to accept, hiding any link to collusion.

He described their visit to the morgue, discovering the hair stick, followed by Sirius’s voicemails later in the evening describing La Femme Nikita, the mysterious woman who tried and failed to murder him in the club. He breezed over his discovery of Sirius’s bleeding, broken body, unable to relive the events so soon after they transpired.

He left out his dinner with Yaxley. He made no mention of the thumbdrive.

Dumbledore nodded along slowly as Harry spoke, waiting a few heavy beats after he finished recalling his tail before speaking. Then asked the question Harry knew was coming, and had prepared for in his mind as he recounted earlier events.

“And why were Sirius and you separated last night? Why take different trains?”

“Sirius was on the hunt for a bakery that made sachertorte, one of Remus’s favorites. The bakery he went to years ago was demolished. He also planned to pop in for a drink at a local pub, someplace
he’d been to in the past. He wanted me to come along, but I wanted to stay at the hotel to process and record everything we’d learned from that morning on.”

Dumbledore’s eyes held him steady. “So you were at the hotel when you received Sirius’s calls?”

Harry knew precisely where this trap led.

“Yes. I was in the shower when they came through. I didn’t realize I had missed calls until my phone beeped after his second voicemail.”

It was a battle to retain his stoic expression, the intensity of Dumbledore’s gaze a heat seeking missile drilling a hole through his skull. But he rallied all his calm and composure and kept his casual pace unaffected by his nerves.

After a short eternity Dumbledore nodded, though his eyes held a knowing glint that grated at Harry. He wondered if the man knew the truth, saw right through Harry’s bullshit lies, or perhaps had other contacts throughout Vienna who somehow knew the truth about Harry’s whereabouts when Sirius was attacked.

Harry felt like a blindfolded pawn on a massive chess board, unable to see the other pieces on the board, unable to discern his own position. He only felt the cold hand wrap around his neck and lift, moving him to a new space that felt no different that the previous one he stood upon. There was no end in sight, no strategy to be had, he was at the mercy of an unseen force that called all the shots and left him completely in the dark.

Finally, the disembodied hand released him, dropping him onto a new square where he was made to wait until it was once more his turn to move.

“I am very sorry about, Sirius, Harry. I meant to express so earlier but I thought it best to keep our phone conversations limited.”

Harry blinked, nodding mutely.

“I hear he is stable, showing positive signs of improvement.”

Harry cleared his throat, scrambling to find his voice. “I haven’t spoken to the doctor yet. The surgeon told me the operation on his heart was successful, they want to monitor him for 24 hours before making air transfer to London.”

“That’s positive news. They would never risk Sirius making the journey if he was truly at risk for-”

“We’ll have to wait and see.”

He couldn’t bear to hear his godfather’s name and death to be uttered in the same sentence. Suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder, stopping him in his tracks. He peered up, face carefully masked of all emotion.

“Harry, I assure you, Sirius is a survivor. You would be too young to recall, but he’s had many rough scraps before, and always pulled through. Before you were born he and your father were known for their rather reckless natures, your mother always providing the voice of reason. But I dare say she was the bravest of them all, keeping them in line as she did. The three of them together were unstoppable. The man he is now is no different than the boy he was then, and I have no doubt in my mind he will come through this on the other side excited to show off his battle wounds.”

Harry smirked, able to envision the man doing just that. Sirius would pull the gauze aside, exposing
the long scar of his surgery, and proudly regail it as “Yet another woman’s failed attempt at my heart.”

Dumbledore nodded, stepping back and releasing Harry from his grasp. “Why don’t we head back up and see how he’s doing?”

Harry tipped his head in agreement and turned around, starting their trek back to the entrance. He slipped his hands in his pockets, absentmindedly tracing the shape of the thumbdrive concealed within.

Hermione blinked tiredly, laid out on her stomach, naked except for the sheet covering her lower half. Tom was beside her on his back, arm bent beneath his head, features supremely relaxed and sated.

She tentatively reached out a hand and traced her fingers along his arm. He tilted his head to the side, locking gazes, looking far too smug. She rolled her eyes even as she smiled, continuing her idle caress. He captured her hand with his, bringing it to his mouth, lips pressing gently to her fingertips, warm breath racing along her skin, creating a pleasant tingle along her nerve endings.

She studied his features with hooded eyes, trying to slip into a cocoon of contentment but finding it impossible. Her mind had been blessedly blank in the long minutes following their mutual release, muscles lax and limbs pliant. But once the fire faded from her veins she felt the dark cloud claim her once more, thoughts tempestuous and dread overwhelming.

He watched her in turn, gaze bright and amused.

“What?”

He smiled, lips still skimming her fingers.

“Nothing.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Tom.”

He hummed low in his throat. “Hermione.”

“What’s so funny?”

“You.”

She blinked. “Why am I funny?”

“You’re always worrying about something, even post bliss.”

She bit her bottom lip, eyes averting away, a crease appearing between her brows.

“It’s not you, luv.” He released her hand to run the pad of his thumb across her mouth, tugging her lip free. “Obviously I didn’t do a good enough job fucking your brains out.”

She fought a smile and failed, shaking her head. But her expression quickly fell.

“Tom...” she swallowed, biting her lip once more. His fingers grazed along her cheek, prompting her to look at him.

“What?”
She closed her eyes as she asked the question that was burning inside of her. “Were there others?”

Her lids were still closed so she missed his stricken look. By the time they snapped open his face was once more carefully masked. “Other what?”

She shifted nervously on the bed. “Other… women.”

His expression remained completely blank, giving away the answer. She swallowed once more, fighting back a cringe. She didn’t expect him to be celibate during their separation, she certainly hadn’t been, rather she was mortified of her own question.

“That was… pretend I didn’t ask.” She began to draw away, feeling foolish, and his arm clamped around her waist, pulling her flush against him.

“Hermione,” his voice was low, deep, soothing to her abashed nerves. “There were others… but nothing like this. No one like you.”

She blinked, heart pounding a staccato rhythm within her chest. “What do you mean?”

He held his gaze steady on her mouth. “You know what I mean.”

She released a slow breath.

But I want to hear you say it…

She swallowed slowly, glancing away, chest seizing.

“There’s something I need to tell you.”

His eyes narrowed a fraction, lips pressing into a thin line, making her lose her nerve, mouth going dry. His hand stroked down the line of her back, resting in the dip of her waist, a gentle coaxing pet, though his expression was still guarded. She swallowed thickly, taking a deep breath and forcing her gaze to meet his.

“I… I was in a relationship for about a year and a half.”

He didn’t blink, didn’t seem to breathe. His voice was low and steady as he asked without preamble. “Were you in love?”

She felt a surge of emotion wash over her without warning. Her throat closed up, eyes welling. She turned her face away before her face crumpled, mortified, devastated by her reaction.

His arm flexed around her, chest contracting as he sucked in a sharp breath. She desperately willed herself to calm down, to wear the same mask of neutrality as Tom. He was silent at her side, further annerving her, trapped as she was by her own thoughts.

Several moments passed before she was able to face him once more. She searched her mind for the words but couldn’t find the right ones to express what she was feeling in that moment, lying beside the man who evaded her for years while thinking about the man who gave all of himself without reserve. Guilt, despair, shame, those were the most easily identifiable.

Yet she somehow managed to open her mouth and utter, “I tried to be.”

She sounded as utterly miserable as she felt. Tom watched her for several beats, his heart thumping steadily against her chest pressed so tightly to his.
“What stopped you?”

She searched his fatholess gaze.

“You did.”

His expression was unreadable, making her terribly self-conscious. But his hand continued to caress her waist, giving her the strength to hold his gaze.

“I was still so hung up on you. I tried so hard to let you go, to move on. But I never could manage it. Not fully. I felt so… so broken. Ruined for any other man. And yet I stayed with him for all that time. Knowing I could never give him the relationship he deserved. I was just so tired of being alone. I thought being with him would help me move on. But I think it somehow made it worse. The constant comparisons I drew, even subconsciously. But it wasn’t right. I should have been honest with him. I should have let him go. I’m such a selfish person.”

His fingertips dug into her soft flesh, hands flexing. “We’re all selfish, Hermione. It’s a part of human nature. But you’re not malicious. You didn’t intend to hurt anyone.”

“Does it make a difference? I still-”

“Yes. It makes a difference.”

Her lips pressed together, lungs slowly deflating. Tom’s eyes gleamed in the sunlight.

“Was he the only one?”

She blinked, still reeling from her confession, his words slow to process.

“Yes.”

She felt the thrum of his heart kick up a notch. “He was your first?”

Hermione’s brows drew in, she’d just answered that question…

Then she realized exactly what he meant, and the thought ruffled her.

“Yes, he was my first and only. Until you.” She bit out, trying to pull away, his arm an unyielding beam at her back. “Why don’t you tell me about all the partners you’ve been with, assuming you kept track.”

To her great frustration Tom merely smirked, unaffected by her ire. “Hermione.”

She stopped her struggles upon hearing her name but still held rigid in his grasp. He sighed in frustration and pulled her back into his chest, earning her glare.

“I thought we agreed you wouldn’t manhandle me.”

“I don’t recall ever agreeing to such a thing. I quite enjoy it. You seemed to take great pleasure in it as well.”

She felt a blush stain her cheeks, try as she might to act unaffected by his comment. His eyes tracked the flood of color blossoming across her chest and neck. He dipped his head low and pressed his lips to the base of her throat, not kissing, not nipping, merely a lingering touch. She swallowed, feeling the movement against his mouth.
“Tom-”

“I want to show you something.” He said abruptly, rendering her mute. He drew his head back, face resting so close to hers their noses nearly touched. She blinked.

“Will it require clothing?”

He flashed his silver grin. “Unfortunately. And shoes, as well as an overnight bag.”

She raised a brow. “Taking a holiday, are we?”

His smile fell, gaze intensifying. “Someday soon. But for now, we’re going to the place where I’ll be most able to protect you.”

Curiosity burned bright within her, she curled her hands against his chest. “Where?”

“Hm,” he leaned in, kissing her on the mouth, whispering against her lips. “Get dressed, and you’ll see.”

Bella was having a wonderful dream.

She had long since harnessed the skill of lucid dreaming, after many years of being plagued by nerve rattling nightmares, when sleep had been synonymous with reliving her past, and her greatest fears and worst memories were paraded behind her lids night after night.

But now she loved her dreams, because she always knew when she was unconscious and could alter the setting and tone at her heart’s whim.

She hated waking up.

She especially hated being forcefully woken by cold water crashing over her head.

She gagged and sputtered, jolting awake violently, fingers curling around the handle of the blade beneath her pillow and arm striking out. She gasped in pain when a large hand caught her forearm, twisting it back while another hand grasped her wrist, pushing on her tendon until her fingers went lax, the knife falling with a dull clink on the floor.

“That was pitiful, Bella. You didn’t even hear me come in. What’s wrong with your right hand?”

She blinked, face drenched, eye makeup running and stinging her eyes, blurring her vision so only the man’s silhouette was discernible against the morning sunlight. But she’d recognize his voice anywhere. Even in her dreams.

“It’s sprained.”

“Hm. And how did that happen?”

She pulled her arm from his grasp, wiping at her eyes. “I jammed it in the turnstile at the metro.”

“Did you now?”

“Bloody hazards, the lot of ‘em. Should sue and make millions. What do you think?”

Green took a deep breath, pacing to the foot of the bed.
“I think you should tell your friend goodbye, before she hears something she can’t unhear.”

Bella glanced at the lump in the comforter beside her. A bare arm was peaking out, a delicate hand with the fingers curled in, a gentle beckoning motion. Bella smiled, recalling the night before. She leaned down, pulling the blankets aside and gazing at the face beneath.

“Wake up, turtle dove,” she cooed, placing her lips at the girl’s ear. Her bedmate moaned, rolling onto her back and rubbing a hand over her eyes.

“What time is it?” she murmured, eyes still closed.

“Time to depart.”

Upon hearing the distinctly male voice the girl’s eyes snapped open as she jolted into a sitting position, mouth agape. Green smiled, though his eyes were cold and still fixed upon Bella.

“Please get dressed and say your goodbyes.”

The girl didn’t move, still looking shell shocked by his sudden appearance. Bella leaned down and placed her lips to the girl’s bare shoulder, gaining her attention.

“Sorry, luv. Dad’s so strict. Never let’s me have any fun.”

The girl blinked. “He’s your father?”

Bella laughed. “Worse. He’s my boss.”

The girl’s head swiveled comically between the room’s two other occupants before she asked tentatively. “What kind of work do you do?”

Bella leaned in and pecked her on the lips. “I kill people.”

“That’s enough, Bella. Tell your guest farewell and get dressed.”

Bella rolled her eyes and then winked. “It’s not you, I promise, he acts this way with all my friends. Better listen to what he says though. Sorry about your underwear, you won’t be able to salvage those.”

Green sighed, shaking his head and spinning around as Bella stood from the bed in her birthday suit, leaning over and fishing for her discarded clothes without shame. She smirked in Green’s direction, enjoying any bit of fun she could have at his expense.

The girl scrambled to get dressed as well, her long limbs making her appear more doe like than ever in the light of day. Bella had enjoyed playing with her, it distracted from her throbbing wrist.

A few minutes later she was walking her playmate to the door of the hotel room, giving her one last, long, lingering kiss before swatting her playfully on the arse, wolf whistling as she walked down the hall, laughing when Green yanked her back inside and slammed the door.

“Very funny,” he snapped, eyes narrowed. “Do you have any idea the mess you’ve caused?”

She blinked innocently, tilting her head. “What do you-”

“No games. I’m not in the mood. I just got off a two hour flight and a thirty minute cab ride, I’ve wasted enough of my morning on you. Now cut the shite and sit down.”
She blinked, shoulders drawn. Green never cursed, unless he was very incensed. She’d only heard him mutter *Fuck* once, and it was moments before executing a man. It had been a spectacular sight to witness, the moment she fell utterly in love with him. But she didn’t enjoy being on the receiving end of his ire.

She slowly made her way back to the rumpled bed and perched on the end, legs crossed, bare feet just touching the floor. He sat in the upholstered chair in the corner and leaned in, resting his forearms on his knees, pinning her with a severe gaze.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

She started to roll her eyes.

“Don’t you dare roll your eyes at me!” His vehement outburst made her snap her gaze back to his. “Tell me what part of my instructions were unclear. Tell me!”

She chewed the inside of her cheek, tucking her hands beneath her thighs like an errant child. He sighed deeply, shaking his head.

“I understand your destructive nature, Bella. I’m one of the few who do. One of the few who knows the extent of your past. So I’ve made many allowances for you, exceptions I make for no one else, not even Tom. But you’ve broken my trust for the final time.”

Her eyes narrowed upon hearing the golden boy’s name from his lips.

“Are you seriously pretending that you don’t make countless allowances for Tom? The only reason you reappeared in my life was so you could stalk his girlfriend! And did you kill her?”

Green narrowed his eyes, sitting back in the chair. Bella smiled cruelly. “Of course not. Because that would have upset precious Tommy. And god forbid you lose his undying love. Meanwhile, if I had some side piece I was running around with I’d wake up with their head in my bed!”

Green raised a brow. “Don’t be melodramatic, Bella. You know full and well I abhor unnecessary gore. If your lover were to end up decapitated we both know it would be by your hand.”

She scoffed, shaking her head. “That’s not the point!”

“I know what point you’re trying to make. I favor Tom, and that frustrates you. You want to gain my attention, so you purposely violate my orders so I am forced to come here and deal with you personally. Correct?”

She glared, crossing her arms. “Why bother asking questions when you already know the answers?”

“Because the answers provided are just as telling.”

“I hate being psychoanalyzed.”

“How strange, most people enjoy it.”

She looked away, staring at a blank spot on the wall in front of her. She heard him shift in his seat. “Let me see your wrist.”

She furrowed her brows. “No.”

“Bella.”
The warning contained within her name was chilling, even to her. She wet her lips and held her injured arm aloft, still refusing to meet his piercing gaze. She blinked, keeping her face neutral as his warm hands gently encased her smaller one, deft fingers bending the appendage in either direction, then rotating it around in a slow circle. She fought back a cringe, biting her tongue so sharply she tasted copper on the back of her throat.

“Always so stubborn, refusing to show any weakness.”

She released a slow breath as he bent her wrist back sharply once more, watching her face closely. Then he released her from his grip, drawing back in his chair.

“The ligaments are sprained, I also detect a fractured metacarpal, minor though. Should heal within a few weeks.”

“Awesome.”

“Do you have nothing else to say to me?”

She continued to gaze forward.

“Perhaps you don’t fully realize the damage you’ve caused. Please, allow me to illustrate it for you. I sent you here to determine whether the Ministry has despatched a private investigational team to look into Yaxley’s murder. If they have, it means they’ve linked it to the Malfoy assassinations. If they’ve linked it, it means they’re going to a burden moving forward. The best course of action is to throw them off our scent, lead them astray, disappear into the night.”

He leaned forward slowly, leveling her with such an intense stare she felt it sizzle through her skin even as her eyes remained carefully averted.

“So naturally, you take it upon yourself to stab one of the lead investigators in the chest. Thus ensuring they continue to pursue us until they’ve tapped every possible resource. Tell me, Bella, how many resources do you think the Ministry possesses?”

She narrowed her eyes. “They’re led by a bunch of fat, idiotic cocks.”

“Is that so? Is the man who followed you into the club last night a fat, idiotic cock? Is that why you decided to make such a spectacle?”

Her lips formed a thin line.

“I didn’t think so. No, I think he showed a rather adept and keen investigational aptitude, which is why you decided to have so much fun with him. He’s alive, you know. And once he wakes up they’ll have both your and Tom’s faces. Superb work, darling. Just fantastic.”

Her head whipped around, making eye contact at last. “There’s no way.”

“That he’s alive or that he saw your face?”

“I stabbed him in the aorta!”

“Did you now?”

She blinked, eyes drifting, cradling her wrist to her chest, running through the events of last night in her mind, certain her aim was true.

Perhaps I got a touch careless...
She looked back to her handler and clamped her mouth shut at the knowing glint in his pale eyes.

“That’s what I thought.”

Her jaw ticked as she bit back a scathing response.

*Blood hell, how does Tommy put up with him on the daily?*

“I see you’re not as jealous of Tom as you were an hour ago.”

“I hate it when you do that.”

“Then I suggest you learn to mask your thoughts a bit better, my dear. Now, I have to devote the rest of my day to cleaning up the colossal mess you’ve made. And you are going to be a well behaved operative for the duration of this mission, or you’ll suffer consequences far beyond your wildest dreams.”

She licked her lips, dark brow raising. “You’d be surprised, my dreams can get pretty wild. I was having a rather spectacular one before you upturned a bottled water on my head.”

He laughed low in his throat, eyes humorless as he watched her. “I would never threaten you with something as benign as death or torture, Bella. I know you far too well for that.”

She fixed him with a smug expression, which quickly melted away with his next words.

“I know the greatest punishment would be to banish you from the organization entirely. Throw you back into the outside world without a backwards glance. How would you like that, luv? I don’t have to kill you to kill you.”

She blinked, swallowing past the obstruction in her throat. He tilted his head, eyes no longer seeing her as much as they saw through her.

“It’s ironic,” he continued, tone light and jovial, as though he hadn’t just threatened her. “Your greatest fear is Tom’s greatest desire. How fascinating that my children are so alike and yet so different.”

He withdrew from his inner musings, gaze alert once more. “Get your things together. You’re returning to London with me, so I can ensure you can’t do any further damage.”

He took to his feet, towering above her. “And fret not, little one.” He smiled, grin wicked and breathtaking to her eyes. “You’re going to help me clean this up.”

Harry sighed deeply, sitting back in the upholstered chair in his hotel room, head tipping back to gaze absently at the ceiling.

Visiting hours at the hospital were over, but the staff had acquiesced and set up a cot for Remus to remain in the room. The man had been adamant about staying and ensuring he was on site should Sirius’s condition change over night. Harry would have done the same, but wanted to allow the men some privacy.

He glanced to the desk beside him, where the silver thumb drive sat dead center. He chewed on the inside of his cheek, considering the last few hours, his decision to keep its existence a secret from Dumbledore. That choice would most likely come back to bite him in the arse, but he stood by it, at least until he could determine what was on it.
Speaking of which…

He blinked, sitting up and fishing his phone from his pocket. He stared at it for several long beats before flipping it open and dialing.

It rang three times before the voice came on the other end, sounding a bit breathless and shocked.

“Harry?”

“Hey, Nev.”

“I didn’t think you’d – I mean, is everything- um,” he stopped short, awkwardly clearing his throat. “How are you? How is Sirius?”

Harry rubbed absently at his face. “He’s stable, being transferred back to London tomorrow afternoon. I take it Dumbledore informed you and Luna what happened?”

“Well, yes, I mean, he told us there was an accident, he said he’d call us first thing tomorrow with more information.”

“It wasn’t an accident. He was stabbed by one of the assassins we’re hunting.”

There was a long pause.

“Assassins? Wait, there’s more than one?”

Harry took off his glasses, rubbing at his eyes. Fuck he was tired.

“Yes, at least two. Though we also suspect there’s a third who acted as lookout here in Vienna. I’ll explain it all when I’m back. My flight leaves early in the morning.”

“Oh, I thought you’d fly over with Sirius.”

“Remus is here, there’s only room for one in the plane besides the emergency crew. I’ll head over first so I can attend the Malfoy funeral, then head over to Mungo’s and oversee Sirius’s transfer.”

“Okay… so… you’re still continuing the investigation?”

Harry blinked. “Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I?”

He heard shuffling on the other end of the line.

“Well, I just figured with what happened, I mean, nevermind.”

Harry leaned forward. “It’s alright, Nev. I understand. But I can’t stop now. Especially now. I’d like for you and Luna to meet me at the office tomorrow evening, if you don’t mind telling her. I need to download you on everything that’s happened and discuss next steps.”

“Absolutely.”

“How are interviews coming along?”

“Great! I mean, we haven’t found a lead. But Luna’s brilliant at asking questions, she catches all types of details…”

Harry couldn’t help but grin. “That’s good, Nev.”
“We met with one of the managers at the catering place and she gave us a list of everyone on staff that night. We’re about one third of the way through, though a couple people still have to call us back.”

Harry glanced to the side, the thumb drive glaring at him, the pulsing thrum in his temples amplifying.

“Nev, I know it’s late, but do you mind doing a screen share with me?”

“Sure.”

Harry wasted no time, crossing the room to grab his laptop off the side table and bringing it back to the desk. “Listen, Nev. What I’m about to show you, no one can know about it. I don’t want you mentioning it to Dumbledore or Luna. Not yet.”

There was a heavy beat of silence before Neville responded. “Okay, sure, I can do that.”

Harry booted his computer and picked up the thumb drive with anxious fingers, a second wind coming over him as eagerness set in. He plugged it into the side and swallowed heavily as the new folder appeared in the top right corner of the screen.

He opened it just as the screen flickered, an alert message informing him that Neville had logged in for a viewing session. Harry’s breath came out in a slow breeze as dozens more folders appeared within the first. They were labeled with seemingly random number and letter sequences.

He opened the first and raised his brow at the numerous image files within. He opened one at random and blinked, an enlarged photocopy of some type of financial document. He didn’t understand the first thing about it.

“You seeing all this, Nev?”

“Yeah. What is it?”

“I was hoping you’d be able to tell me.”

“You’re using an external drive?”

“I am.”

“Hm. I can copy the contents over to my server, look through everything.”

Harry wet his lips, clutching the phone tighter. “You can do that?”

Neville laughed, light and airy. “Please, Harry.”

“Sorry, Nev, I forgot who I was speaking to. Will it be a secure transfer?”

“I’ll encrypt everything and decode it on my end. Should take about twenty minutes given the size. Is there anything in particular you’re looking for?”

Harry squinted, recalling Karkaroff’s earlier words. “There should be highlighted documents hiding somewhere in here. If you could give those a glance I’d appreciate it.”

“I’ll go through it all tonight.”

“You don’t have to do that, it’s already late-”
“I don’t mind, really. I want to. Luna’s taken the brunt of the interviewing and I want to contribute.”

Harry leaned back in his chair. “You contribute plenty.”

Neville cleared his throat awkwardly. “Thanks. But I want to help. I’ll find the highlighted documents and have them ready for you when we meet tomorrow.”

Harry gazed back at the screen, square light reflecting off his lenses. “That’ll be great.”

There was a long pause, filled only by the hum of the computer and the echo of Neville’s mouse clicks.

“Err, Harry?”

“Hm?”

“I’m really sorry about Sirius.”

Harry nodded, eyes affixed to the jumble of documents and images scattered before him on the screen.

“So am I. But I promise you, I’m going to find them. Every last one of them. And I’m going to make them pay.”

Hermione tried her best to quell her questions as Tom led her through the city, her overnight back over his shoulder, her hand firmly encapsulated by his. But she could hardly enjoy the sensation, plagued as she was with curiosity and an ever growing sense of panic.

They took a cab across town to Chelsea, dropped off near the station and walking the rest of the way. She glanced about the posh neighborhood they entered, wondering for the millionth time where they were heading. Everytime she tried to ask Tom shushed her, continuing their brisk walk forward.

They came to a large, modern brownstone, luscious rose bushes blooming along the front. Her eyes widened as they started up the steps, realization dawning.

Tom glanced about in either direction before he faced forward once more, punching a code into the keypad beside the double doors. There was a beep and the sound of locks clicking, and then they were entering the lobby, a security desk coming into view first, an elderly officer sitting behind it, smiling pleasantly in greeting.

“Welcome home, Mister Gaunt. Fine weather we’re having!”

Tom nodded his head in acknowledgement, the corner of his mouth turning up. “Yes it is, Mr. Finnbar, hopefully you have a chance to enjoy it in person before it’s gone.”

The older man chuckled, returning his focus to whatever was spread out on the desk. Hermione opened and closed her mouth like a fish, blinking first at the Officer and then at Tom, who merely glanced forward as he led her across the marble floors and to the lifts.

Once they were safely enclosed inside she pinned him with a narrowed gaze. “Mr. Gaunt?”

“At your service.”

“Why are you using her name? You told me you hated that name.”

“Trust me, I do. But I could hardly use my real name, nor the pseudonym I use on missions.”
“Why not make up a new one?”

“It’s easier to remember this way. Also, I’m a glutton for punishment, as you well know.”

She opened her mouth to respond when the doors opened. The car glided so smoothly she hardly felt its movement. She glanced at the buttons on the wall. They were at the top level. Tom pulled her hand and she fell into step behind him, down a short hall to the sole door on the floor, glossy black. He let go of her to draw his keys from his jacket, sliding them into the modern lock and opening the door. He stood back, tipping his head, indicating for her to walk ahead.

She hovered at the threshold, eyes wide as she stared upon the elegant entryway.

“Tom… what is this place?”

He leaned casually against the hallway, expression just as smug as it was post coital. “I’ll give you three guesses, even though we’re both aware you already know the answer. Now get inside.”

She blinked, stepping through the doorway in a numb stupor, head swiveling in each direction as she glanced over everything. There was a large mirror on the wall over a shiny wood entry table, adorned with well polished knick knacks. The bright wood floors led down a narrow path to the large living room, adorned with modern furniture and more frivolous decor, but what caught her attention above all else was the bank of floor to ceiling windows composing the back wall, revealing a breathtaking view of London and the Thames.

She didn’t even realize she’d crossed the room to stand before them, her shocked reflection staring back at her with wide eyes. Tom dropped her bag to the floor behind her, closing and locking the door, the sound of several deadbolts sliding into place. She spun around to face him, brows drawn when she noticed the back of the front door was composed of metal. He followed her curious stare.

“Bullet proof,” he supplied by way of explanation, slowly walking to her with his hands in his pockets. “As are the windows, so feel free to gaze away.”

She shook her head, eyes still wide. “You… live here?”

His face conveyed an air of indifference but his eyes shone brightly with a hidden emotion, one she recognized easily. Pride.

“I do.”

She released a slow breath, facing the city view once more. Of all the things she’d learned about Tom since their recent reunion- including the fact that he was a trained assassin- his home was he most shocking yet.

Perhaps it was because she always knew Tom to have a penchant for violence, so deep down his chosen career path hadn’t been as much of a surprise as a dissapointment. But for as long as she knew him, he’d always had an obsession with wealth, disdain for privilege, and now he lived like those he abhorred most. She always knew he’d become a success one day, be able to afford fine things, as children and teens they stayed up late countless nights talking about all the things they’d buy, all the places they’d travel.

But now it was real. Tom had actually fulfilled all those flippant fantasies. He’d become wealthy, successful.

By killing people.
The realization stole her breath, made her dizzy. She felt lightheaded, tipping to the side. Tom caught her, brows drawn. “Hermione?”

“I’m fine,” she said weakly, unaware her face was white as a sheet.

She gasped as he knelt down, sweeping her into his arms and walking her to the couch, laying her down gently. “Wait here. I’ll get you some water.”

She nodded, too overwhelmed to argue. The setting sun at her back cast long shadows over the room. She swallowed, rubbing a hand over face to try and regain her bearings. She listened to Tom rummage around through the kitchen before his steady tread neared, setting a glass before her. She glanced up, caught in his intense gaze.

“Are you alright?”

She nodded slowly. “Yes. I just... this is all so much.”

He watched her for several moments before asking, almost tentatively. “What do you think?”

Hermione blinked, at a loss for words. What did she think? She thought this was all insanity. A fever dream. Nothing seemed real anymore. Not even her own life. Surely she was dead, or lying in a coma somewhere, the last week a vivid hallucination of a broken fragile mind.

But the moment reminded her of something else, a time long ago, when Tom first revealed his finished motor bike to her eager eyes, acting nonchalant about the whole thing but she could tell he was intensely pleased with himself. She inhaled deeply, reaching for the glass in front of her.

“It’s lovely, Tom.”

He raised a brown, obviously expecting more from her. She sipped slowly at the water for an excuse to break his gaze, unable to bare the flash of disappointment in his eyes. But she couldn’t bring herself to shower him with false praise, either. That’s what his minions were for. She only offered him blatant honesty, whether he enjoyed hearing it or not. And she couldn’t muster excitement for the beautiful, modern flat when she knew it was financed by blood money.

Tom moved beside her, and she thought perhaps he was about to say more, attempt to coax more of a response from her, but instead he back away, crossing the room to turn on lights. The room appeared even larger now, the far walls of the connecting dining room illuminated, large, colorful artwork adorning the walls, fine upholstered seating surrounding a glossy table that looked unused.

She set the glass down, blinking when she realized Tom had set a coaster beneath it. The minor addition made the scenery more obscene. She remembered Tom breaking bottles behind tires, knuckles perpetually bruised and swollen from fights, dirt marring his face after sneaking into the dorms long after curfew, reeking of cigarette smoke. The raw, gritty boy of her past now owned a posh flat in one of the city’s richest neighborhoods, owned fine expensive furniture and used coasters.

She shook her head.

“I’m going to change, feel free to explore all you want.” His voice sounded flat, no doubt he was still simmering with disappointment over her lackluster reaction. She nodded mutely, eyes fixed to the large flat screen mounted to the opposite wall as his footsteps receded down the hall.

Once she was certain she was alone she slowly took to her feet, spinning in a circle, gazing upon the opulence surrounding her with a sense of detachment. She made her way to the kitchen, gazing
about the expensive appliances with resigned amusement. She was certain he bought them for appearances sake, because they were costly and therefore belonged in his home. She couldn’t imagine him in the kitchen, making pasta by hand or whipping frosting.

She was pulled from her musings when a knock sounded at the door.

Hermione froze, muscles tense, head snapping to the side as she gazed upon the entryway with wide eyes. She swallowed, terrified, and then snapped out of her daze as a second knock sounded, no more urgent than the first.

She took off at a sprint down the hall, passing three closed doors before reaching the one at the end, half open with light streaming out.

“Tom!” she whispered sharply, peering inside.

“I heard it.”

She reared back, gasping as he emerged from the room with a gun. “Stay in the bedroom. Don’t come out unless I tell you.”

She blinked. “But-”

His head whipped around, eyes narrowed. “Hermione. Do as I say. Now.”

She nodded quickly, nearly falling over as she stumbled back, retreating into the large bedroom, closing the door. She placed her hands on the wood, trembling, then quietly opened it ajar, placing her ear at the opening, straining to listen.

She heard Tom’s footsteps as he crossed the living room, stopping at a distance, no doubt at the door. There was a long pause, she wondered if it had a peephole, she didn’t recall seeing one. Then the sound of heavy locks echoed down the hall, four in total, followed by the sound of the knob turning.

She heard Tom’s deep murmur, catching only a hand full of words, not enough to piece together the message, but his tone conveyed great disdain.

That could only mean one thing.

She carefully opened the bedroom door the rest of the way, stepping outside. She placed a hand to the wall as she crept on her tiptoes towards the living room, pausing before the entrance, still concealed.

“-said you wouldn’t be making any more housecalls.”

“And I meant it,” came the all too familiar baritone, flooding her system with adrenaline, causing her hands to curl into claws at her side. “This is hardly a housecall. I’ve come to deliver your next mission. I figured what better time to do so than when Hermione’s here.”

She closed her eyes, willing herself to disappear. Of course. Of course he knew she was here.

“You can tell her to come in, no point hovering in the hallway when we’re already well acquainted.”

Her eyes snapped open, muscles tensed to spring, to run.

_Run to where?_

She released a breath, glancing futilely back to the bedroom, head snapping back around at the sound
of Tom’s voice.

“You don’t need to talk to her. I’ll relay all the information she needs. You’ll deal with me and only me.”

Yes. I don’t want to see him again.

“I’m afraid that will hardly due. After all, this is meant to be an equal partnership. And she’s determinedly strong, is she not? At least that’s what you told me this morning. Well, now is her time to shine.”

Hermione bit her lip, heart fit to burst. Her thoughts raced.

What am I doing, hiding like this? He already knows I’m here. I’m only making myself look foolish and terrified.

Never let them know you’re afraid. Even when you’re scared shitless, keep it hidden. Their greatest power lies in their ability to incite fear. Don’t let them have the satisfaction.

The latter was whispered into her mind in Tom’s youthful voice. His first lesson for her among many, after she’d agreed to undergo his tuteleg and learn to stand up for herself against the schoolyard bullies.

Hermione drew her shoulders back, taking a steadying breath that was far too shaky for her liking, and slowly emerging from her hiding spot.

Tom’s head whipped around, eyes narrowed, expression livid. Green merely smiled, looking far too pleased with himself.

“Ah, Hermione. How lovely to see you again.”

She grit her teeth, willing her heart to slow it’s rapid thrum, forcing her feet to work, to bring her further into the room.

“Mr. Green. I can’t say the feeling is mutual.”

He chuckled lowly, nodding. “Yes, I don’t blame you, given the circumstances of our first meeting. However I am excited we’ll be working together over the foreseeable future. I have a feeling we’ll develop as interesting of a relationship as the one I share with Tom.”

Upon hearing his name Tom stepped away from the man, backing up towards Hermione, as though he were using his entire person as a shield.

“Say what you came to say and get out.”

Green shook his head. “Of all the things I’ve taught you, I was never able to instill any manners.”

Tom stopped a few feet ahead of her, blocking most of her body from the man’s view. The gesture was chivalrous but did little to comfort her. From what little time she’d spent with Tom’s handler she’d derived he wasn’t a physically violent person, at least that wasn’t his greatest weapon. He preferred to disable his enemy with his mind, and had a subversive ability to do so.

She wet her lips, watching the man carefully. “Maybe we should all take a seat?”

The suggestion couldn’t have elicited more opposite reactions from the men before her. Tom spun around, brow raised comically high, mouth open but no sound emitting, as though he couldn’t even
think up a response. Green in contrast rocked back on his heels with a beaming smile, looking absolutely delighted, and made his way to the chair in front of the couch.

“That’s a fantastic idea, Hermione. I appreciate your ability to remain polite and civil despite your unease. It’s a pleasant change in pace,” his eyes latched onto Tom, “considering the normal company I keep.”

Tom sighed in resignation, shoulders tense and gun protruding from his waistband. Her eyes lingered on it but then snapped away.

No, killing Green wouldn’t accomplish anything but forfeiting their lives immediately after. Beyond that, she harbored her doubts Tom would even be capable of taking the man’s life by his own hand, despite his many promises to do so. His anger towards Green felt similar to his anger towards his mother, all consuming yet hollow, easily blown apart by his fundamental attachment. She suspected there was a twisted codependency at work, which wouldn’t surprise her given Tom’s young age of recruitment.

Which is why he needed her help cutting the ties.

She stepped forward, placing a hand on Tom’s shoulder, gaining his attention. “Let’s just get this over with,” she whispered, loud enough for Green to hear as he took a seat, looking comfortably at home.

Tom held her gaze for a long moment before nodding slowly, placing a hand at the small of her back and guiding her to the couch, then pressing a palm to her hip to halt her movements, directing her to sit at the farthest corner from the man watching them both with idle amusement.

She sat down and he followed suit, sandwiching her between the cushioned armrest and his hard body. She felt claustrophobic, unable to breath properly. She clutched the fabric, fingernails digging in, willing her mind to remain calm.

Tom rested his forearms on his knees, body tensed as though braced for impact. He kept his narrowed focus on the man sitting casually across from them. Finally the heavy silence was broken by Green’s cheery baritone.

“Well, I hate to interrupt your evening any more than necessary. I’ll get right to it then.”

Tom’s fingers curled into loose fists between his knees.

“You’re next target is local,” he continued, reaching into his coat and withdrawing a heavy piece of cardstock. He slid it across the table to Tom, who merely gazed down upon it, brow raised. “At least, they will be this weekend. You’ll complete the mission Sunday.”

Tom blinked, eyes snapping upward. “Sunday? You’re joking.”

“How often do I joke?”

Tom’s jaw ticked. “That’s not nearly enough time to get Hermione up and running.”

“It’s not nearly enough time to plot against me, you mean.”

Hermione drew back on the couch a tiny fraction, but she might as well of screamed her intentions with a megaphone for the attention it drew. Green looked to her sharply, predatory grin in place.

“Oh yes, I can only imagine all the plotting and planning going on within these walls. I am very
sorry to put a time limit on your strategizing. But I must admit I’m looking dreadfully forward to what the two of you come up with. You especially, Hermione.”

She swallowed thickly, pressing back into the cushions. His pale gaze cut to Tom. “Especially when you’ll be joined by two others.”

Tom blinked, spine rigid. “What?”

Green chuckled. “Oh yes, you didn’t think I’d trust you to see the mission through if it was just you and Hermione, did you? Perhaps you’ll be more inclined to follow the rules when surrounded by witnesses.”

Tom drew in a sharp breath, nostrils flaring. “I assume it’s Bella and Reg?”

Green tilted his head. “You’re half right. But I’ll leave the identity of your team a pleasant surprise. Same with your target. I can’t have you doing something foolish before hand to undermine the mission, can I?”

Hermione’s mind reeled.

Shite.

This would certainly throw a massive wrench in her plan. She scrambled through possible scenarios of how they could still execute it, but with at least two other people hovering about, watching their every move, it would be near impossible.

And they had practically no time to figure something else out.

It felt hopeless. Impossible.

Nothing is impossible. You’ll think of something.

You have to.

She pulled out of her thoughts when she felt his cold gaze upon her once more, lethal smile still in place. “As I said, I look forward to seeing what you come up with.”

She bit her tongue on retort, though she wasn’t certain what she would have said.

Tom spoke instead, anger barely tamped in his voice. “How can I plan for a mission when I have no idea who the target is?”

Green glanced to the paper on the table. “I’ve written down the address of where to go on Sunday morning. You’ll meet the other two. One will have the identity of your target and the other their location. Keeps the playing field a bit more even, in case you get any smart ideas. Though with Hermione in tow, I’m sure you’ll keep your violent urges to a minimum.”

Tom glared. “I’m finding it a touch difficult at the moment.”

Green laughed to himself, slowly taking to his feet, buttoning his suit jacket. “Yes, yes, you want to dismember me piece by piece while I’m still cognizant. I’m quite aware. Perhaps Hermione can inspire a bit more creativity in you, especially with her chemistry background.”

Hermione wrapped a hand around Tom’s arm, as much an anchor for him as herself. Green’s eyes tracked the movement, smile fading at the corners, eyes alight, then the expression melted away and his mask of pleasant indifference took its place.
“I suggest you spend less time plotting my demise and more time preparing Hermione for what's to come. This target won’t be easy.”

Tom glared up at him. “And why is that?”

Green’s smile showed fangs, dripping venom all over the glossy hardwood. “Because this person knows all about you, Tom. And most importantly, he’ll know you’re coming.”
A/N: Hello my pretty patronuses! Welcome back…

Well, it eventually had to happen… life finally caught up with me. Rat bastard. Given the length of these chapters and the other stories I’m writing my updates for KKBB will be a little erratic for the foreseeable future. Thank you for your patience.

Alrighty.

Enjoy!

Saturday July 16, 2005

“Give her, oh Lord, your peace and let your eternal light shine upon her.”

Harry bowed his head as the priest delivered the final prayer, arms folded before him.

“Amen.” The sea of mourners murmured as one.

Harry swallowed, glancing up, eyes fastened once more to the tall blonde dressed in pure pitch at the front of the crowd. Harry detested cemeteries almost as much as the morgue, yet unfortunately he was just as unable to escape their clutches.

But this particular event was unavoidable wherein the investigation was concerned. The Malfoy funeral was Harry’s best opportunity to meet possible leads, study those closest to the victims at their most vulnerable. It was perhaps a despotic view to take, but a lot could be discerned from people in mourning.

More specifically, how they reacted when they knew eyes were upon them. Who broke down in tears, who garnered sympathy, who withdrew into themselves. Who socialized and who acted as though they were simply enjoying a sunny afternoon in the park.

So far Draco hadn’t shed a tear, his expression remaining stoic throughout his father’s burial service and then his mother’s. A slender brunette with a swing bob hung from his arm throughout both ordeals, sobbing loudly, yet she shed no visible tears. Her tight black dress looked a touch too short to be deemed entirely appropriate for the occasion, but what did Harry know about fashion.

He found it fascinating Draco continually glanced at her with narrowed eyes, posture stiff and seemingly uncomfortable by her close proximity, yet he made no attempt to dislodge her blood red nails from his bicep or her heavily made up face from its spot on his shoulder.

Harry found it even more fascinating that a tall blonde in a more conservative dress watched the pair with a heated glare throughout the double procession. Draco seemed to studiously ignore her while many others glanced between the pair with raised brows and whispers.

Harry tucked his hands in his pockets as the large group slowly broke apart following the priest’s dismissal, allowing the gravediggers to complete their work. Most turned to Draco, forming a long line to shake his hand, as though they hadn’t spoken to him throughout the private viewing. Harry had anticipated this, arriving towards the end but still unable to secure a moment of time with the Malfoy heir, sought after as he was by the crowd of aristocratic elite.
Harry had hung around the back of the opulent room before giving up and arriving to the cemetery early, wandering the graves aimlessly, mind drifting to Sirius, the case, everything in between. It had been a small mercy for his sleep deprived sanity when the hearse and long fleet of private cars arrived.

He still had yet to speak with Draco directly, though their eyes had connected several times throughout the priest’s speech. Harry had kept his face void of emotion, a mirror image of the blonde’s. But the other man’s silver gaze burned brightly, making Harry feel a bit on edge, as though he were trying to convey a message through his eyes alone but Harry was frustratingly unable to interpret it.

Now that the crowd was once again allowed to mingle Harry stood back, observing everything in his path. The black suits and dresses looked obscenely expensive, their bespoke nature obvious even to his untrained eye.

He found it curious how most people curried for Draco’s favor. Then again, maybe it wasn’t that strange. The man was, after all, the sole inheritor of his family’s great fortune. Not only that, but he was the only Malfoy left to his name, surely that had impact on a business and legal scale far beyond Harry’s comprehension.

But as much as Draco stood to gain, his words from their dinner rang though Harry’s head on a loop.

“I can assure you I would never bring harm to my mother. And when I find the person responsible for doing so no courtroom or prison cell will be able to protect them from me.”

Draco’s face betrayed no turmoil, but his eyes surely did. Harry wondered if that was the message being conveyed. Deep seeded grief, and unbridled rage. Something Harry was quite familiar with. It was a toxic gas that filled your lungs, poisoned your every breath, but it was as addictive as it was fatal, a driving force that possessed your every waking thought.

...when I find the person responsible for doing so no courtroom or prison cell will be able to protect them from me…

Harry sighed, forcing those thoughts aside to once more gaze upon the sea of so called mourners. The closer he looked, the more crocodile tears he spotted. He also saw a few people with expensive cameras and notepads hovering along the perimeter, trying to look inconspicuous. He wondered if Draco was aware the press had infiltrated his parent’s funeral, or if he even cared at this point. The man obviously harbored no love for the media, but he also seemed resigned to their constant presence in his life. Why should today be any different?

Harry’s hands curled into fists in his pockets, feeling outraged on behalf of Malfoy. He quickly shook his head, wondering where the hell that swell of emotion came from. He barely knew him. He was no doubt projecting his own haunted history onto the stranger, their loss aligning them in his mind.

This is hardly the same thing. Your parents weren’t murdered.

Weren’t they?

Harry closed his eyes, inhaling deep, slow, willing the treacherous thoughts at bay. Now was most certainly not the time to pick at that scab. It would only throw him off his game, set him on a course that was neither here nor there. As it always did.

He opened his eyes, blinking in surprise when he noticed Draco staring directly at him, pale brow
raised, looking supremely uninterested in whatever the short round woman standing before him was prattling on about. Her hat was five times larger than her head, giving her a cartoon quality that made Harry smirk. Draco copied his expression, and the tension snapped like a band.

As she continued to drone on Harry mimed tipping an invisible hat, and Draco’s smirk turned into a bark of laughter that he quickly tried to hide as a cough. The rotund women stopped mid sentence, hands aloft in whatever animated story she was telling, and started to pat him violently on the back, which caused Draco to squirm away awkwardly, making Harry burst into a fit of laughter that drew the gazes of a nearby group.

“Sorry,” he murmured, turning his back to hide his smile. He glanced back towards the blonde and was surprised to see him cutting a path across the cemetery directly towards Harry, the group at his back looking confused and forlorn at his sudden abandonment.

Harry cleared his throat, standing still and watching each measured step the man took, his gate as elegant and refined as the rest of him, even when he was clearly at his wit’s end. Harry envied his easy mannerisms, his own stride resembling a drunken stag, according to Sirius-

Harry stopped short, even thinking his godfather’s name a painful shot to the heart. He swallowed heavily, concentrating on the man fast approaching. Finally when he was within earshot Harry nodded in acknowledgement.

“Malfoy. My condolences. The service was beauti-”

“Cut the shite, Potter. I came over because you aren’t like the rest of the lemmings here, don’t start acting like it now.”

Harry rolled his eyes. Draco was in rare form today it seemed. But he’d be remiss if he didn’t admit he enjoyed the scathing banter. At least it was real, tangible, and perfectly distracting from the otherwise somber atmosphere that served as a constant reminder of Thursday night’s events.

“Alright then. I thought the priest droned on a bit. And I smelled alcohol on his breath when he passed me earlier.”

Draco tipped his head, eyes roaming Harry from bottom to top. “I thought I told you to purchase a suitable outfit. You look like a homeless drifter that wandered in.”

“Well I heard there was free food.”

“I suppose you’re desperate for a handout these days, seeing as you were fired for being unable to hold your bladder for longer than five minutes. I do hope you don’t have any accidents at the cemetery. But if you find yourself unable to hold it, I’m happy to suggest a few graves you might piss on.”

“I’d appreciate the recommendations.”

Draco held his emerald gaze for several seconds before his mask broke, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. Harry mimicked him, feeling his chest loosen at their rapid fire exchange. For a few moments he forgot where he was, what all this meant. But the dark cloud once more ascended, covering them both with its torrential downpour.

“Have you spoken to any of the guests?”

Harry nodded. “A few. Most aren’t very personable. At least not with me. Probably the state of my clothing, they know I’m not one of them.”
“More likely your hair. But I see your point. I can introduce you to anyone of interest. A voucher from me is the same as being knighted.”

Harry raised a brow. “And here I thought the circumstances of today might humble you a bit.”

Draco laughed without humor. “Please. Have you seen all the women eye fucking me. It’s despicable. And yet it does great and terrible things for my ego.”

Harry’s eyes drifted past the blonde, locking onto the petite brunette from earlier, watching their exchange with narrowed eyes, hands firmly on her hips and high heel tapping against the grass as though timing his absence.

“I noticed two women doing so, though I’d say one of them was attempting to skewer you through the center with her stare alone.”

Draco’s jaw ticked. “Tori.”

Harry’s eyes snapped away from the irate brunette and back to the man before him. “Tori?”

“My ex. She wasn’t happy to see Pansy on my arm. I wasn’t either, but I did a slightly better job of hiding it.”

Harry nodded. “Only just. I take it Pansy is the five foot five bundle of joy giving me the evil eye?”

Draco didn’t need to turn around to confirm it. “Yes.”

“That name sounds familiar. I think I read about her in one of the articles about your family that was published recently. She’s another ex?”

Draco scoffed. “Hardly. The fucking press will print anything to sell papers. Pansy and I never dated. Our families have been friends since we were in swaddling clothes. I consider her a petulant little sister. Nothing more.”

“I see. Does she know that?”

Draco raised a brow, silver grin lighting his face. “I can’t help that women develop unhealthy obsessions with me.”

“And would any of these obsessions be unhealthy enough to kill for?”

Draco’s easy grin faded, eyes narrowing. “Of course not. And even if I were playing devil’s advocate, why would they target my parents instead of me?”

Harry shrugged nonchalantly. “Because if you were dead you’d be slightly harder to marry. Killing those you loved most, at least those they assumed you loved most, would be a way to hurt you, inflict some of the pain that they feel you’ve caused them. Revenge motivated by passion.”

Draco blinked, falling silent for several beats, before simply uttering. “No.”

Harry nodded. “Just covering my bases.” He glanced around the milling crowd once more, attempting to affect an air of calm. “Speaking of which… does the name Corban Yaxley mean anything to you?”

Draco blinked for a second time, brows drawing together. “Yes. He was my father’s financial advisor.”
Harry’s heart lurched in his chest, eyes snapping back, though he did his best to keep his face blank. “Was?”

_Yaxley’s death hasn’t been announced, if he already knows about it then..._

Draco looked at Harry as though he was too idiotic to breathe. “My father’s dead, Potter, in case it’s escaped your notice.”

Harry held his gaze for several seconds, carefully studying his reaction, searching for any signs of duplicity. Finally he relented.

“Yaxley is dead. Murdered Wednesday evening in Vienna.”

Draco’s spine straightened. “By the same people who killed my parents?”

“Yes.”

The blonde swallowed heavily. “Bloody hell. Wait. What are you doing here? Why aren’t you in Vienna chasing them down?”

Harry finally glanced away. “I was. Just got back this morning. They would have fled the country by now. They know we’re onto them.”

Draco stepped closer. “That’s unacceptable, your shoddy detective work will not interfere with finding my-”

“One of them stabbed my partner in the chest, he’s in critical care, in a coma. I came back to London to oversee his transfer to Mungo’s later today. Then I’m resuming the search.”

Draco’s mouth lingered open for a beat before his jaw snapped shut, eyes still narrowed but lacking the heat from moments before. He tucked his hands in his pockets, tense shoulders easing. The silence became unbearable, Harry searched his mind for something to break the awkward tension before it reached a boiling point, but drew a blank. To his surprise Draco spoke first.

“I regret to hear that.”

Harry was unsure whether he was referring to Sirius’s attack or the fact that the killer yet evaded them, but decided it really didn’t matter. Suddenly Draco’s posture tensed again.

“Did you say one of them?”

“Yes. We know there’s a female working with the male whose picture I showed you. As of yet we don’t have her likeness, but I know she’s fairly young and attractive, most likely physically fit as well. I came to warn you to look out. If there’s some connection between Yaxley and your father then you could be a target as well. Be on the lookout for anyone you don’t know getting too close. Don’t trust anyone.”

The blonde’s expression remained unreadable. “I never do.”

Harry searched his mercurial gaze for another beat. “If you know about the dealings between Yaxley and your father I’d like to be informed. It could help pinpoint any additional targets, or lead to the assailants themselves.”

Draco was silent for several moments before taking a step back in the grass. “I’ll take a look at their past contracts this weekend, see what I can find. I take it this means you’re still leading the
“An investigation?”

Harry furrowed his brow. “Of course.”

“If you needed to step out, because of your partner, it would be understandable.”

Harry tilted his head, confused. Neville had alluded to the same thing last night. Was Harry a horrible person for continuing the mission? It had never even occurred to him to back down.

“I already told you, I won’t stop until I find the man who killed your mother, and now I’m even more driven to find the woman who stabbed my friend.”

A ray of sunlight broke through overhead and fell upon Draco’s eyes, making them glow otherworldly for a moment before the clouds closed once more. Harry blinked, wondering if he imagined it.

“I trust you, Potter. I trust that you’ll find them, no matter the cost. Don’t disappoint me.”

Harry released the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

“I don’t make promises I can’t keep, Malfoy. And I promise you, nothing will stop me.”

Sirius lay still as death in the narrow bed, machines beeping all around him, creating a sympathy of bleak despair. His eyes flickered rapidly behind translucent lids, almost as though he were merely asleep, yet his chalky pallor told another story.

Remus kept guard beside him, head bent and body turned towards the head of the bed from where he sat hunched in his chair.

Both men had arrived to St. Mungo’s an hour earlier, Harry awaiting their presence in the main lobby. Remus was remanded to wait with him while they set Sirius up in a private room. Harry had already called Dumbledore, requesting around the clock guards. He wouldn’t allow his godfather to suffer the same fate as Narcissa.

They’d finally been allowed to go up once he was settled, his condition unchanged since last night. They’d been keeping silent company ever since, Remus posted beside the bed like a sentinel and Harry pacing the room, only stopping to glance out the window, eyes narrowed, wondering if it was possible to scale the side of the building to gain entry. He debated asking for a new room, but then realized all the rooms in this wing were along the east facing perimeter.

There was little else to distract from the constant beeping of the heart rate monitor besides obsessing over security measures, and replaying the events of the attack over and over in his mind until he was overcome with madness.

He heard a slight shuffling and glanced sharply over his shoulder. Remus had crossed his legs, leaning back in the chair, eyes heavy. No doubt he’d spent the entire night wide awake, terrified Sirius would pass away the moment he fell asleep. Harry had been in a similar state until finally departing for his red eye flight to London, equally plagued by fear.

He hadn’t spoken to Remus very much up to this point, other than relaying the news initially, though for the life of him he barely remembered that phone call, the surge of adrenaline scrambling his thoughts. After Remus arrived in Vienna Harry tried to afford the man as much privacy as possible. But that wasn’t the true reason for his avoidance and he knew it.
Harry was deeply ashamed to be in the same room as Remus, feeling directly responsible for the state his godfather currently resided. He didn’t deserve to pace the tiled floor in such close proximity, and the overwhelming guilt and shame was destroying him from the inside out.

Finally, he couldn’t bear another moment of silence. He stopped pacing and took a deep breath, scraping together all the courage he could muster, gazing down at his black dress shoes, still garbed in the outfit he wore to the funeral.

“Rem…” he stopped short, unsure how to continue, his chest a raw, gaping wound. “Remus, I’m so sorry.”

Remus blinked slowly, no doubt startled by the sudden break in silence, and pulled his focus away from Sirius to stare at Harry. “It’s not your fault, kid.”

Harry swallowed. “I should have been there. I should have answered his first call. If I had I would have talked him out of following her alone.”

Remus gave a sad smile. “No one can talk Sirius out of anything once he sets his mind to it. You know that as well as I do.”

Harry ran a hand through his already vertical locks. “There’s something I could have done-”

“Harry, look at me.”

Harry took a deep breath before reluctantly turning his gaze upwards. Remus adjusted in his chair to better face him, expression somber.

“Listen to me carefully. This is not your fault. Do you understand?”

Harry inhaled sharply, unable to form words.

“You are not to blame for any part of this,” Remus continued, voice measured. “The only people to blame are the killers who you are going to find and stop. That’s what you guys do. As dangerous as it is, as much as it keeps me up at night with worry, it’s your calling, and I’ve learned to accept it.”

He leaned forward, eyes bright. “Sirius went after her because he couldn’t sit by and risk her hurting anyone else. If your roles were reversed you would have done the same thing. You know you would have. And then you’d be the one in this bed and I’d be trying to convince Sirius it wasn’t his fault. I’d rather die than lose either of you, but if I had to choose, I know I can handle Sirius being in this state more than I could handle seeing you in it.”

Harry swallowed thickly, scuffing his shoe along the ground, focusing on anything other than the sincerity in the man’s eyes. Sirius always carefully avoided emotional intimacy, heavy topics, but Remus went right for the jugular each time, eliciting a bevy of emotions with just one look.

Once Harry regulated his breathing enough to ensure he wasn’t about to break apart at the seams he nodded slowly, gazing up, his eyes two faceted emeralds in his skull, hard and glimmering, reflecting the light at every angle.

“I’m going to find them, Remus. Both killers. And I’m going to make them suffer for the pain they’ve inflicted.”

Remus’s sandy brows drew together. “Harry, that’s not the way. You can’t let them change you by destroying your principals.”
“My principals were shattered the moment I found Sirius on that dance floor bleeding to death.”

“I know you’re angry but-”

Harry shook his head, stepping closer. “I’m not angry, Remus. Angry is far too tame a word for it. She tried to take away one of the only people I have left in this world. Prison is too good for her.”

Remus studied Harry’s tense posture carefully, eyes troubled, as though he saw something that unsettled him. “Harry… Sirius wouldn’t want you to continue down that path. Neither would your parents.”

Harry felt his chest crack open anew, his blood spilling out onto the floor with every beat of his heart.

Remus may not have been a field agent, trained in physical combat or weaponry, but he knew just how to take down an adversary without having to lift a finger.

Harry blinked several times, feeling barely contained within his own skin.

“That isn’t fair. They aren’t here anymore, Remus. They don’t get a vote.”

“This isn’t about voting. You knew your parents, Harry. Knew the kind of people they were. They would never want to see you compromise your morals for the sake of revenge.”

“This isn’t about revenge, it’s about justice!”

“Is it?”

Harry was panting, chest heaving beneath the emotional onslaught he’d managed to keep tamped down until now. He shook his head, turning away and striding to the window, gazing out without actually seeing anything beyond the red haze clouding his vision. He heard Remus stand and approach, and the wall of anger crumbled as soon as he felt a hand grasp his shoulder. Harry spun around and leaned into the man’s embrace, eyes squeezed shut, body quaking. It was too much. The last week, the last two days, the last hour… it was just too much.

After several moments of leaning into Remus’s anchoring weight, breathing in his familiar and comforting scent, he pulled back to ask a question that had been simmering at the forefront of his mind for several hours, not bothering to ease the man into the sudden change in topic.

“Rem, do you trust Dumbledore?”

As expected, Remus looked adequately surprised. “What?”

Harry stepped back, affixing him with a far more calm and steady gaze than he wore moments ago. “Dumbledore. Do you trust him?”

Remus swallowed, and Harry could see the wheels turning behind his eyes.

“Don’t,” he asked, voice worn and exhausted. “Please don’t sugar coat it, don’t censor it. Just tell me the truth. Whatever the truth is, I need to know. You’re the only person I can ask that I trust.”

Remus sighed, nodding in silent resignation. “I take it you’re having reservations?”

“Yes. But I can’t explain why. It’s just a feeling I can’t escape. Everytime I’m around him I feel it. I want to understand. Sirius brushed me aside each time I asked. But I know you won’t.”
Remus chewed on the inside of his cheek for a moment before relenting. “Both mine and Sirius’s relationship with Albus is complicated. Our most recent interaction with him was when he petitioned the courts on Sirius’s behalf to gain full custody of you after you left your relatives. He also saw to it that they didn’t press any charges against him for the attack against your uncle.”

Harry nodded, remembering the explosive episode well. “But there’s more, isn’t there?”

Remus released a long sigh. “Sirius resents Dumbledore for tapping James for the mission that ended up being his last.”

Harry blinked, heart lurching. “Wait, Dumbledore what the lead on the Dubai mission?”

Remus nodded. “Yes, he hand picked the team himself. Sirius was working on assignment in South America at the time, James was pulled from another case to assist.”

Harry shook his head. “That’s impossible. I’ve dug up every bit of information there is on my dad’s cases, especially the final one. Dumbledore’s name never appeared on any of the official documents. And he told me himself he regrets not being there when dad died, said he was away on another assignment.”

Remus tilted his head. “Did he now.”

The silence that followed was deafening. Harry felt light headed with the revelation, all the questions swirling around in his mind. “I… why would he lie? Do you think he’s hiding something?”

Remus tucked his hands in his pockets. “If you’re asking whether I think he meant for harm to come to James, then no, I don’t. He cared for your father a great deal, and was devastated by his passing. He couldn’t make it to the funeral but came by the house shortly after, clearly broken apart by both your parents’ deaths. That said, I think Dumbledore got to be where he is today by being very good at keeping secrets. And if his name never appeared on any of the official documentation then I certainly think there was a reason for it, just as there’s a reason he chose to keep this information from you. Maybe it’s to avoid a conflict of interest from occurring on the current investigation. Maybe it’s guilt. Or maybe it’s something else. But I don’t believe it’s anything sinister, nor do I believe it’s worth upturning your belief system to uncover.”

Harry gazed back at the man for several heavy beats, heart still keeping a bruising pace beneath his ribcage. Finally he took a step back.

“I need to meet with Nev and Luna, update them on the investigation and Sirius’s condition.”

Remus opened and closed his mouth as he watched Harry walk hastily to the door. He managed to find his voice just as Harry grasped the handle.

“Harry, please, remember what I said. Don’t lose sight of who you are.”

Harry swallowed heavily, glancing over his shoulder. “I won’t upturn my belief system for Dumbledore,” he vowed, eyes determined. “But I’ll set the world on fire to find the truth.”

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**Sunday January 4, 2004**

Tom brought the paper cup to his lips, storm cloud eyes narrowed over the rim.

Fixated. Possessed.
She stood two gates ahead, wringing her hands together, rocking on her heels as she glanced around anxiously. She’d arrived nearly thirty minutes ago. Tom had been waiting for nearly an hour, knowing she’d arrive.

To pick up her boyfriend.

Ugh. The word caused bile to rise in his throat at even the mere thought.

He’d managed to keep away from her for an entire week since first seeing her on campus in order to dig up every bit of information he could on this Victor character. He hadn’t been impressed by his findings.

A run of the mill athlete, attending UCL at the grace of a sports scholarship, grades subpar at best. He’d seen photos online. He begrudgingly admitted the man was somewhat attractive. If you had a thing for oafish, barrel chested neanderthals.

Obviously Tom had wanted to seek him out in person, but that would have required traveling to Bulgaria, where the man spent his extended holiday break each year, according to his travel records.

To his great relief Hermione had remained behind. So Tom stayed in London, filling his days with watching her instead. He was called away twice for a job, one a simple stake out mission and the other an assassination. He wrapped up both assignments in record time. Even Green seemed somewhat suspicious. Tom had played it off as fatigue, burnout, asking for a few weeks off. He was shocked that his handler had acquiesced, calling it an early Christmas present.

Tom rolled his eyes at the gesture but had taken up the offer nonetheless, filling his days and nights with Hermione. He felt an overwhelming surge of emotions where she was concerned. Seeing her again after so long, at his heart’s leisure, stirred up strong feelings of desire and longing.

Knowing she had aligned herself with another man stirred up feelings of homicidal rage and madness.

But he managed to talk himself out of doing something terribly foolish. So far.

He reluctantly accepted that the fault was his own. Hermione had no idea he was even still alive. It had been seven years since she last saw him, five years since she’d left the Orphanage, had to fend for herself in the world. It was perfectly reasonable that she’d formed a relationship. He was equal parts surprised and relieved she’d only had the one, and that it had formed quite recently, if his foray into her past was accurate.

He wondered why she hadn’t had any other boyfriends before now. She was beautiful and intelligent, kind and loyal. The perfect catch. He’d long been haunted with dark thoughts about other men’s hands on her, roaming her curves, possessing her mouth, calling her theirs. It didn’t feel good to see her with someone else, but at least this relationship was new enough to warrant little concern to him. It wasn’t as if she was married with two point five children and a white picket fence.

Tom flexed his jaw as the door opened and passengers began spilling out into the airport, luggage in tow and bags in hand. Hermione’s spine straightened. Tom raised a brow as he watched her take a step back, limbs rigid, looking almost at though she were going to bolt.

Interesting.

Then his eyes narrowed once more as he saw a familiar face tower above the rest, dark eyes alight upon her, expression joyous.
“Hermione!”

She seemed to snap out of whatever reverie had possessed her, stepping forward and bouncing on her heels as she waited patiently for him to reach her.

*At least she isn’t running into his arms like an overdramatic bint.*

*Perhaps she didn’t miss him as much as he missed her.*

The thought did little to comfort him as the large man reached her, wrapping heavy arms around her waist and lifting her up, causing her to giggle and squirm before he captured her mouth with his own.

Tom glanced away, chest seizing.

He’d thought once a time, years ago, that subjecting himself to around the clock fantasies of her was a study in self torture.

He’d been wrong.

Watching her interact with the man she labeled as hers, whom she allowed to label her as his, *this* was torture. Beyond the capacity of anything he’d ever known. Beyond the cruel discipline his mentors had subjected him to during his long months of training.

Beyond his mother’s unyielding, punishing hand.

He drew in a sharp breath, closing his eyes briefly before setting his cup aside and taking to his feet, walking briskly away from the scene unfolding at his back. He tucked his fists into his coat pockets and grit his teeth, feeling a cold resolve sink into his skin and wrap around his bones.

One thing was for absolute certain.

This would simply not do.

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**Saturday July 16, 2005**

“We have to abandon the plan.”

“It could still work—”

“No, it won’t. Trust me Hermione, it’s too risky.”

She sighed deeply, running a hand through her hair in frustration. “Well we have to think of something else then!”

“There isn’t enough time. And we can’t formulate any type of plan when we don’t know who we’re going to be working with. There’s too many unknown variables. Green set it up like this on purpose. He’s boxed us in and he knows it.”

“Well what’s the alternative? Killing someone?”

Tom raised a brow, lips pressed thin. She shook her head, curls bouncing. “No. Absolutely not. I can’t—”

“You won’t have to. You don’t even have to look. I’ll take care of it.”
She swallowed thickly. “No. We have to think of something else. The whole point was to get you out of this life.”

“What’s three more scores, Hermione? In the grand scheme of my career it’s nothing.”

She furrowed her brows, taking a step back. “Nothing?”

He sighed, glancing away. “That’s not what I meant.”

“That’s exactly what you meant! You mean taking three more lives is barely a notch on the belt. You have no regard for-”

“You were the one who said you wanted to take Green up on his offer! I was willing to let you go-”

“Don’t turn this around on me! We agreed to work together to get you out and now you’re going back on your word-”

“I am not! When I agreed to your plan I thought it was going to be just the two of us on assignment. Now that we’ll be working with more people it changes everything. And if I know Green then he’s set us up with individuals who will only serve to make the job more difficult.”

She curled her hands at her sides, arms rigid, unable to look at him. In the long silence that followed all she could hear was the rapid thrumming of her heart.

“Hermione… Listen. Green is testing us. If we play by his rules he’ll loosen the shackles, we can carry out the plan on the next target-”

“And if he pairs us with more people then, too? Are we just going to go through with all three homicides?”

“As I said before, you won’t have to do anything.”

She gazed down at him from her rampant pace around the living room, irritated by his calm and poised sprawl across the couch. How could he speak so flippantly about such things? How could he be so- so-

So cold?

She blinked, halting her movements.

*He’s used to this. He takes lives as easily as other people grocery shop. Or have you conveniently forgotten that fact?*

“Hermione, get out of your head before you get lost in it.”

She crossed her arms protectively. “Tom, we have to think of something. Please.”

She held his gaze, eyes bright with desperate plea. She’d used the expression a handful of times in their youth, always to success, which is why she avoided implementing it too often, lest it lose its potency. Tom was usually the one swaying her to his side of things, but if she held the rope just right, maneuvered it carefully enough, she knew how to lure him to her end.

It seemed the years apart hadn’t lessened her ability to affect him just so.

He sighed, shaking his head in irritation and leaning forward. “ Fucking hell. You realise we’re more likely to get ourselves killed trying to save some corrupt politician?”
She smiled, stepping in close and looping her hands behind his neck, sensing her victory in his scathing words. He looked up at her through a narrowed gaze, large hands skimming along her hips and around her backside, firmly grabbing her arse.

Yes, she’d won this round.

“Thank you, Tom,” she whispered, biting her lip as he pulled her forward, tipping her off balance and into his body.

She leaned her head down on instinct, warmth already pooling at her core, but before her lips could make contact with heated skin there was a loud, rapid pounding at the front door.

She gasped as Tom seized her by the waist, practically tossing her to the couch beside him, springing to his feet in one fluid movement. She choked on her hair, sweeping it out of her face, blinking rapidly.

“Is it Green?” She whispered sharply, blood pumping furiously as she watched him pick up the gun he’d taken to carrying with him through the flat, as though expecting someone to leap out of the cabinets at a moments notice.

His gaze narrowed, glued to the door, falling into a defensive stance she was beginning to recognize as a second skin.

“No. That’s not his knock. Go to the bedroom.”

Her brows drew together, not appreciating the command and wanting to argue on instinct, but as the urgent knock sounded again she thought better of it, nodding instead and running into the hall. She made it halfway to the bedroom before hesitating.

What if Tom needs me?

She whipped around.

And what help could you possibly provide if he’s overpowered?

She bit her lip, sidling up to the wall and keeping flush against it.

I just need to be able to hear what’s happening, so I know if I need to crawl out the window or something...

She blinked, wondering if all the windows in the flat were bullet proof.

Of course they were. Tom would spare no expense, take no risk.

How the hell am I supposed to escape if something happens to him?

She shook the thought away, knowing in her heart it was a moot point. If Tom was killed she wouldn’t have the desire to run, she’d rather lay down beside him and accept the same fate.

The realization made her heart stutter. She felt awash with shame and disgust, blinded by it. But her inner turmoil was drowned out by the sound of heavy locks turning. She sucked in a sharp breath and held it.

The door opened.

There was a full second of mind numbing silence before she heard Tom’s voice.
Harry paused outside the blood red door, bracing himself before finally grasping the handle and pushing his way in.

As he suspected, Luna and Neville were already inside the office. What he didn’t expect was for them to be standing less than a foot apart, Neville with his head bent down while Luna spoke quietly in his ear. Harry blinked and by the time he regained sight of them an instant later they stood apart, facing him with eager gazes.

There was a heavy beat of silence, the air thick with it, before Luna took a step forward. “Harry. It’s good to see you. How is he?”

Harry blinked again, staring at her blankly before he could almost hear the click of his mind returning to him. He cleared his throat, stepping fully inside and shutting the door.

“He’s at Mungo’s in a private room. Dumbledore has assigned round the clock security outside his door, Rem is there now.”

Luna nodded, then glanced to Neville with an expectant look that Harry couldn’t begin to interpret. He’d only been gone for two days, had they already developed a wordless communication?

Neville swallowed as he met her blue gaze and then glanced nervously to Harry. “I think she meant, how is he doing… healthwise…”

Harry studied them a moment longer before responding, tone flat. “He’s holding stable. For now at least. The doctors can’t give us an ETA on when his condition will improve, if ever.”

If he delivered the words without emotion then perhaps he wouldn’t feel any emotion. He couldn’t afford to feel anything beyond his anger. Not now. Not anything so heavy as to distract from the task at hand.

The red hot boiling rage would sustain him until he found Nikita and wrapped his hands around her throat-

“Harry, please... Don’t lose sight of who you are.”

He sighed, shaking his head as if to dislodge Remus’s parting words from his mind.

“Thank you for meeting me here on a Saturday,” he said, desperate to push ahead in the conversation. “I wanted to touch base with you both about our findings in Vienna, and hear any updates you had for me. For obvious reasons, it’s vital we move fast, that’s the only way we’ll be able to catch up with them, and eventually move ahead of them.”

To his great frustration Neville and Luna shared another long look. Harry swallowed past the increasing tightness in this throat. He hated being out of the loop, feeling like he was in the dark about something. And he wouldn’t stand for it when it came to this investigation. He was the leader, dammit!

“What is it?” he snapped, earning both their attention immediately. Neville looked properly chastised and nervous, but Luna looked calm and placid as a summer lake, which only served to infuriate him further. He locked gazes with her.

“You don’t seem surprised about the news that there’s more than one killer.” He narrowed his eyes,
shifting his focus to the tall lanky man at her side. “I take it you went behind my back and told her about our conversation last night?”

Neville opened his mouth like a scared, gaping fish, shaking his head earnestly but not emitting any sound. Then Luna stepped in front of him, a human shield, which would have been comical given her fairy like size if it wasn’t so damn frustrating.

“I wasn’t aware you spoke with Neville last night,” her voice was even and patient, but her eyes narrowed a fraction, expression tensing. “Dumbledore informed us there is likely a team of assassins operating throughout Europe and to be careful as we continue-”

“So you’re still speaking to him behind my back? After I told you not to?” He felt separate from his body, watching someone else’s face contort in rage and someone else’s hands tighten to fists.

She didn’t flinch. “You told me you would take over the task of providing him with regular updates on our progress. I haven’t reached out to him since. He called me last night to warn me about the possibility of our investigation coming to light, and to be on the lookout for suspicious characters beyond the man in the sketch. He said you would be providing more information when you returned, but he wanted to make sure Neville and I watched our backs in the meantime.”

Harry blinked, desperately wanting to argue further, to break something, to punch his hand through the wall just to release some of the pent up stress and aggression. He was so fucking tired of hearing that man’s name, of his never ending influence…

“Harry, mate... are you okay?”

Harry blinked again, and through the haze of red he saw Luna standing rigid and stiff, shoulders drawn, Neville close behind, hand bracing her arm as though to move her out of the way. A united front. Against him.

Harry reared back.

Bloody hell.

He ran a hand over his face, instantly flipping his expression of irate madness into weary shock.

“Christ... I- I’m sorry,” he whispered, voice betraying just how exhausted he felt. He glanced between them, swallowing. “I’m sorry, Luna. I didn’t- I’m not-”

She put him out of his misery as he struggled to the find the words to embody the storm raging inside him.

“It’s alright,” her expression softened to its recognizable sweetness. “I understand.”

He shook his head. “That doesn’t excuse me for being a complete arse.”

She smiled as though he just told her they were expecting nothing but sunshine for the next week.

“You’ve just undergone a very traumatic event, Harry. At least you didn’t pull a gun on me.”

Harry blinked, mouth opening but no response coming to mind. Then Neville let out a short laugh and the tension snapped like a stale cracker. Harry ran a hand through his hair and chuckled as well, finally finding an outlet for his stress and overwrought nerves.

It took him a few moments to regain his footing, suddenly feeling light headed and wrung out. He
leaned against the nearest desk and was relieved to see their posture had eased as well, though Neville still hovered closely behind her slight figure.

“I didn’t mean to take my anger out on the two of you. You didn’t deserve that. It won’t happen again.”

Neville flushed and looked down, nodding lightly, while Luna tipped her head and studied Harry, her gaze almost annerving before she spoke. “When’s the last time you slept?”

Harry sighed. “I managed a couple hours last night.”

He could tell she didn’t believe the lie. After he’d gotten off the phone with Neville he’d spent the remaining wee hours of dusk glancing through the contents of the thumb drive, too exhausted to make sense of it and too worked up to attempt sleep. The he’d gone to the airport, returned to London, and the madness had started anew.

Luna must have sensed his apprehension and let the subject rest. Harry pushed forward before the conversation could once more be derailed.

“So Dumbledore told you we’re looking for a team of killers. What else did he say?”

“Nothing really,” she provided. “He said that one of the suspects is a woman, but we have no physical description.”

Harry nodded, still perched on the edge of the desk. “Sirius followed her from the metro to a nightclub by the river. He called me, I was tied up somewhere else, I’ll get into that in a moment,” he exchanged a charged look with Neville before returning his gaze to the blonde. “On his voicemail he referred to her as La Femme Nikita. Since then I’ve been calling her Nikita as well, makes it easier to keep track now that we have multiple targets.”

Luna nodded. “We should create one for—”

“How about Melvin?” Neville suddenly said, voice high and excited, making both Harry and Luna jump slightly at the outburst.

Harry tilted his head. “Melvin?”

“The male killer was pretending to be a janitor… and Melvin Ferd was the toxic avenger. He was a janitor before his accident, and then he got exposed to toxic waste and… well, I mean, he became a crime fighting janitor and…” he voice trailed off as he noticed Harry’s smirk. He glanced anxiously to Luna and flushed crimson beneath her appraising smile.

“That’s very creative, Neville. But I think it will be easier for Luna and I if we refer to him as The Janitor. He doesn’t deserve to be classified with the likes of a crime fighting superhero.”

Neville nodded, rubbing his neck and ducking his head in embarrassment.

“So we know of Nikita and The Janitor, any others?” Luna prompted, turning back to Harry.

“Sirius thought there might have been a third manning the helm from the security office. Makes sense, as video footage was missing or altered. Unfortunately we won’t be able to pursue the Vienna investigation any further. There’s strong opposing forces at work, we can’t trust anyone.”

*Just like Dumbledore warned me…*
Harry shook his head free of the stray thoughts.

“There’s more…” he began tentatively, taking a deep breath. “While Sirius was pursuing the target I was meeting with his contact in the Russian Embassy. He all but confirmed Yaxley was working with them in collusion, though against who or what I don’t know.”

He paused, fixing both his partners with an intense stare. “He also provided me with a piece of information that I feel is vital to the case. But I need you both to promise me something, here and now.”

Neville straightened beneath the force in Harry’s voice. Luna merely tilted her head.

“This information is extremely sensitive. Two people have been murdered in pursuit of its recovery already. By viewing it you are knowingly exposing yourself to the danger it presents. And we must keep that danger at a minimum. If it gets out that we have this, they will come directly for us. Which means we can’t tell anyone about it. No one.”

His eyes fixed solely on Luna. “Not even Dumbledore. At least for right now.”

She blinked, body still. Neville shifted awkwardly behind her.

“I know this is asking a lot. Not only in the threat of viewing the information but also the burden of keeping it quiet. But I am your leader on this investigation. You only have an obligation to me. I will handle any and all fallout that occurs with Dumbledore and any of his superiors.”

There was a heavy silence that permeated the room before Neville cleared his throat. “I’m with you, Harry.”

Harry nodded his appreciation at the loaded declaration before shifting his focus to Luna. Her serene expression was still firmly affixed but Harry knew a core of steel dwelled beneath, he’d glimpsed it just moments ago when she stepped in front of Neville without a second’s hesitation.

She straightened beneath his emerald stare and nodded. “I’ll do whatever is necessary to catch these people. If that means keeping things between our team then that’s what I’ll do. I’m with you and Neville.”

Harry was barely able to suppress his smile as Neville flushed anew, eyes wide and blinking down at the her. She seemed oblivious to the reaction she caused in the other man, gazing steadily at Harry.

He stood from the desk and fished the object in question from his pocket, uncurling his hand to show the small thumb drive in the center of his palm.

“This is what our Russian contact provided. It’s the last bit of evidence Yaxley turned over to their government. Last night I called Nev, asked him to glance over the contents to see if he could make sense of it.”

Harry took a steadying breath, tearing his gaze away from his hand to look at the other man. “Did you find anything?”

Neville’s skin still had a fevered quality to it but his eyes and expression lit up with sudden excitement, making Harry’s heart thump wildly.

“I think so. There’s a lot there. I didn’t have time to comb through everything but I found the highlighted documents you mentioned. They were invoices. It took a while to trace the account...
information back to- well, hang on, let me show you.”

Harry stepped back as Neville crossed in front of him, taking a seat behind his computer and firing it to life. Harry handed him the thumb drive and Neville plugged it in while Luna and Harry walked around the desk, standing behind his chair and peering over his shoulder.

Neville opened the file and typed something into the search box, a series of number and letters he must have memorized. Harry held his breath, chest tightening, the rest of the room becoming a faint smudge in his peripheral. Nothing existed but the glowing screen and the flickering images that danced across as Neville scrolled through the contents.

“Here it is,” Neville said in a hushed tone, enlarging a document littered with various characters that made little sense to Harry.

“It’s encrypted?” Luna asked.

“Sort of. It’s been heavily censored. But the account number at the top is unchanged. It appears on nearly every document in here. Most of these are invoices for various items and services. There’s hospital billing, building materials, spa treatments, child care service, housing, vehicles, resorts, everything under the sun. But they’re all billed to the same account. Only that account doesn’t exist. Not really. I traced it to an overseas bank and hacked into their mainframe.”

Harry raised both brows, eyes darting down to Neville, impressed and terrified. They were supposed to be operating above the table, he was pretty certain hacking banking information wasn’t exactly legal… but he was also thrilled Neville took the initiative to do so to further the investigation. Harry would do everything in his power to protect Neville from any backlash that occurred.

Neville, for his part, didn’t seem phased by his admission, as though hacking secured mainframes was no important than what he had for lunch. “The account is empty. Money gets transferred in as needed and withdrawn almost immediately. When I tried to trace where it’s coming from I found over a hundred sources scattered through about twenty countries, all with fake account information attached. There’s no public record for any of the owners listed.”

Harry braced a hand on the back of Neville’s chair and one on the desk as he leaned in, glasses reflecting the image before them. “This was one of the highlighted docs, you said?”

Neville nodded. “There’s roughly four hundred documents on the drive and about a dozen are highlighted.”

“How do you know this is the one we need?”

Neville glanced over his shoulder, locking gazes. “Because this is the only business located in England.”

Harry felt his heart lurch, turning his focus back to the screen. It certainly looked like an invoice, but the top was blacked out, the business name hidden.

“Shite,” Harry mumbled, squinting, trying to develop x-ray vision to see past the black. “How the hell are we supposed to garner anything from this?”

“How do you know the business is based in England” Luna asked as she leaned down at Neville’s other side, effectively boxing him in with Harry. Her blonde hair cascaded down, the tips brushing the tops of Neville’s hand and distracting him so thoroughly Harry had to discreetly tap him on the back to break him of the trance.
Neville cleared his throat and snapped his head forward, crossing and uncrossing his ankles as he scrolled to the bottom of the document. “There’s a code at the bottom, at first I thought it was… well, I didn’t know what it was, but I ran searches on nearly everything shown and this got a hit. It’s a corporate tax number.”

Harry’s hand clenched around the edge of the table. “For what?”

Neville wet his lips. “A mental healthcare facility.”

Then he was pulling up the browser, typing something rapidly and pressing search before Harry had time to blink. A web page popped up, displaying a large modern building with a bright shiny sign in the front surrounded by flowering bushes and green grass.

“Janus Thickey New Beginnings…” Harry read, eyes narrowed. “It’s privately funded I assume?”

Neville nodded. “It was started by the Thickey family foundation twenty years ago, but has undergone some pretty drastic renovations over the last ten. They used to be a general intake facility but now they only cater to the rich, if the price sheet I found is any indication. It’s inpatient only, some of the accounts I saw go back from it’s opening.”

Harry nodded, drawing back to his full height, mind racing anew. “It’s a posh prison for the rich to hide the black sheep of their family and not feel guilty because it has a pool.”

Luna tilted her head, inspecting the screen. “There is a pool.”

“No, there’s always a pool,” Harry muttered, starting to walk towards the evidence wall. “Does the invoice give anything else away?”

He heard the faint click of the mouse behind him. “Any names have been blacked out but I think this is an identification number. I wasn’t able to access the facility’s mainframe. They’re probably operating on a closed network.”

Harry thought about the security system at the hotel in Vienna.

“Would you be able to run a search on one of their computers?”

Neville glanced up. “Of course. But I hardly think they’ll allow me free rein of their-”

“Don’t worry about that. How late are they open?”

Neville blinked. “Uh…”

“Visiting hours are from 9 to 7 on Saturday,” Luna provided, standing away from the desk, eyes bright and locked with Harry’s.

“Um… guys?” Neville asked slowly. “What are we-”

“Where’s it located?”

“Surrey.”

Harry sighed. “Of course it is. We’ll need to rent a car.”

Neville glanced rapidly between them. “Wait, we’re going?”

“I can borrow daddy’s car.”
Harry raised a brow. “You sure he won’t mind?”

“He never does.”

“We’re going up there? Like… right now?”

Harry finally turned his attention to the nervous man. “Relax, Neville.”

Neville didn’t relax. “But even if we go, how are we going to get them to release any information to us?”

Harry smirked. “That’s the fun part.”

Tom braced himself before his front door, gun pointed downward, ready to strike at whoever was on the other side. He never received casual visitors, the only people allowed to access this floor were Green and himself. Which meant whoever was on the other side had either killed Finnbar or found some other means of gaining entry. Certainly not a girl scout.

He sucked in a sharp breath, glancing over his shoulder to ensure Hermione was out of sight, and then quickly cracked the door open, hiding the bulk of his body behind the bullet proof barrier.

His eyes fastened on the figure standing at the threshold. His heart skipped a beat before resuming its rapid pace, making his temples throb painfully.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“Are you going to let me in or not?”

His jaw ticked as he lowered the gun, tucking it back into his waistband. “Not.”

She groaned loudly, pushing against the door with both hands so suddenly it sprang from his grasp, hitting the opposite wall. He made a move to block her but she quickly darted beneath his arm.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing? Get the hell out-”

“It smells like a woman in here. Unless you’ve got a lacy thong on under those trousers I think you have a guest,” she spun on her heel, brow raised. “Please tell me you’re wearing a lacy thong.”

“Get out!”

She laughed shrilly, walking further into the room. “Is your precious dove here, then? Explains why you’re in such a cross mood, though I’m starting to think you’re always a bit vexed these days. Are you kids not fucking?”

“I swear to god-”

“What’s the big deal? I already know about her, no point in keeping her under lock and key anymore.”

She narrowly evaded his capture once again, deftly flipping over the dining table, landing in a spry pounce. “What’s the big deal? I already know about her, no point in keeping her under lock and key anymore.”

He groaned, tossing a chair aside as he continued to pursue her around the table with narrow eyes. She threw her head back and laughed, sprinting into the kitchen, towards the hallway, closer to Hermione.
Tom flew after her, his long legs easily covering twice the distance as hers. He tackled her to the hard tile, grunting in pain as she elbowed him in the kidneys, but managed to straddle her legs, pinning them down and grabbing her forearms as she reared up, laughing maniacally.

“Jesus fucking christ-”

“I just want to meet her!”

“There’s no way-”

“Hello.”

Tom blinked, head snapping up as the woman beneath him ceased her struggles at once, tipping her head back against the floor to gaze upside down at the new entrant. Tom inhaled sharply, vision tinged red.

“Hermione, go back-”

“Don’t be such a wanker, Tommy! It’s wonderful to finally meet you darling,” she tried to twist her arm free but his iron grasp held. So she instead tilted her wrist, the one that wasn’t bandaged, to extend her hand upward. “I’m Bella.”

Hermione swallowed, eyes darting between Tom and the woman laid out beneath him, posture tense and weary. Yet she tentatively took a step forward, into the kitchen.

“No! Hermione, get back! Bella, you’re leaving, right now.”

He pushed himself up and hauled her with him, keeping his grip on her arms and twisting them behind her back. She rolled her eyes, then fastened them on Hermione, licking her lips. “Aren’t you absolutely divine. Even more delicious up close. I’ve been so eager to meet you in person.”

Hermione continued to blink, glancing to Tom for direction. He merely glared at the back of Bella’s wild mane, dragging her across the room towards the exit. She dug her heels in, slowing their ascent. “Fucking Christ, Tommy, you’re always such a stick in the mud!”

He didn’t humor her with a response, jerking her harder and groaning in frustration when she managed to wrap her leg around the heavy base of the coffee table, dragging it across the rug with them. To his even greater frustration, Hermione slowly followed in their wake. His muscles burned with the force of having to drag Bella out, his body still surging with adrenaline.

“Hermione, get back to the bedroom!”

“Ha!” Bella barked, grin feral and gleaming. “I knew you had a dom lurking inside you.” She gazed past his shoulder. “Does it make you wet when he bosses you around, luv?”

Hermione stopped in her tracks, expression guarded. Tom shook his head, breathless by the time he got her legs free of the table. As he finally dragged her into the entryway, victory in sight, she tilted her head back to gaze up at him with guileless black eyes.

“Don’t you want to know about tomorrow’s assignment?”

Tom blinked, hesitating, and saw the triumph flash in her eyes. He noticed Hermione shift in his peripheral, he glanced and caught her eye. They were wide, bright, lips parted. He shook his head.

“No. Absolutely not.”
“Tom,” she began, stepping closer to the still grappling pair. “If she knows something then-”

“We can’t trust her.”

Bella laughed, going limp in his hold, resting her head on his shoulder like a lover. “Come now, I’ve come all this way, surely you can at least hear me out.”

She glanced at Hermione, obviously knowing she’d be the easier sell. Hermione looked deeply annervied to be pinned beneath the female assassin’s heated stare, but she managed to hold her ground without fidgeting.

“Thanks for the offer, Bella, but I already knew Green would be punishing me with your company. I don’t give two shites about anything you have to say.”

She ran her tongue along the tops of her teeth, still watching at Hermione. “So you don’t want out then?”

Hermione jolted, eyes snapping to Tom. He released a slow breath, shaking his head minutely, silently telling her not to take the bait. So naturally Hermione took a step back and gestured to the couch.

“Let her speak, Tom.”

“You don’t know her, Hermione, we can’t-”

“How can you tolerate such bossiness outside of the bedroom?”

Hermione pointedly ignored the comment, gazing at Tom. “I know you don’t trust her. Obviously. But we can at least hear her out. If she’s working with us on Sunday then it’s smart to have a sit down anyway, discuss the game plan.” She held his stare meaningfully for another long beat. “Besides,” she continued, peering at Bella once more. “According to Green she has one third of the mission parameters.”

She locked gazes with him again and the rest went without saying.

_If we have her information, maybe we can figure out the last bit on our own._

He took a deep breath, feeling bile rise in his throat. He didn’t want Bella within a kilometer of Hermione. But they were going to be forced into close confines in twelve hours time regardless… maybe it was better to expose them to each other now, let Hermione see just how fucking psychotic the woman was so she knew to keep her distance during the actual mission, and allow Bella her chance to get all the lewd and instigating comments out of her system before she had a gun in her hand.

He swallowed thickly, slowly releasing her from his grasp. She instantly darted across the room, making his entire body go rigid as she sidled up to Hermione, leaning into her personal space but not touching. Hermione was tense as a board, hardly breathing, eyes wide and fastened on the manicured hand hovering before her face, long fingers skimming her lips.

“Enough!” Tom stormed forward, grasping Bella roughly by the shoulder and tossing her back so hard she fell into the wall with a keening laugh.

“Relax! I’m just having a bit of fun.”

“Keep your fucking hands to yourself. You so much as sneeze in her direction and I’ll throw you out
with more than a broken wrist.”

“It’s sprained, thanks for asking.”

“Sit down and keep your hands where I can see them.”

She rolled her eyes, holding her arms aloft in a mocking gesture as she walked back to the couch. Hermione took an instinctive step back this time, looking thoroughly annerved. Tom cut across to stand between them, directing Hermione to one of the chairs with his eyes while he sat at the opposite end of the cushions from Bella.

“Alright. You have five minutes to say whatever you came to say and then you’re leaving. Understand?”

She sighed, leaning back and crossing her legs. “That’s not nearly enough time to acquaint myself with my new partner.”

Hermione shifted in her seat and Tom grit his teeth, forcing himself to take a deep breath. “We’re not playing your games, Bella. Not tonight.”

“Perhaps tomorrow night then? You know how I get worked up after a mission.”

Tom shook his head, rubbing at his eyes. “Let’s get on with it already,” his gaze narrowed at her feral grin. “You know exactly what I mean.”

Hermione tucked her hands beneath her thighs, eyes flickering between the pair, wheels turning behind her eyes. He knew she must be burning with questions. He didn’t look forward to the conversation they’d be having after Bella left.

“Green told me you want out,” Bella said without preamble, shite eating grin on her face.

Tom swallowed heavily. He couldn’t wrap his head around his handler telling her that, but he must have, since he knew Hermione certainly didn’t tell her and no one else knew.

“And how exactly did the topic come up?”

Bella traced her fingers absently over her bandaged wrist, eyes unfocused for the briefest of seconds, but plenty of time for Tom to put the pieces together.

“How did you come by that injury?”

She blinked, sitting upright, defensive but trying to downplay it with a coy smile.

“Went a bit overboard with the target. You know, the one you left behind after you strangled me and took off running like a madman?”

Hermione cocked her head, pinning Tom with the intensity of her gaze. He shook his head. “She’s being dramatic.”

Bella tipped her head back, pulling her collar down and revealing finger length bruises along her throat. “Am I now?”

Hermione swallowed, eyes narrowing, but not at Tom. Her focus was directed on the other female in the room. “You worked with Green to kidnap me.”

Bella raised a dark brow, releasing the fabric and covering the marks on her flesh. “You’re a quick
study. Good, I like that. But unfortunately your rendezvous with Green was all him. I wish I had more of a hand in it. I promise, we’d of had a lot more fun while you were paralyzed. My own little doll to play with.”

Hermione blinked, leaning back into her chair. Tom’s fists clenched, shoulders drawn. “You’re lying. Yaxley was bound. How did you hurt your wrist?”

Bella rolled her eyes. “Fine. I got into a bit of a bar fight.”

“How many people died?”

She scoffed. “None, for your information.”

“Then you wouldn’t be injured.”

“I’m flattered you have such faith in my abilities. But I was a bit drunk at the time, ended up-”

“What did you do, Bella?”

She stopped short on her lie, red lips hovering open a moment more before she sighed dramatically, shaking her head in exasperation. “Fine! I attacked one of the agents sent to investigate Yaxley.”

Hermione turned white as a sheet, arms rigid at her sides, but Tom’s focus was solely upon the darkly clad woman at the other end of the sofa.

“You dumb bitch.”

There was a heavy beat of silence before the tension snapped and he started to laugh, the revelation overtaking him. Bella glared daggers, picking at her cuticles aggressively while Hermione glanced between them with a furrowed brow.

“Wait… that’s a good thing?” she asked tentatively.

“It is for us,” he said, slowly gaining control of his expression. “It means Green’s going to kill her, and we don’t have to deal with her psychotic episodes any longer.”

“And what a waste that would be, seeing as I’m offering you my help.”

Tom stopped short, brow raised. “We don’t need your help.”

“Tom…” Hermione’s voice was low, hesitant.

He whipped his head around. “You don’t know her like I do.”

“Then why don’t you tell me?” she said more firmly, crossing her arms and pinning him with a challenging stare.

Bella’s smile reached her ears. “Oh I like her.”

Tom ignored her, still focused on Hermione. “She’s crazy.”

“She’s sitting right here.” Bella clipped.

“She changes her mind on a whim, she’ll stab us in the back and the front for the sheer pleasure of it.”
“She’s still sitting right here.”

“She’s still sitting right here.”

Hermione glanced between them, chewing the inside of her cheek. “She knows we’re planning something, obviously. If we don’t let her in she could run and tell Green.”

“Green already knows we’re planning something, he said so himself. He probably sent her here to find out exactly what it is.”

Bella sprung to life from her reclined position. “I want to bury the bastard as much as you do.”

He turned around, scathing remark at the ready, when Hermione cut him off.

“Do you want out, too?”

Bella laughed. “Of course not, luv. Why would anyone want out of this life?”

Hermione looked hesitant, like she couldn’t figure out if the woman was being sarcastic or not. Tom shook his head, rubbing at his eyes, feeling a pressure headache coming on.

“Bella is made for this life. She’ll never leave.” He peered up at the woman in question. “But the last I heard you worshipped the ground Green walked on. I take it he wasn’t pleased with your tantrum in Vienna?”

There was a heavy beat of silence in which the humor faded from her black eyes. She took on a guarded expression, leaning back and effecting a casual sprawl. “I’m tired of his double standards. He treats you like a king and me like an insolent child.”

A muscle in his jaw ticked. “You have no idea the type of relationship we have.”

“Don’t I?”

Hermione sat forward, the reluctant mediator. “What exactly are you offering, Bella?”

Tom cringed at hearing Hermione say the woman’s name aloud, a dark spell from her lips, especially as he saw Bella’s eyes gleam with pleasure.

“Just what I said. Tommy wants out, I’m inclined to help him. It’ll piss Green off and I’m very much in the mood to do so.”

“Or perhaps you want Green all to yourself?”

Bella and Tom blinked, Hermione flushed, sitting back once more, as though shocked she uttered the words.

“You hit the nail on the head, luv,” Tom said with a smirk, peering to the woman at his side. “That’s really what’s going on here, isn’t it?”

Bella licked her lips, wheels spinning behind her eyes as she bid her time to formulate a response, which was all the answer he needed.

“Now that’s actually believable. I might be more inclined to trust you if your motivations made sense.”

She sighed, crossing her legs and extending her arms over the back of the couch. “Fine,” she bit out,
face pinched. “Maybe I want to know what it’s like to be his number one. Or maybe I just want to see the look on his face when he loses you for good. When he realizes his pride and joy wants nothing to do with him. When he knows what it feels like to be used and discarded.”

The statement was heavy, loaded, and while Tom couldn’t give two shites about Bella’s mental anguish he could see Hermione was effected. He shook his head, ready for this exchange to end.

“I still don’t feel comfortable working with you. But seeing as we’re forced to work together tomorrow, I suppose I have to extend some mediocome of trust. Why don’t you tell us what you know about the mission and we’ll take it from there.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, looking quite frustrated, but then she turned her eyes to Hermione and her expression took on a feral quality that made his skin itch.

“I know the location of our target.”

“Do you know who our remaining partner is?” He asked, trying to draw her focus back to him.

She reluctantly did so. “No. He wouldn’t tell me.”

“Any guess as to who it might be?”

She tipped her head. “He was quite incensed. I would put my money on someone he knows will frustrate the fuck out of me.”

Tom nodded. “He wants to make this harder for Hermione and me as well. It’ll be probably be someone I’ve worked with in the-” he stopped short, mind reeling.

“What is it?” Hermione asked, leaning forward.

Tom swallowed, eyes fixed on a random part of the table as a vivid memory surfaced, then his eyes snapped up and locked with Bella’s. The black voids were hollow, endless, knowing.

“He wouldn’t.” she whispered.

“He absolutely would.”

“He would what?” Hermione snapped in frustration, eyes darting between them.

Bella smiled without humor, turning to face her. “You’re in for a real treat, my darling. Tomorrow is going to be a crash course in assassination. We’re all going to kill each other.”

Harry gazed up at the large building as they pulled into the backlot. Luna was behind the wheel while Neville hovered in the center of the backseat, looking equal parts nervous and excited. Harry realized belatedly that this was the man’s first field assignment beyond conducting interviews.

As they pulled into a parking spot Harry glanced at his two team members.

“Okay. Remember the plan?”

Luna nodded while Neville bounced in his seat. The website had provided interior photos of the venue, all the high end amenities it provided as well as a view of the opulent lobby. Unless the design had been updated since, they at least had some idea of what to expect upon walking in.

“Alright, show time.”
They emerged from the car and started cutting a path to the main entrance, Neville with his small leather bag slung across his chest. The automatic doors slid open to reveal a lush entry, creamy marble floors surrounding a massive water display at the center, tropical plants lining the walls, a large glossy check in desk at the back. An older woman in a white uniform perked up, glancing up from her computer with a raised brow.

“Welcome to New Beginnings,” she said without any inflection. “I’m afraid visiting hours end in twenty minutes.”

Harry smiled, walking right towards her. “We were actually hoping to take a tour of the facility.”

“Tours are conducted by appointment only.”

Harry feigned surprise. “Oh darn. Can we make an appointment with you?”

She nodded. “Certainly. What is your name?”

“Rupert Evans.”

“And who are you seeking to admit?”

“My father in law. Honey?”

Luna sidled up beside him at the desk, wrapping a hand around his arm. “My father’s been on the decline for a while now. We both work full time and it’s not possible for us to provide the care he needs. We’ve looked at various facilities but they all seem so dreary. Friends of ours suggested this place.”

The woman smiled, it seemed more tired than anything else. “I’m very sorry to hear that. However I can assure you our facility-”

Harry half listened to her sale’s pitch as he watched Neville disappear into the men’s room at the other end of the lobby. He casually grabbed his phone from his pocket, turning on the app Neville had loaded before they left the office. He placed it on the countertop, directly behind the computer, watching a rotating circle appear before an empty status bar took its place.

“- award winning service for the past six years, and we are nominated again this year.”

“That’s fabulous,” Luna said with a serene smile, casually glancing to the phone as well. “We are definitely interested in seeing what you have to offer. When is the next opening for a tour?”

“Let me check.”

The woman started typing, the status bar started to load.

“Looks like we can get you in on Monday. Would you have any availability in the afternoon?”

“Let me check,” Luna pulled her own phone out and opened a shopping list, studying it carefully. “Shoot. I have a meeting I can’t move. Do you have anything Tuesday?”

The woman typed some more. Harry cleared his throat. “Tuesday won’t work either, luv, we have-”

“Oh that’s right!” Luna didn’t miss a beat, tossing her hair back in frustration. “Never a free moment. Are we free Wednesday?”

Harry glanced down at his phone, then back to her. “No, that won’t work either.”
Luna nodded. “Alright, I suppose we’ll have to come back next weekend.”

The woman waited for Luna to glance back to her before returning her focus to the screen. “Can you come in the morning?”

Luna smiled. “Yes, that would be wonderful.”

Harry watched the bar reach seventy five percent and flexed his shoulders back. Luna released his arm and leaned further into the counter.

“Thank you so much for your help. May I ask you a few more questions?”

The woman nodded. “Of course.”

“While you do that I’m going to run to the loo,” Harry interrupted in a low tone.

Luna smiled at him. “Alright, darling.”

Harry could barely contain his smirk. He left his phone on the table and swiftly cut a path across the marble, Luna’s sing song voice growing fainter as he progressed and disappearing entirely as he entered the restroom.

“Nev?”

“Back stall.”

“How’s it going?”

“Good, we’re almost there.”

Harry slid into the large handicap stall and locked the door behind him, crossing over to Neville and glancing down at the small laptop balanced on his knee.

“You in yet?”

“About ten more percent and we’re golden.”

Harry rubbed his palms together, eager and anxious. He was amazed at the technology Neville was privy to. Not for the first time he was thrilled with his team selection, Neville was without a doubt a technological wizard with magic powers, able to open doors that were invisible to most.

“Alright, thirty more seconds. How’s Luna doing?”

“Great. She deserves an Academy Award.” As soon as he said it he thought about Sirius’s comment from yesterday, about playing King Richard in the school play. He rubbed absently at his chest as he pushed the memory aside.

“Okay, we’re in.”

Harry stood straighter, taking a deep breath as he watched Neville start typing rapidly.

“Shite.”

Harry blinked, heart dropping to his stomach. “What?”

Neville glanced up. “I plugged in the ID number from the invoice and it links to a patient file, but the
name is missing."

Harry raised a brow. “In their system?”

Neville nodded, turning the screen towards Harry. “Look. Shows billing information but the patient file itself isn’t attached.”

“Can you pull it up?”

“Probably, but I wouldn’t know who we were looking for. The ID number is all we have to go on, it could be anyone here.”

Harry ran his fingers through his hair in frustration, eyes roaming the screen frantically, willing more words to appear. Then he released a slow breath. “What is that?”

Neville turned the screen back to him. “What?”

“That right there,” he pointed to a set of numbers at the top, below the ID number.

425C

Neville shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Harry paced the tiled floor, mind reeling, before stopping short, gazing at the toilet paper dispenser.

“How many floors does this place have?”

Neville blinked. “Um, five, I think.”

Harry glanced at him sharply. “Think it’s a room number?”

Neville shrugged. “I don’t-”

“Can you look up other patients? See if it lists room numbers on their invoices?”

Neville shook his head. “I can only navigate the mainframe with search parameters. I’d need to know a name or ID number to run a lookup.”

Harry sighed. “Alright, we’re going to have to look for ourselves then.”

Neville drew back. “We… how? They won’t let us up-”

“We won’t ask permission. Hang here for a few more minutes, I’m going to grab Luna. Meet us outside in five.”

Harry bolted out of the bathroom before Neville could formulate a response.

Luna was still chatting with the front desk worker when Harry arrived beside her.

“Everything squared away?”

She glanced up. “Yes, we’ll swing back here next Saturday at nine.”

“Fantastic,” he glanced to the woman behind the desk, casually grabbing his phone and pocketing it. “Thank you for all your help.”

“My pleasure. I look forward to seeing you again next weekend.”
The fake happy couple nodded their goodbyes and exited the building at a casually gait. Once they were outside Harry glanced down to Luna.

“You were fantastic.”

“Thanks. Did we get what we needed?”

Harry shook his head. “We don’t have a name, but we might have a room number. Nev’s going to meet us in a minute, we have to find a way up.”

“Up?”

Harry swallowed. “Fourth floor.”

She tipped her head. “This is fun.”

Harry couldn’t help but chuckle. “Glad one of us thinks so.”

Her expression remained neutral. “Not just me. Neville is very excited to be in the field. And you come to life when you’re in the midst of a breakthrough.”

Harry blinked, mouth opening but no words emitting, just as the doors slid open and Neville emerged, zipping his bag.

“Hey guys. What’s the plan?”

Harry promptly closed his mouth, facing away from the slight blonde and clearing his throat. “Still trying to figure that out. Any one bring a grappling hook?”

“I can check in the trunk.”

Neville laughed, then sobered when he noticed Luna looked serious. Harry started cutting a path around the building. “Maybe we’ll hit it lucky and someone left a window open.”

“Like in the movies.”

“Inspiration has to come from somewhere…” he trailed off, eyeing the side of the structure with narrowed focus. He shook his head in frustration when no opportunity presented itself. Besides, there was no way to scale the side of the building to access a window anyway. He turned to face his team members trailing in his wake when he heard muffled voices.

Harry spun around, walking quickly to the end of the wall and pressing against it, peering around the corner. He smiled upon the sight that greeted him.

He glanced over his shoulder and signalled for Neville and Luna to approach, placing a finger to his lips to keep them quiet.

“There’s two staff members smoking,” he whispered. “The door behind them is propped open.”

“Men or women?” Luna asked automatically.

Harry locked eyes with her and smirked. “Men.”

She nodded, smiling slowly. “I got this.”

Harry nodded in return. “Thatta girl.”
Neville toyed with the strap of his bag awkwardly as Luna made her way around the back of the building. Harry couldn’t see her but he heard the steady click of her boots, and then the male voices ceased.

“Hey, mind if I bum a smoke?”

There was a brief pause before one of the men replied.

“Um, yeah, sure.”

Harry released a slow breath and peered around the corner once more. Luna stood opposite the door, facing Harry, the men adjusted to face her and turned their backs to him.

“And a light?” She asked with a smile, causing one of the men to fumble with his lighter so quickly he dropped it at his feet.

Harry gestured for Neville to follow him as he quickly slid around the corner, keeping as close to the wall as possible and darting rapidly for the open door. He briefly made eye contact with Luna, less than a heartbeat, but the moment their gazes connected Harry allowed his deep admiration and appreciation to shine through, and in return her serene expression turned radiant, obviously finding a thrill in the challenge as well.

Harry held his breath as he slid into the narrow corridor of the building, Neville bumping into him as he sprinted in behind. He started to utter an automatic apology but Harry slapped a hand over the man’s mouth just in time, shaking his head. Neville inhaled sharply and nodded, following silently in Harry’s wake as they progressed down the hallway.

As they turned the corner Harry sighed, glancing over his shoulder. “Okay, we need to find stairs or a lift,” he whispered.

“What if they catch us?”

“Don’t worry, Nev. Like I said in the car, I’ll take the heat for anything that happens.”

“I don’t want you to get in trouble either!” Neville whispered sharply, adam’s apple bobbing nervously. Harry could tell he was starting to panic, the surge of adrenaline overtaking his senses.

“Nev, keep calm and focused, alright? I need you.”

Neville blinked, nodding slightly and taking a deep breath.

“Good man, now come on.”

They progressed through another door and Harry breathed a sigh of relief when he saw another door at the end of the hall marked Stairwell.

“Thank fucking christ,” he muttered to himself, jogging down the stretch of tile, Neville’s footsteps squeaking behind him. As soon as they emerged in the narrow stairwell Harry wasted no time flying up, taking the steps two at a time as Neville struggled to keep up. His senses were on high alert, heartbeat reverberating in his ears.

He had no idea if his hunch about the room number was correct, but he knew without a doubt the answer to some unknown question lie inside this building, somewhere, and he wasn’t going to leave until he found it.
“H-Harry…” Neville panted from below. “I- I can’t-”

“Sorry, Nev,” Harry gasped for air as well, slowing his pace and allowing the man to catch up. “We’re almost there, one more floor.”

Neville nodded weakly, leaning heavily against the railing. “Go ahead, I’m right behind you.”

Harry took another deep breath and resumed his upward trek, pausing outside the fourth floor entrance to peek through the narrow glass pane. The hallway beyond was brightly lit and deserted. Harry’s smile gleamed.

“Okay, ready, Nev?”

Neville’s face was blotchy and his eyes weary but he nodded all the same. Harry slowly pushed the door open and entered the hall, heart lurching as he gazed upon the plaque beside the nearest door.

405A

*Bloody hell, we were right...*

He could barely contain his excitement, his pace increasing with a newfound surge of energy.

*Something’s here, someone... someone important, the missing puzzle piece...*

He was practically running down the hall now, every sense numbed but for his sight, narrowing in on the plaques above each door.

410C

415B

420A

Harry’s heart was beating through his chest, so lost to his trance that he nearly face planted when a figure suddenly appeared before him, clad in a thick terry cloth robe and fuzzy slippers, grinning like a marionette doll.

“What’s up, friend! It’s not safe to run around the halls like that you know.”

Harry caught himself against the wall before he collided head first with the stranger. Neville ran into his back, stumbling on his feet as he tried to maintain his balance.

Harry swallowed, blinking rapidly, taking in the man’s appearance and quickly deeming him a patient. Something about his face was startling familiar, his animated voice as well, but Harry couldn’t place him-

“Bloody hell,” Neville muttered from behind. “Is that-”

“Gilderoy Lockhart at your service, I don’t usually allow fans into my private quarters, but since you went through the effort of bypassing hotel security the least I can do is sign your- oh dear, where’s your headshot? Did they confiscate them at the front desk again? I keep telling-”

“Who the hell is that?” Harry whispered over his shoulder, eyes affixed to the rambling man who was deep in a conversation with himself.

“Gilderoy Lockhart, he was on a soap opera my gran is batty for. He’s been in a bunch of made for
Harry nodded. “I’d say so.”

“-but I told her not to accept no for an answer, my fan club is not stupid and they don’t appreciate it when-”

Harry pasted on a smile and attempted to maneuver around the man. But Lockhart wouldn’t shut up, grabbing Harry by the arm and pulling him close. “You want a photo, eh? Alright, but you must stand to my left, my right side if the money maker, you know.”

Harry glanced to Neville and the man shrugged, eyes wide.

“Take the photo, Nev,” Harry ground out, posture stiff as Lockhart wrapped an arm around his middle, pulling him in close. Neville shifted awkwardly before slowly bringing his hands to his face, mimicking a camera.

“Um… okay, then. One, two-”

“BAFTA!” Lockhart called out with a wide grin. Harry closed his eyes as Neville mimicked a camera shutter with his mouth.

“Uh, alright, we got the shot. Thank you.”

“Of course, anything for my adoring fans. Now be sure to tag me on your social media, I have MySpace.”

“I’ll do that,” Harry said, wriggling free and quickly backing away.

“Ta ta!” Lockhart called down the hall after them.

“Christ.”

“Wait until I tell gran I met Lockhart, she won’t believe it.”

“Just show her the photo you took.”

Neville started to laugh but stopped short when he noticed Harry’s posture go rigid. He followed Harry’s line of sight and fell deathly still as well. They stood before the door at the very end of the hall.

425C

Harry sucked in a sharp breath and peered though the narrow window at the top of the door. He didn’t see anyone inside, only a well made bed and neatly arranged shelves containing an array of items, mostly books. Harry blinked, slowly reaching for the knob.

“Wait-” Neville bit his lip, hesitating. “Are we sure we should be doing this?”

Harry look over at him. “We’ve already come this far.”

Neville held his gaze for another moment before nodding slowly, stepping back as Harry turned the knob and opened the door.

“Stay outside, tell me if anyone’s coming.”
Neville swallowed heavily but turned to face the expanse of hallway as Harry slid inside the room, gently shutting the door behind him. He gazed around the large, bright space. It looked like a bedroom in a nice home, warm walls and plush rugs, a couch in the corner adorned with throw pillows. But there were no personal touches, no photographs or knick knacks.

Harry made his way across the room to the bedside table where a leather bound book sat, spine worn. He slowly picked it up and opened the front cover. It was a journal, the penmanship within elegant and neat, but what drew his eye were the initials etched into the skin.

Harry jolted as the sound of a toilet flushing filled the space, quickly followed by a steady stream of running water. His eyes latched onto a door at the other end of the room, closed, a bar of light emanating from beneath. He held his breath as the water shut off, nothing existing but the door and the deafening thud of his heart.

It briefly occurred to him to duck down and hide, to run for the exit, but he stayed rooted to the spot, determined, all in.

He drew in sharp breath as the door suddenly opened, a figure emerging and then freezing in the doorway, eyes wide, posture defensive.

“What are you doing here?” They asked, voice filled with trepidation.

Harry could only blink, jaw falling open, all rational thought scattering to the wind in his shock. The journal slipped from his numb fingers to the bed as he uttered the only thing that came to mind.

“No fucking way.”
A/N: Hello my chocolate covered peanuts. Welcome back, and sorry for the long hiatus. I’ve been pretty busy with my other twisted tales. But a few people reached out about this one and awoke my Assassin Muse. She’s been throwing knives at the wall ever since.

Enjoy.

Sunday, July 17, 2005

Hermione pulled her jacket closer, shoulders drawn, perched on the edge of the upholstered seat. Her eyes traced the lines on the floor, mind racing.

Tom glanced her way, dark sunglasses masking his gaze as they surged through the Underground. He leaned back casually, arms resting atop the seats. How he managed to remain so calm and nonchalant at a time like this only unnerved her further.

She couldn’t bear to look at him, terrified she’d lose her meager stomach contents across the bottom of the tube car with just one glance.

He sighed, gazing ahead once more as he dropped an arm and slid it around her waist, causing her to jolt.

"Shh," he gently admonished, pulling her across her seat and into his side. "Calm down. You're acting suspiciously."

She swallowed, trying to pull away but his arm remained locked, an iron band at her middle, pinning her in place.

“I can’t do this,” she hissed, heart steadily climbing up her throat.

“You can and you will.” His voice held no inflection, no sympathy, no room for argument. “And I’m going to be by your side the entire time.”

The words were no doubt spoken to grant her comfort. They only served to terrify her further.

Tom was an assassin. A trained killer. She was quite certain she wanted to be as far from his company as possible once they arrived at their final destination.

At the moment they were still riding the Metro line, heading to the westward terminus, Amersham, to meet the others at the rail station. From there they’d take a car to where the Target was currently staying.

Just thinking the word ‘Target’ made her stomach clench painfully. She pressed a hand to her abdomen, face paling.

“Breathe, Hermione.”

She glanced up, glaring at his sharp jawline, the amused tilt of his lips.

“You think this is funny?”

Though she couldn’t see the movement through his dark lenses she was positive he rolled his eyes.
She bristled, trying once more to pull away.

"Enough of that. Relax." His arm flexed, hand splaying across the top of her jean-clad thigh. "Lean into me."

“I don’t want to-”

“Lean into me.” This time it was a command. One she hadn’t the mental fortitude to fight.

She reluctantly did as bade, discovering quickly the warmth of his body was soothing to her nerves, even if his hard muscles didn’t provide the softest of cushion. She sighed, relaxing further, limbs loosening as she rested her head against his shoulder.

“Now close your eyes.”

Hermione blinked, peering up at him in confusion.

His smirk deepened.

“Trust me.”

Her nose twitched, but she followed instruction, cheek resting against the soft leather of his jacket as she slowly closed her lids.

“Remember our trip to Brighton?”

The question took her off guard, the memory immediately blossoming to life, bright and vivid, pushing away all her fear and anxiety.

She smiled, eyes still shut.

“Of course. I also remember the blisters I got on my hands from scrubbing the floors for ten hours straight after Cole punished us for sneaking out.”

“Mm.” He rested his chin on the top of her head. “It was worth it.”

“Says you. She only gave you mop duty for the night.”

“She was afraid to punish me further.” His voice sounded pleased. “And I busted you out of scrub duty before your shift was up.”

“Which resulted in bathroom cleaning. I much preferred the original punishment.”

His fingertips tapped along her thigh, as though following along to a melody she couldn’t hear.

“We’re getting off topic. Let’s get back to Brighton.”

She bit her lip. “Why are you-”

“No more talking. Just listen.”

She sighed in annoyance but fell silent, hands folding atop her lap, the tap tap tap of his fingers sending electric thrills through her leg.

“I want you to picture the beach. The rocks and the warm sand. The blue water rushing up to meet your bare feet. The white foam of the tide.”
His voice deepened, slowed, pulling her into a trance.

“Picture yourself sitting there, staring out at the sea, the bright sun overhead, the gulls circling the water. You hear nothing but the waves, the gentle lapping across the shoreline. You feel the sun on your skin, the damp sand beneath your palms. Picture it. Stay in it.”

She swallowed lightly, all of her weight slumped against him.

She added to the imagery of her own accord. She wasn’t alone on the fantasy beach. Tom was beside her, seventeen years old, frayed jeans rolled up to the knees, long dark hair blowing in the gentle breeze as he gazed upon her with one of his secretive smiles. Pleased with himself for executing their escape from Wools right under the Matron’s nose.

She knew they would be in a world of trouble upon their return but couldn’t find it within herself to care, to let any shred of reality ruin this perfect moment of freedom and abandon. Such moments were precious and rare, and to share it with Tom made it all the more perfect.

Fifteen-year-old Hermione knew then and there this memory would become forever emblazoned on her mind. The beach, the water, the otherworldly glow in Tom's eyes as he pulled her closer, removing his jacket and placing it around her shoulders as they watched the sun dip below the horizon.

Twenty-four-year-old Hermione once more listed against his side. The troubled and rebellious boy giving way to a haunted and lethal man. And yet the moment was the same. Fragile and fleeting, water in the palm of her hand.

She didn't realize she'd started to doze, lost to the memory until Tom squeezed her hip.

“We’re arriving at the station, luv.”

She blinked, the fluorescent lights of the tube car harsh on her eyes. She squinted, pulling back from his body.

“What was that?” She asked, voice scratchy.

He smirked. “It worked, didn’t it?”

She nodded, tucking a curl behind her ear. “Temporarily.”

“When I first started out I would get anxious before a job. I would think of different places to try and distract myself. But I found real memories worked better than imaginary ones.” She drew in a slow breath, desperately wishing she could see his eyes. “Brighton was always my favorite place we visited.”

Hermione bit her lip, the thought of Tom using this exercise to ready himself for a kill creating great tension within her. But before she could reflect on the moment the overhead announcement came on, informing passengers they were at the end of the line.

Tom grasped her wrist, then slid his hand down to interlace their fingers as he stood. She followed suit, lingering at his side as the car slowed. They swayed as it came to a stop in the underground station. His free hand held onto the overhead bar, hers slid around his waist, the momentum causing her to press flush against him.

He looked down, lips hovering above hers. She stared at them longingly. He smiled.
“No distractions today.”

She tilted her head. “Are you implying I’m a distraction?”

He kissed her quickly, a teasing peck.

“Always,” he whispered against her mouth, causing her to laugh and flush.

And then the automated doors slid open, the few other passengers on their car quickly disembarked. Tom released the bar and stepped forward, leading the way onto the platform.

His hand squeezed hers as he glanced over his shoulder.

“Remember what we talked about.”

She nodded. “I won’t engage with either of them.”

“Bella will try to—”

“Provocate me. I know, Tom. You’ve warned me about her a thousand times now. Also, I’ve met her. I know what to expect.”

His eyes darkened. “You’ve never seen her in the heat of a kill.”

Hermione swallowed, a chill running up her spine.

“I’ve never seen you in the heat of one either.”

He blinked, holding her gaze for a heavy beat before glancing forward once more, increasing his stride and causing her to jog lightly to keep up.

“Slow down, Tom.”

He didn’t respond.

“Tom—” she reached up, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Please don’t close down on me. Not today.”

She felt the muscle under her hand tense.

“Just remember what I told you. About everything.”

Hermione sighed, but before she could respond he released her hand, leaving her staring at her bereft fingers.

“I don’t want to advertise our relationship around them.”

She nodded. That made sense, even if it made her chest ache.

She followed silently in his wake as they exited the station, crossing the street for the parking lot.

“Do you really think it’s going to be him?” she whispered, panting lightly to keep pace at his back.

“Knowing Green, yes.”

They turned the corner of the building. Tom’s step faltered, spine straightening. She peered around him to see what caused such a reaction and felt her heart skip a beat at the sight of Bella leaning
against a van in the distance.

It was parked beneath an overpass, the windows heavily tinted. There was no sign of anyone else, but the amused expression on her face as she watched them approach didn’t bode well.

“She looks pleased,” he practically growled under his breath. “This can’t be good.”

Hermione had only spent an hour in the woman's company, but from the information she garnered during that brief and loaded encounter she was inclined to agree.

The female assassin stepped away from the van and licked her lips, painted a deep burgundy, and winked as they came into earshot.

"About time the star-crossed lovers arrived. I thought perhaps you'd fled the country."

Tom scowled, no doubt at her open assessment of their relationship. Hermione took a deep breath.

“Hello, Bella.”

“Hello, kitten.”

She fought the urge to roll her eyes, suspecting the other woman was looking for a reaction.

“Are we waiting for the fourth?” Tom asked without preamble, hands clenching at his sides.

Bella laughed, and a sense of dread took up residence in the pit of Hermione’s stomach as the passenger door of the van opened, the sound of boots crunching the gravel quick to follow.

Tom placed a hand on Hermione's hip and practically threw her into the side of the van. She caught herself against the paneling with a shocked gasp as Bella's laugh took on a hysterical quality.

Hermione spun around in time to see a fist swing at Tom’s head. He easily ducked away.

The other man growled, eyes bulging in rage. And then to her great horror, he withdrew a gun from the interior of his coat.

And pointed it directly at Tom’s head.

Her scream was muffled by a hand over her mouth. Bella pulled her back with an arm around her middle, pressing Hermione flush against her body.

“Shh, quiet, kitten,” she cooed in her ear, holding her immobile. “We must let the boys play.”

"So, let me see if I understand this correctly, Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore spoke slowly, voice level and calm in the wake of the chaos that had just been unleashed within the tiny office.

“You received a piece of crucial information from your Russian informant, which you concealed from me, only to investigate it on your own, also without notifying me, and snuck into a patient’s private quarters at a mental health facility, without legal cause?”

Harry took a deep breath. “That’s an accurate summary.”

Neville shifted awkwardly from his spot against the wall, Luna standing calmly at his side.

“It was my decision to keep the thumb drive a secret. I also insisted on visiting the facility and
breaking in. Nev and Luna had nothing to do—"

"I am not interested in assigning blame, Mr. Potter. I am interested in knowing your motivations for keeping the existence of the drive a secret in the first place." He lowered his chin, eyes gleaming, holding Harry immobile. "I thought we agreed at the Hospital you weren't going to keep any more secrets from me regarding this investigation."

Harry’s jaw ticked, snippets of his conversation with Remus flooding back to him.

_I’m not the only one keeping secrets._

But he refrained from making the comment aloud. His teammates were unwilling witnesses to this exchange and he was in no mood to dredge up the bones of his past before an audience.

No, there were greater matters at hand.

Last night’s discovery had been monumental to the case.

He’d reached out to Dumbledore right away, the information too far reaching to sit on. He’d wanted to meet in person right away, unwilling to disclose the news over a tappable phone line. But the Senior Agent had been indisposed, unable to meet until the early morning.

And here they all stood.

“I apologize.” The words were acid on his tongue, and the older man seemed to detect the acrid scent of them on the air. Harry pushed forward. “However I think there are far more important things to discuss at the moment, like what the hell we do next.”

Dumbledore studied him for several nerve-rattling moments, eyes far too keen for Harry's liking.

“Very well, Mr. Potter. We shall move past the issue for now. But rest assured, this will be a topic of conversation after we’ve resolved the more pressing matter.”

Harry swallowed heavily, nodding. “Agreed.”

_I have quite a few questions for you, myself._

Dumbledore rose to his full height, as though reading the statement in Harry’s emerald gaze.

“In light of your recent discovery, I think it prudent we pay our friend a visit.”

Harry’s heart rate increased, adrenaline flooding his system.

Dumbledore held up a hand.

“Unfortunately, he’s spending his weekend on the English countryside.”

Harry deflated. “Fuck.”

Neville glanced away, smirking lightly.

“Quite right, Mr. Potter.”

Luna tilted her head, expression void of any distress, as though Dumbledore swung by to inform them all of the traffic report.
“I still have daddy’s car.”

Harry’s heart swelled, smiling at the blonde and then shifting his focus to the Senior Agent.

“We’ll drive out there today. Confront him before he has a chance to learn about our visit to the facility and flee.”

Dumbledore took a deep breath, wheels turning behind his glacial eyes. Harry couldn’t bear the silence, every instinct within him screaming for movement, action.

Finally, Dumbledore nodded.

“Alright, Mr. Potter. I suppose there’s little point in denying you permission considering you’ll head out there one way or another.”

Harry wet his lips. “I prefer having your blessing. Also, I need the location.”

The older man smirked. “At least I’m still useful for something.” He glanced over his shoulder. “I know Xeno would prefer for his daughter to drive his vehicle, but will you be accompanying them as well, Mr. Longbottom?”

Harry expected Neville to respond in the negative, volunteering to stay behind and man the fort per usual.

“Yes, I will.”

Harry blinked, glancing at his friend in surprise. Neville blushed. "If that's alright."

Harry nodded. “That’s brilliant, Nev.”

Dumbledore faced forward. "In that case, you had better take plenty of coffee to go. It's a long drive."

Anticipation swelled within him. “Where is he?”

Dumbledore matched the intensity of his gaze. “Lancashire.”

Hermione thrashed against Bella’s hold, but she was no match for the skilled assassin, who easily held her in place.

“You’re a dead man, Riddle.” The stranger’s voice seethed in rage.

Tom’s answering smirk was surreal to her eyes.

“Interesting. You’d think I wouldn’t be walking around, talking.”

Hermione deflated in Bella’s hold. Was he serious? Was Tom really antagonizing the man holding a gun to his head?

“You fucking bastard! I’ve been waiting years for this moment!”

“Looks like you’ve been doing little else, you’re getting a bit soft around the middle there, mate.”

She blinked as Bella snorted behind her, relaxing against the side of the van even as she held Hermione in her iron grip.
The stranger glanced over at the noise, and that one moment of distraction was all it took for Tom to reach out with lightning reflexes and grab the man’s wrist, pushing it away from his head and the girls. The man fired and the bullet tore through the air with a deafening crack, hitting the cement wall of the overpass and blowing dust and debris in its wake.

“You're still a bloody idiot, Rabastan!” Tom growled, twisting the wrist in his hold until the man yelled in pain and his fingers released the gun. It fell to the ground, a gleaming beacon of death and destruction. Her eyes remained fixed upon it as the men toppled to the ground in a pile of swinging limbs.

Bella tipped her head, watching past Hermione’s hair, eyes wide and bright.

“Kill him, Tommy.”

Hermione started to thrash anew.

Meanwhile, Tom managed to straddle the man, a forearm pinning his neck, murder clear in his gaze. It was deeply unnerving. Hermione glanced away, staring once more at the gun, unable to watch him kill someone before her very eyes, even if said someone had just attempted to do the same to him.

“Listen here you fucking moron,” Tom growled, low and sinister, face barely an inch from his subdued prey. “You’re not going to create the same mess you did last time, opening fire in a crowd like some fucking lunatic. You just made the only mistake I’ll allow of you on this mission. You so much as look at me the wrong way—” he tipped his head towards the van. “You so much as look at her once, and I will finish with you what I started with that idiot brother of yours. Do I make myself clear?”

The prone man attempted to spit in Tom’s face but it was too thick and strung across his cheek instead. Tom grimaced in disgust.

“Story of your life, isn’t it?”

“Fuck you!”

“Believe me, I’ve tried, darling,” Bella spoke up, finally releasing Hermione’s mouth to play idly with her voluminous curls. “Unfortunately he only has eyes and cock for this one.”

“Let her go, Bella.”

The woman rolled her eyes but did as bade. Hermione stepped away quickly, running her hands through her hair, trying to dispel the woman’s poison touch.

Tom’s eyes never left the man beneath him. His arm pressed deeper against his neck.


The man continued to glare through bloodshot eyes, face a deep red from the pressure on his windpipe, but he managed to sputter "Yesss. You. Fuckking basstarr-"

“Excellent.”

Tom released him, springing to his feet and straightening his leather jacket with graceful ease. He glanced at Hermione, then to Bella.

“Touch her again and I’ll-”
“Rend me limb from limb? Slit me open from bow to stern? Cut my throat down to the bone? Come now luv, give details, you know I love it when you’re poetic.”

He shook his head, leaning down and grabbing the gun.

“We have to leave immediately, thanks to this idiot I’m sure the authorities are on their way.”

Hermione glanced at the man on the ground, rolling to his side and coughing, gasping for air.

“You haven’t made formal introductions, Tommy.” Bella smiled, sidling closer to Hermione. “Boys. No manners.” She winked, face brimming in amusement. “Hermione, my dearest, this is Rabastan Lestrange. His code name is Buttercream.”

“Fucking bitch,” the man hissed, slowly climbing to his feet.

“Don’t mind him. He’s still a bit sour over an incident from years ago.”

Hermione blinked slowly, almost afraid to ask, and yet unable not to.

“What happened?”

Tom tucked the gun into the back of his waistband, striding for the van.

“Enough. Everyone inside now!”

Bella rolled her eyes. “Tommy you are such a little drama-”

“Shut the fuck up and get in.”

“Why don’t you boys sit up front and let us girls play in the back?”

Hermione looked at Tom with pleading eyes. He didn’t bother glancing in their direction as he slid open the side of the van.

“Nice try. You have the location, you’re driving. Rab sits up front so I can keep an eye on him. Hermione, get in the back.”

She nodded; relief washing away her earlier trepidation. She climbed inside as Bella opened the driver’s door with a sigh.

“Come now, Rabby. We’ll play road games to pass the time.”

Rabastan rubbed at his throat, glaring daggers at Tom as he spoke to Bella.

“Don’t call me that.”

“If you insist. Get in the van, Buttercream.”

He scowled but slowly made his way to the passenger door. Hermione glanced at Tom as he slid into the backseat beside her, slamming the door closed.

“Is his code name really Buttercream?” she whispered, aware of Bella’s feline gaze watching her through the rear view mirror.

Tom removed his sunglasses, expression tense, eyes narrowed and fixed on the man climbing into the vehicle.
“He’s Ash. His brother was Coal.”

"I'm Scarlet since I know you were positively dying to know," Bella chimed, starting up the engine.

Hermione ignored her, focused upon Tom’s use of the past tense when referring to the other Lestrange male. She was about to ask more when he shot her a warning look, shaking his head.

She bit her lip, leaning back in the seat and falling silent.

Bella smiled as Rabastan shut the door.

“Alright, kids. Everyone put their seatbelt on. Safety first.”

Tom pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Just fucking drive.”

The female assassin tapped her red nails against the steering wheel. “We have a long trip ahead of us boys and girls, it will go by much faster if everyone-”

“Fucking drive!” Rabastan shouted, slamming a fist into the dashboard and causing Hermione to jump.

Bella laughed, rich and deep. “Oh, how I’ve missed this.” She put the transmission into drive, pulling out of the underpass. “Off to grandmother's house we go.”

“How’s it going back there, Nev?”

“Good, I got her booted just fine.”

Harry rolled his eyes, smirking. “I meant how are you doing, not your computer.”

Neville blinked, glancing up from the small screen balanced atop his knees. “Oh. I’m good also.”

Harry exchanged an amused glance with Luna.

“How much further?”

His teammate glanced back to the GPS. “We’ve got about three hundred kilometers to go.”

Harry sighed, settling deeper into the seat. “Shite.”

Luna glanced at him from the corner of her eye. “Why don’t you try and rest, Harry? I’m sure you didn’t get any sleep last night.”

He shook his head. “I couldn’t sleep if I wanted to. My mind is going too fast. There’s too much happening.”

Neville cleared his throat awkwardly, a telltale sign he wanted to ask a question or make a statement he feared wouldn't go over well. Harry sighed.

“What’s on your mind, Nev?”

“I was just thinking… if this really proves to be connected, the corruption runs deeper than we ever thought. I mean, it sounds like multiple governments are involved in whatever is going on.”
Harry glanced at the side view mirror through the window, catching a glimpse of the man’s nervous profile.

“So um… I was just wondering… I mean, if our own government is involved as well…”

Harry raised a brow at Neville’s prolonged silence. “Yes?”

“Well, I mean, who can we trust?”

Harry took a deep breath, staring ahead through the windshield, focusing on the endless stretch of road before them.

“We trust each other. This is our case, and we’ll see it through to the end. No matter what.”

Luna’s hands tightened on the wheel. Harry adjusted in his seat, glancing at them both.

"Actually, while we're together for next few hours, let's do a debrief, run through what we know, make sure we aren't overlooking anything."

Neville perked up in his seat. “I’ll take notes!”

Harry smiled. “Whatever you want, Nev.”

Luna tipped her head, gaze serene. “We haven’t had the opportunity to discuss the Malfoy funeral with you. Did you learn anything of note?”

He leaned his head against the seat. "Nothing that stood outright. Well, I take that back." He released a slow breath. "My gut tells me Draco Malfoy isn't connected to his parents' killings. Furthermore, I think we can utilize him as a valuable resource regarding his father's business dealings. Primarily Lucius's connection to Yaxley."

Privately, Harry also thought he’d prefer relying on Draco for funding, rather than depending on Dumbledore. Harry still didn’t trust the man fully, not until he got to the bottom of his involvement in his father’s final mission.

Alas, the Senior Agent possessed powerful connections with every major government around the world. If and when the shite hit the fan, they’d depend on him to shield them from the fallout. Harry hated to admit it, but they needed the man far more than he needed them. Harry would have to tread carefully moving forward, their relationship far too vital to sever while the investigation was still running.

Harry ran a hand over his face. “I’m still trying to get a read on the killers. I assume Nikita was behind the poisoning of the bodyguard, given the hair stick.”

Neville shifted. “Who do you think killed Yaxley?”

Harry closed his eyes, reconstructing the Vienna crime scene in his mind.

“The bodyguards were taken out first. The Janitor restrained Yaxley before exiting the bedroom. If Nikita managed to enter the room and poison the man closest to the door, the Janitor would’ve likely been responsible for stabbing the second guard.” He opened his eyes. “Which aligns with his M.O. at Mungo’s, knives seem to be his forte. Leading me to predict he was the one to slice Lucius Malfoy’s femoral artery.”

“I think Nikita killed Yaxley,” Luna said, voice light and airy. Harry glanced at her sharply,
intrigued.

“Why do you say that?”

“The Malfoy murders were brutal and messy, but also quick. Detached. As was the stabbing of the guard. But the poison was a slow, painful death. An intimate killing. Yaxley’s murder was the most drawn out, the most personal. It doesn’t fit the Janitor’s style up to this point, but it could fit hers.”

Harry tipped his head, studying her profile as she stared out at the road.

“I agree.”

She smiled.

“Why do you think she left the hair stick behind? You think it was an accident?” Neville asked, leaning forward in the center seat to join in the conversation.

Harry’s eyes narrowed, the male assassin’s handsome, smug face taking root in his mind.

“These people don’t make mistakes. She left the murder weapon behind for us to find.”

Neville’s brows drew together. “Why?”

"For the same reason the Janitor let the security cameras capture his face and left the footage intact." His fist clenched on the armrest.

“They’re cocky bastards. He knew the authorities already had his image, from our run in at Mungo’s, and he doesn’t care if we see it again. It’s his way of saying he isn’t afraid of me catching him. He thinks he’s untouchable.”

His jaw ticked. “They both do.”

“Christ.” Neville swallowed. “I feel like that makes them even more dangerous.”

Harry looked into the rearview mirror.

“Perhaps.” He caught the man’s gaze, holding it. “But not as dangerous as me.”

_____________________________________________________

To say the drive to the Target’s location was awkward would be a gross understatement.

Hermione was huddled against the door, seated behind Bella, who was the only person to speak throughout the ride so far, excluding brief interjections from the boys demanding she shut up, usually with a few choice expletives thrown in.

The other woman finally fell into a sullen silence, but the eerie quiet only rattled Hermione more.

She jolted when she felt something warm brush her hand, currently clenched against the seat. She glanced down and saw Tom’s little finger trace along her own. She released a sigh, closing her eyes and allowing his lingering touch to suffuse her bones with a sense of stillness. He was so calm on his end of the seat, so at ease, other than the hard set to his eyes, carefully fixed on the back of Rabastan’s long umber hair.

From where she sat it seemed Rabastan was tenser than her, shoulders squared and posture rigid in his seat, alternating looks of scorn to the woman beside him and to the side view mirror where he undoubtedly had a clear view of Tom in the back.
Hermione swallowed, wondering if he was going to make any more attempts on Tom's life today. Tom seemed to disarm the man with ease, overtaking him just as fast, but she didn't like the thought of contending with a homicidal maniac in lieu of their other burdens.

*Tom doesn’t even seem phased.*

She studied his profile in the dim light of the van, the tinted windows blocking out most of the afternoon sun.

*Like having a gun pointed at his head is business as usual.*

The thought was overwhelming. She took a deep breath, glancing away. Only to face the two hit people seated before her.

*What the hell am I doing here? How did my life come to this?*

She tried looking out the darkened window instead, squinting to make out the shapes of the trees that flew by, desperate for any form of distraction.

And then Bella spoke, voice melodic and carefree, as though she wasn’t hauling a van full of killers and a very terrified stowaway.

“*We’re here!*”

Tom’s hand slid away as he sat up straighter, leaning to the side to glance out the windshield.

“*We made good time.*”

“*What can I say? I’m a demon in the sheets and behind the wheel—*”

“*And where exactly is here?*” Rabastan interrupted, tone acidic.

Bella gestured out the window. “*Didn’t you see the giant welcome sign? Oh, that’s right, you can’t read—*”

“*You fucking cunt!*”

“*Enough!*” Tom’s voice rattled the windows with its intensity. Hermione pushed back in her seat, unnerved by his lethal expression. “*I’m not going to put up with this bullshite from either of you today. Bella, stop antagonizing him.*”

She rolled her eyes. “*Yes, dad—*”

“*Bella.*”

She groaned, tipping her head back as she flipped the blinker and turned off the main road onto a rocky dirt path.

“*Fine! We’re in Lancashire, about 350 kilometers north of London.*”

Hermione took a deep breath. She’d known their destination since last night but they hadn’t been able to find a public listing for the property. Tom had speculated that his employer owned the home. Why their target was staying at such a venue evaded her, and when she’d inquired as much aloud, Tom and Bella had exchanged a loaded look which only served to frustrate her further.

She didn’t appreciate being left in the dark, like some child tagging along on a field trip. This mission
involved her just as much as it did them. Her life was also at stake. But sitting in the backseat beside Tom and behind Bella, she felt staunchly out of place. A little girl playing dress up. She knew she didn't belong here, and it was stunningly evident they knew it as well, which somehow made it even more unbearable.

*And what would you prefer? To be given a gun and told where to shoot?*

She shook her head, disturbed by the thought and her reaction to the situation in general.

*I just need to survive this day. I can figure the rest out later.*

She sent up a silent prayer to a deity she’d spoken to more in the last week than in the first twenty fours years of her life.

*Please let Tom make it out of this unscathed.*

She bit back a yelp as the van drove over the uneven path, tossing them side to side.

“Fucking hell, are we heading into the forest?”

Bella rolled her eyes at the man in the passenger seat. “It’s a country home. Those tend to be in the country.”

“They still have roads.”

“Do you want to be seen driving to and from the crime scene, Rabby?”

Tom pinched the bridge of his nose. "No one else talks until we get there."

“Who the hell put you in charge of this mission?” Rabastan scowled over his shoulder.

“You did. When you let me disarm you.”

Hermione bit her lip, feeling the inexplicable urge to smile. Rabastan’s eyes darted to her, eyes narrowing.

“What did I say about looking at her?”

“Who the fuck is she anyway?”

“Come now, Rabby, surely you’ve got enough functional brain cells left to piece together that puzzle.”

Rabastan faced forward again. “She’s obviously not a part of the organization. Why is she here?”

“Why don’t you ask Green the next time you see him,” Tom clipped. “In the meantime, keep your mouth shut. I’m taking the lead position when we go in. You listen to me or you get shot in the head.”

Whatever brief amusement Hermione felt before instantly withered and died in her chest. She inhaled a shaky breath, averting her eyes to the window once more.

“How are you going to take the lead when you don’t know the name of our target, Riddle?”

Tom stared at the back of Rabastan’s head with such ferocious intensity she was amazed the man’s skull didn’t split open.
“I expect for you to tell us, idiot.”

“That’s quite an expectation. I have no plans of sharing that information until we’re inside the venue.”

Bella laughed. “There’s that Lestrange logic I’m so fond of.”

“I’m not going to give up my one piece of leverage until absolutely necessary. Not around the two of you.” He paused. “Not when Green is obviously up to something, sending a Girl Scout on the mission.”

Hermione scowled. “Excuse me?”

“Hermione.” Tom’s voice held a clear warning. Do not engage. She bit her tongue and glanced away.

“You shouldn’t keep her leash so tight, Tommy. She’s got a mean bite, you just have to let her exercise it every now and then.”

“I appreciate the advice, Bella. But she’s not a dog. And I don’t intend for her to exercise anything beyond her eyes as the lookout.”

Hermione glanced at him sharply. "But Green said-"

“I don’t give a fuck what he said. You being here fulfills the terms of the agreement. If he has a problem with that he can take it up with me.”

She wet her lips, hands clenching on the seat. She wanted to argue the point further but it was clear the front two inhabitants were listening in, intrigued to learn the details of Hermione’s presence here.

Her jaw tensed as she forced herself silent once more.

_Why are you arguing? This is a good thing. Being a lookout is the safest job there is._

_With any luck, you won't hear or see anything._

She blinked, a feeling of dread washing over her.

She had a sinking suspicion the day wasn’t going to go as smoothly as Tom intended.

Bella slowed the van to a stop beneath a gathering of maple trees, the full branches hanging low and concealing the side of the van from the view of the main road.

“Allright, dad, how would you like to proceed?”

Tom didn’t react to the moniker. “The three of us will visit the home and take care of the target, Hermione will stay behind with the van.”

Bella tipped her head, a look of amusement clear on her face. “May I make a suggestion?”

“No.”

Rabastan scowled. “When your pretty girlfriend gets killed don’t blame us.”

Tom's hand shot out lightning fast, wrapping around the man's throat and squeezing the life out of it. Hermione jolted, watching in abject shock, glancing at Bella in panic. The other woman rolled her
eyes, removing her seatbelt and inspecting her nails.

“He’s an idiot, but he makes a good point, Tommy.”

Rabastan clawed at his throat, desperately trying to dispel Tom’s death grip.

“Tom,” Hermione whispered, “Please.”

Tom glanced over, meeting her frightened gaze. He released a deep breath, steam practically billowing from his mouth, and dropped his hand. Rabastan sank into the seat, gasping, face purple.

“The next time you put your hands on me I’ll fucking-”

"Honestly, Rab, you aren't doing yourself any favors, luv." Bella turned in her seat, facing Tom. "Hermione doesn't have any weapons or self-defense training. Last night you told me Green warned you this target is aware we're coming. Do you really want to leave her out here unprotected?"

Tom’s jaw tensed. “I’m not bringing her in.”

“Of course not.” She licked her burgundy lips. “Which is why I’m volunteering to stay behind with the little kitten. Aren’t I just a fantastic team player?”

Tom released a humorless laugh. “Not a bloody chance.”

“Well, I suppose you could stay behind with her… but that would leave me and Rabby in charge of eliminating the target. And being the control freak you are I know you don’t trust us to carry that little mission out to your standards.”

“I trust you even less with Hermione.”

Rabastan was still rubbing his throat, glancing over his shoulder with clear intrigue. “Who the fuck is this girl? She yours?”

Tom’s eyes twitched. “It isn’t up for discussion.” He looked at Hermione. “Do you feel comfortable with a gun?”

Her mind reeled. She opened her mouth but words didn’t come out.

“Look at her, Tommy. You give that pretty little thing a gun and she’ll shoot herself in the foot in the first ten minutes.”

“I know how to shoot,” Hermione interjected defensively, bristling at the insult. Bella smiled at her.

“I’m sure Tommy has taught you all types of kinky tricks, luv. But shooting a gun and shooting a person are two very different things.”

Hermione fell silent. Bella winked at her and then glanced at Tom once more. "Well?"

His fists clenched, eyes hardened to steel.

“Bella should stay with me.”

Everyone in the van looked at her. She wet her lips, fighting to keep her voice steady. “Really, Tom,” she held his gaze. “I’ll be okay.”

He blinked.
“There you have it. Straight from the kitten’s mouth.”

Hermione ignored her, nodding once at Tom, trying to convey a sense of assurance through her gaze alone.

A short eternity went by staring into his eyes, but finally, he nodded in turn.

“Stay here. I’ll be back soon.”

“Don’t jinx yourself, Tommy.”

He scowled.

“Bella, a word outside. Now.”

The woman rolled her eyes, glancing at Hermione. “I’ll be just a minute, kitten. Have to let your lover threaten to murder me ten ways to Sunday.”

Hermione felt the tension within her lift a fraction. She bit her lip, fighting back a smirk as Tom slid out the van in a fit of pent-up frustration. Bella slid out as well, calm and collected, and for a heart-stopping moment, it was only her and Rabastan in the vehicle.

The man glanced at her over his shoulder, roaming her figure from bottom to top, eyes gleaming. She pressed back in the seat, stomach clenching, and then his door was wrenched open and Tom was grabbing him by the lapels, hauling him out.

Hermione sighed as the door slammed behind him, and she was left alone with nothing but her frantic nerves and traitorous thoughts.

Tom left Rabastan scowling in his wake as he circled the van and pinned Bella with the full intensity of his glare.

“Oh Christ, what did I do this time?”

“I don’t know what you’re up to-”

“I believe the words you’re looking for are ‘thank you, Bella, for guarding my girlfriend’s life while I murder someone real quick.’”

Tom took a deep breath through his nose, the urge to throttle her overriding his need to stay on task.

"As I was saying, I don't know what you're up, and I don't have time to figure it out. But if anything, and I mean anything, happens to her while I’m gone, I will do things to you that make you pray for death."

Lightning sparked in his eyes. "And you can save all the sex jokes and innuendos because I've always seen right through the rouse. I know who you really are under all that depraved bullshit, Bella. I've always known."

Danger flashed in her gaze as well.

“Not exactly wise to piss me off before leaving your beloved in my keep.”

“I know your survival instinct overrides even your psychosis. And you know you’re as good as dead if any harm comes to Hermione. I’ll hunt you to the end of the earth. Not even Green will be able to
protect you from my wrath.”

She raised a manicured brow. “I know you said to snuff the sex talk, but I’m dripping wet.”

He shook his head, backing away.

“It’s your fault for using the gravel voice!” she called after him as he rounded the van.

“Remember what I said.”

She mock saluted him before climbing back into the van. Tom turned his focus to the idiot lingering in the grass, fidgeting like a child in too big a coat. Tom rolled his eyes, striding past.

“Let’s get this over with.”

Rabastan scowled. “Don’t I get a weapon?”

“No.”

“Are you fucking kidding?”

“I’ll give you one guess.”

Tom glanced over his shoulder through the windshield of the van. He could barely make out Hermione's outline in the backseat through the tinted glass. She was in the center, leaning forward. He couldn't see her eyes but he could picture them well enough, the tension wrought in her face.

He took a deep breath, eyes lingering on the dim form of her shape, and then faced forward once again, committed to seeing this assignment through with little to no distraction.

He was known to disregard rules and protocol in the past, doing whatever the hell he pleased, but he couldn't afford to risk Hermione's safety this time around. It wasn't only his life at stake anymore.

“So, what’s up with Barbie?”

Tom blinked. Hearing Hermione compared to the plastic toy caused him to smirk, imagining her reaction to such a comment. He harbored no doubt she would take it as the ultimate insult.

“It’s none of your business.”

“If I’m to be working with the both of you, it’s most certainly my business.”

“Why don’t you think back to the last time you pushed me on information I wasn’t keen on sharing?”

Rabastan spun around, walking backwards along the edge of the trees.

“You’re a sick fuck, you know that?”

“I’ve been aware for quite some time, yes.”

“You think you’re so much better than-”

"I'm going to stop you right there. If you finish that sentence you're going to push me over my limit for the day and I'll be forced to kill you here and now. However, I don't feel like explaining the incident to Green. So do us all a favor and keep your mouth shut for the remainder of this mission."
Stand silently and look intimidating if you must."

Rabastan tucked his hands in his coat pockets like an insolent child and faced forward, glaring at the ground.

“The house is up ahead, looks small. Can’t be many people living there.”

“There’s only one.”

Tom raised a brow. “Did you just hand over your last piece of leverage?”

“ Fucking hilarious.”

“I’ll handle the target. Don’t get in the way. And for the love of God, don’t get any bright ideas. I assure you, they aren’t nearly as clever as you think.”

Rabastan shook his head as they emerged from the small wooded area and approached the cottage on the hill.

“One of these days, I’m going to kill you, Riddle.”

“I’ll be sure to remind you of that when I’m taking your life.”

Rabastan fell blissfully silent, seething in his rage as they walked up the gravel driveway. Smoke billowed from the chimney. Other homes could be seen in the distance, far enough away that Tom doubted they’d hear any run of the mill commotion, but a gunshot would certainly draw their attention.

He’d have to handle this manually.

They walked onto the porch, passing flowering bushes and standing beneath wind chimes.

Tom tipped his head.

_Interesting._

A sour feeling started to fester in his gut.

_What is Green up to?_

He lifted a fist towards the door when Rabastan surged forward.

"You're just going to knock?"

Tom fought back a scowl.

"I was contemplating it."

"Shouldn't we go around the side?"

"I don't like to over complicate things until they need to be complicated."

Rabastan shook his head. "What if they're armed?"

"Then I'll be sure to use you as a human shield. Lestranges are good for that sort of thing if memory serves."
"You fucker!" Rabastan swung at his head for the second time that day. Tom reared back and caught his forearm, twisting the appendage behind the man's back and shoving him into the side of the house, face slamming against the honey-colored paneling.

"That's your second mistake for the day. Lucky for you there are more pressing matters at hand, otherwise, you'd already be dead."

"Get off me!"

"Your next strike will be your last," Tom growled into his ear, leaning close. "I'm not playing games. You sabotage this mission and I will sever every limb from your body while you're startlingly cognizant."

"Your threats don't scare me, Riddle!"

Tom twisted his arm, causing him to gasp in pain against the sheathing.

"Then that will be your third and final mistake."

He released him, stepping back and straightening his jacket once more. He waited until Rabastan peeled himself away from the wall with a fatigued grunt and stood beside him.

Tom knocked on the door.

A shuffling sound could be heard from inside.

He glanced at Rabastan. The man was rocking on his heels, glancing around anxiously.

“Calm the fuck down,” Tom hissed under his breath just as the door opened.

He blinked.

An old woman stood before him, grey hair cut short and back hunched. She gazed up at them through thick spectacles, a pleasant smile on her face.

“Oh! Hello, dears. I’m not interested in buying anything today.”

Tom blinked again, quickly changing gears.

“Hello, Ma’am. We’re not selling anything. We came to pay a visit to the resident, but it seems we have the wrong house.”

We had fucking better.

He started to back away, disgust twisting his stomach when Rabastan took a step forward.

“Er… hello.”

Tom glanced over his shoulder with narrowed eyes.

“Good day, Ma’am,” he wet his lips, palms rubbing in front of him. “You wouldn’t by chance be Mrs. Crouch?”

Her smile deepened. “Why yes, I am.”

Rabastan nodded, looking back at Tom, pupils blown wide.
Tom’s jaw tensed as he trotted back up the steps.

“Apologies. We thought perhaps your son lived here.”

"Oh no, Barty is the owner but it's just me. Of course, I'm expecting him anytime now. He visits on the weekend." She glanced between them. "Would you like to come inside and wait?"

Tom took a deep breath, smile unfurling. “That’s very kind of you. Yes, we’d love to wait for Barty.”

She nodded, stepping back. “Do come in. How lovely to have guests! I’ll make some tea.”

Harry ran his hand through his unruly hair, peering out onto the road with narrowed eyes.

“How much further?”

Neville sighed behind him. “We’ve gone 25 kilometers since the last time you asked, mate.”

Harry groaned, thumping his head on the seat.

“We’re making good time, the roads are surprisingly clear for a Sunday,” Luna chimed, eyes fixed ahead.

“Crouch has had since last night to find out about our visit to the facility. That’s plenty of time to pack up and run. It’ll be a miracle if he’s even in the UK anymore.”

“The staff didn’t see us slip in or out, unless his son told him,” Neville said, moving his laptop to the seat beside him.

“I doubt that’s the case,” Luna interjected. “Harry didn’t provide his real name, the son wouldn’t have known about our Ministry ties.”

“That’s not what I meant. Crouch is his dad. If a stranger snuck into my room I’d be sure to bring it up during our next call.”

“I get the distinct feeling Crouch doesn’t talk to his son all that often. If he did, I doubt he’d have stuck him in that place to begin with.”

“It’s rather lush.”

“He’s not the one flipping the bill.”

Luna glanced at him from the corner of her eye. “How did you know who he was anyway?”

Harry’s gaze narrowed as he watched the road ahead. “I remember seeing a photo on Crouch’s desk once. Years ago. Then it disappeared. I thought it was strange he never mentioned his kid to anyone, ever. I asked Sirius about it and he said the boy was sent up North when he was young for behavioral issues.”

“Seemed mighty calm to me. Compared to Lockhart, anyway.”

Luna glanced into the rearview mirror, eyeing Neville. "Who?"

“Nevermind.” Harry sighed. “The kid's been locked away in that place for years, for whatever reason, and someone else has been paying for it. The same people linked to all the other accounts on
the thumb drive.” His fists tightened. “Crouch has been working with them, providing them inside information—”

“We can’t make those assumptions yet, Harry.” Luna’s calm voice only riled him further.

“Assumptions? Two men were murdered for the content of that drive and Crouch’s son’s medical bills were highlighted on it!”

“It implicates him, there’s no doubt about it. But we don’t know how deeply involved he is until we speak with him.”

Harry cracked his neck, nerves wrought. "Well, we're going to find out once and for all."

And he’d know whether the man he used to call his boss was feeding Ministry intel to the people responsible for putting Sirius in a coma.

He felt his blood pressure rise, the tiny car stifling.

He forced a deep breath.

“How much further?”

“Here we go, some nice tea for some nice boys.”

“Thank you, Ma’am. Please, allow me.” Tom stood from the floral print couch, lace doilies lining the arms and back, and took the heavy tea tray out of the elderly woman’s hands, gently sitting it on the coffee table.

“Oh, what a sweet young man you are.”

Tom grinned. “You’re too kind. But you’ve doted on us far enough. Please, take a seat, relax.”

“Well, I don’t mind if I do. My knee has been acting up today.”

She slowly folded herself into the armchair facing the couch, where Rabastan was currently seated, posture stiff and hands bracing his knees like he was pushing out a dog-sized shite. Tom did his best to keep her focus off his idiot partner.

“How do you take your tea, Ma’am?”

“Oh, white with two lumps, dear.”

Tom leaned down and began preparing her cup, pouring the steaming liquid into the delicate china while watching Rabastan shift anxiously from the corner of his eye.

The fucktard was going to do something superbly stupid. He just knew it.

Tom smiled once more, handing her the cup balanced upon a saucer. She reached up with shaky hands, her entire body trembling with some chronic illness. “Thank you, dear.”

She took a delicate sip. Tom retook his seat beside Rabastan, wanting to be near the man in case he had to tackle him to the floor before he ruined the entire mission.

“I’m so sorry you have to wait with an old woman,” she spoke suddenly, drawing his focus back. “Barty was supposed to be here an hour ago. Such a good boy, checking in on his mother like he
does. He bought me this house you know.”

“Did he now?”

“Yes. He’s a great man, my Barty.”

Tom’s smile dripped acid. Not for her. But for her piece of shite son who bought his mother a home with blood money.

_Like you’re one to judge. Your mother didn't appreciate anything that couldn't be melted down and drawn into a syringe._

Tom swallowed, pushing past the wayward thought.

“And how often does he visit you?”

"Oh, at least once a month. It's difficult for him to take time off of work. But of course, you'd know all about that, working in the same department."

Tom nodded. “Yes, Barty is certainly a workaholic.”

She smiled in turn, then glanced to Tom’s side with a worried expression.

“Are you quite alright, dear?”

Tom blinked, looking to the man beside him. His eyes narrowed.

Fuck.

Rabastan looked like death warmed over.

His complexion was waxy, pale, a sheen of sweat across his forehead and upper lip. His palms rubbed together continuously.

Tom wasn't certain how he'd missed the tell-tale signs before. His preoccupation with Hermione had obviously left him more distracted than he realized.

He looked upon the man with thinly veiled disgust, taking a deep breath and redirecting his focus to Mrs. Crouch.

“He’s fine. A bit carsick from the long drive.”

“Oh, yes, of course.”

Tom cleared his throat lightly. “So, do you know when Bartemius might be arriving?”

“Oh… well, no, I don’t.” Her eyes brightened behind the thick lenses. “But I can give him a ring for you, see where he’s at.”

Tom shook his head. “No, I’d hate to trouble you.”

"Oh, it's no trouble at all, dear!” She waved her hand. "You boys took the time to come all the way out here to see him, the least I can do is find out where he is for you.”

She started to push up from the chair when an engine could be heard springing to life. She blinked.

“Oh, perhaps that’s him now.” She glanced over her shoulder towards the wall that no doubt
connected to the garage.

Tom’s eyes narrowed, staring at the wall as well.

“I bet it is.”

*And I bet the rat has been hiding here the whole bloody time.*

His mother seemed too sincere to pull off such a skillful lie. Tom was certain she didn’t know her son was home or simply forgot in the wake of being so fucking old. Either way, he’d spare her having to watch-

His internal musings were cut short as the sound of screeching tires filled the tiny living room. Through the bay window, a station wagon could be seen peeling off through the back driveway, leaving tire tracks in its wake.

The men seated upon the doily ridden couch made eye contact with the driver; his pudgy, red, terror-filled face easy to spot even from a distance.

“That fat fuck just took off in a car!” Rabastan exploded at Tom’s side, half leaping from the couch.

“Excuse me?” Mrs. Crouch asked, grey brows drawing in.

Tom smiled pleasantly, restraining the moron at his side with an arm across his chest.

“He said we need to get back to our car. We parked on the street, don’t want to get ticketed.”

“Oh, of course.”

“Hurry up, Riddle! The fucker’s getting away!” Rabastan hissed, bouncing on the cushion like an impatient child.

“Thank you for the tea, Ma’am. We’ll just wait to speak with Bartemius at the office. Have a wonderful day.” Tom took to his feet, politely nodding his farewell.

“Of course. Stop by anytime, young man. It’s so nice having visitors to the house.”

Rabastan sprinted to the door like an eager dog. Tom ground his teeth, keeping his focus on the old woman.

“I’ll be sure to do that. Take care now.”

Once they emerged outside Tom slapped Rabastan upside the head. “Dumb fuck.”

“Ow! What the hell was that for?”

“For using my real name in front of a civilian, but mostly for coming on a mission in the middle of withdrawal.”

Rabastan blinked, expression tensing.

“I- I don’t.”

“Save it. I’ve seen heroin withdrawal up close and personal a hundred times over. I know the signs. You’re peaking towards the worst of the symptoms. Only an idiot would undertake a mission when they can’t even walk straight.”
“I know you have a god-complex, Riddle, but you can’t tell me what to—”

The rest of his sentence was overshadowed by the sound of a heavy engine firing to life. Tom felt his heart sink, already knowing what to expect even before his eyes landed on the sight.

Up ahead, the van burst through the trees, rocketing down the grassy hill and crashing onto the main road with a metallic bang.

“That fucking cunt…” he whispered, eyes narrowed in rage as the van sped off down the road in the opposite direction.

“I’m going to kill her.”

Twelve minutes earlier...

Bella drummed her hands on the steering wheel to the beat of the song on the radio.

Her eyes met Hermione's through the rearview mirror.

"Sit up front with me, luv. I don't bite."

Hermione bit back a scoff.

"I'm fine back here."

“Did Tommy tell you to keep your distance from me?”

Hermione rubbed her arm. “Why do you call him that?”

Bella smiled, tipping her head. “Would you prefer I call him Tom?”

Hermione blinked, gut clenching at the sound of his name on her sultry lips.

“No.”

The other woman laughed. “I didn’t think so.” She reached forward and switched the radio off before turning in her seat to face Hermione. “Let’s have girl talk.”

Hermione leaned back, sliding her hands beneath her thighs, tense.

“We should probably watch the road, keep an eye out for Tom and—”

“They’ll be fine, darling. You know Tommy better than anyone. He’s more than capable of handling a target by himself, even with thirteen stones of dead weight dragging behind him.”

Hermione bit her lip, glancing away. Bella leaned forward. “So… how did you two kids meet?”

“Can we talk about something else?”

Bella laughed once more, eyes bright. "Aren't you the mysterious one. You're perfect for each other."

Hermione sighed, glancing out the window, staring at the maple leaves with feigned interest.

"You know, I suspected Tommy was harboring a secret lover years ago. I never considered him the commitment type. I'm more shocked he was able to keep you a secret from Green for as long as he
The name triggered a visceral reaction within her. She shuddered, swallowing thickly. Bella rested her chin on the back of the seat.

“It’s alright, luv. Green inspires that feeling in most people.”

Hermione took a deep breath, knowing Tom would throw a fit if he knew she was about to willingly engage with the female assassin. But the temptation was too great. She turned her head, locking gazes.

“Is he your handler as well?”

Bella’s expression fell instantly, like flipping a switch. “No.” Her jaw tensed. “Not anymore. He’s just borrowing me temporarily.”

“To spy on Tom and me?”

“Among other things.”

Hermione fought back a second shudder, something in the woman’s gleaming gaze far too predatory for her liking. It reminded her of Tom. The comparison disturbed her.

“What happened between Tom and Rabastan?”

Bella smiled once more. “See? I knew you were good at gossip.”

“What can I say, when people pull guns on each other it makes me curious.”

Bella sighed, perching her long legs up on the passenger seat as she settled in.

“Well, if I tell you it’ll only piss your boyfriend off even more…” She winked. “You came to the right girl.”

Hermione fought back a smile. Something about Bella was equal parts terrifying and exhilarating. Like riding a roller coaster without the safety bar, waiting for the turn that throws you plunging to your death.

"Tommy worked with Rab and Rod years ago. I have as well but under far different circumstances. I've never been able to get the full story out of Roddy but from what I've gathered, Rab said the wrong thing at the wrong time and all hell broke loose. There was a shootout in a hotel lobby.”

Hermione leaned forward, drawn in by the story. “Between them and the target?”

“No, between the boys.”

Hermione blinked.

Bella folded her arms around the back of the seat. "Rab was trying to kill Tom, Rod was trying to protect his brother, and in the midst of the chaos ended up with a bullet to the leg. If it had hit just muscle tissue it would have been fine, but of course, Tommy struck a nerve, no pun intended.”

Hermione wetted her lips. "He died?"

Bella played with a strand of her long black hair. “Worse. He was crippled.”
Hermione fell back against the seat. “That’s worse?”

"For people like us, it's a living hell. Rab has never forgiven Tommy for the incident, even though he technically started it."

“Is his brother still alive?”

“Of course.”

“I just thought… if he can’t work anymore…”

“Our bosses would kill him?”

Hermione nodded. “I didn’t think they offer a retirement plan.”

Bella chuckled. “They certainly don’t. But Roddy has far more sense than his little brother. He was a good agent. Not as prized as Tommy, of course, but he still made a pretty decent name for himself. They offered him another job, out of the field.”

“Behind a desk?”

“Not quite.”

Hermione waited in silence for the woman to continue, but she seemed to be done talking on the matter, eyes drifting to the window as her expression took on a curiously serious repose.

Hermione fidgeted lightly, eyes trailing down her sharp, attractive features.

“Do you mind if I ask how you came to be… this?”

Bella’s dark gaze snapped back, the corner of her mouth tipping up. “In all these years you’re the second person to ask me that.”

Hermione raised a brow. “Who was the fi-”

She was cut off by the sound of screeching tires. Bella spun around, both women watching through the windshield as a mocha colored station wagon raced down the main road in front of them, skidding along the pavement as the driver turned the wheel frantically, trying to correct his path.

Hermione barely got a glimpse of the outline of the driver, a portly man with short hair, before Bella was firing up the engine.

“Something tells me that fat little mouse is our target, darling.” She glanced over her shoulder, face alight with dark amusement. “When the dogs are away, the cats will play.”

The silence of the sedan was broken by a loud ring.

Harry blinked, pulled from his thoughts, glancing down at the center console.

“Is that mine or yours?”

“That’s not my ringtone,” Luna answered, flipping the blinker and changing lanes.

Harry slid open the top and pulled the vibrating phone free.

“Holy fuck.”
“Who is it?”
Harry glanced up, locking eyes with Neville. “Crouch.”
Luna tipped her head. “Perhaps you should answer.”
Harry flipped it open, pressing the green icon, bringing the plastic to his ear.
“This is Pot-”
“Potter!”
Harry blinked, glancing up at Neville once more. “Crouch?”
“You’ve got to help me!”
Harry took a deep breath, gaze hardening. “I take it you know about our-”
“I’m in trouble!”
“It’s going to be okay, Crouch,” Harry forced out, hand clenching around the phone. “We just want to talk with y-”
“They’re going to kill me!” he keened, voice bordering on hysteria.
Harry drew back. “Who’s trying to-”
“They’re right behind me!”
Harry lowered the phone and put it on speaker. The sedan was filled with Crouch’s panting breath, the sound of a roaring engine and uneven road.
“Who’s right behind you?”
“I don’t know! They sent people to kill me! They were at my mother’s house!”
Harry held Neville’s wide gaze, wetting his lips, mind racing. “Where are you now, Crouch?”
“I managed to sneak out! I took the car but they had people outside waiting for me, too! They’re right behind me!”
“I need you to look for a sign or marker and tell us what road you’re on.”
“I can’t! They’re right-”
"Crouch!" Harry yelled, fist tightening on his lap. "We're almost to Lancashire. We will help you, but you have to tell us where you are.”
Neville paled, leaning back. Luna continued to gaze out at the road, seemingly unaffected by the desperate man’s plea.
“I… I’m on Norfolk Road, heading West. No, no east! I’m heading east!”
Harry snapped his fingers at Neville. “Pull up the map.”
The man fumbled with his laptop. “I can trace Crouch’s cell signal.”
Harry blinked. “Do that.”

Suddenly the phone erupted in a high pitched scream, nearly causing Harry to drop it in surprise.

“Crouch!” He yelled, heart beating through his chest. “What happened? Are you still on the road?”

"They just rear-ended me! The crazy bitch!"

His vision swam. “Bitch? It’s a woman driver?”

Crouch wheezed in hysteria. “It’s two women!”

Bella let out a shriek of pure delight, followed by a maniacal laugh.

“You know I just can't resist tapping that ass!”

She rammed into the back of the station wagon a second time, causing Hermione to lurch forward in her seat. Bella had commanded she climb into the front shortly after taking off after the wayward vehicle.

Hermione braced her hands against the dash, body pulsing with adrenaline.

“Are we sure this is the target?”

Bella laughed again, sharp and terrifying. “Perhaps we should make certain and ask. Let me help him pull over.”

Hermione choked on a gasp as Bella rammed the bumper a third time and held, pushing the smaller vehicle along the road, tires screeching, and then spun the wheel, changing course and driving the station wagon off the gravel and into a picket fence.

The wood splintered, both vehicles plowing through and emerging in a hill strewn field. The van bounced wildly, causing Hermione to bump her head against the roof.

“Hold on, kitten!”

Bella laughed in pure delight, maneuvering the wheel with easy skill, guiding both vehicles around the grassy ravines.

Hermione opened her mouth but only broken sound emitted, too overwhelmed by the sudden turn of events to form rational sentences.

Bella hit the brakes, changing direction with clear intent to drive into the side of the station wagon, but the van skid along the wet grass, losing contact with the other vehicle.

“Fuck!” Bella slammed a fist into the dash, eyes transforming from feral delight to bloody thirsty in the space of a heartbeat. Hermione swallowed, bracing herself with a hand on the door as the van righted course, racing after the supposed target once more.

But the brief head start paid off, the wagon sped around a tall hill and disappeared from sight. Bella followed the same tight turn but the van scraped along the side of the hill and lost momentum, the wagon getting further and further away.

Hermione released a shaky breath.
“Perhaps we should wait for Tom-”

“Don’t be silly, darling. This little mouse will make for quick work. Just stick with me.”

They emerged from the hills, finally on flat grassland. The wagon was up ahead by the treeline, heading straight for the thicket of overhanging branches and tall bushes.

“What’s he doing?” Hermione asked, heart in her throat. “Why wouldn’t he head for the road?”

“Fear makes people stupid. And I somehow doubt this one had much intelligence to begin with.”

Bella smiled as the wagon’s brake lights came on, skidding to a stop just before the woods. The driver door flew open and the large man tumbled out, falling to the ground in his haste to get out. He scrambled to his feet, kicking up dirt and dead leaves as he charged into the trees.

Hermione released a sigh of relief, not realizing she’d been rooting for the man’s escape from the moment Bella fired up the engine. She knew what this would mean, not being able to catch their target, the hammer Green would bring down upon all their heads, but she couldn’t find it in herself to wish for someone else’s death simply for her freedom.

This mission made the situation all too real.

She wasn’t a killer. And she couldn’t look the other way while Tom performed the hit either.

Bella must have noticed her change in posture, or perhaps the female assassin was simply able to read minds because a moment later she was parking the van beside the abandoned station wagon and glancing over with a wicked smile.

“Don’t worry, luv. It isn’t over yet.” Her teeth gleamed, sharp and hungry. “The chase is the best part.”
Hermione carefully turned the worn, yellowed page, tongue pressing the roof of her mouth in nervous anticipation. She’d read the following passage so many times she could quote it word for word. Still, she never tired of her very favorite novel. The Count of Monte Cristo.

Sunlight danced across the page, broken intermittently by the shadows of swaying leaves above. She sat on the far edge of a circular bench, a tall oak protruding from its center, affording her a bit of shaded reprieve from the hot summer sun. The fragrance of wet sap and freshly mowed grass was thick upon the air, permeating the back of her throat and relaxing her further until she forgot where she was for a blessed few minutes.

Tom’s weekly counseling sessions.

He was finally nearing the end of his year-long court-ordered punishment. But last month the mysterious counselor had suddenly insisted Tom visit his place of business located across town instead of holding the meetings in Mrs. Cole’s office at the orphanage. Tom never offered up an explanation for this sudden change in routine and Hermione knew better than to ask.

Besides, she considered it a splendid change of pace, harboring no complaints on the matter. Any opportunity to escape the oppressive walls of Wool’s was a gift. She’d hated waiting for him in the courtyard outside the old brick building they were forced to call home, chum in the water for Amy and her gang of mindless drones, the piranhas eagerly circling their prey while the shark was preoccupied.

But on this rare occasion, Hermione was finally able to enjoy a bit of much-needed solitude outside the elegant office building, reading her library book in peace and quiet without the fear of a sneak attack.

Her eyes continued to speed rapidly across the text, finally reaching her very favorite part of the story. Edmund’s daring prison break. His hard-won freedom within hand’s reach at long last, after so many years trapped in the dark solitude of his own mind, plagued by crippling loneliness and despair. Until his life-changing encounter with Abbé Faria, his sole friend and mentor, a guide through the endless desolation.

Such a small blessing that two broken souls could find each other within the stone walls of the château, deriving enough strength and hope from the other to maintain the will to go on. The daring courage to dream of a better future. To one day fight against the system that cast them both aside like human rubbish. A stain on society. Easily ignored. Quickly forgotten.

Hermione bit her lip, emotion rising high within her chest until she was certain her rib cage would burst from the pressure. Edmond was being swung back and forth in the body bag now, moments
away from being tossed into the black ocean tide, free free free—

A dark shadow appeared across the page, obscuring the text. Hermione reared back, sensing the presence of a person standing just before her knees, throwing her back into the coldness of reality as though she too were being tossed off a cliff’s edge into the raging sea. Her eyes met a tall, dark silhouette, wide shoulders blocking out the sun, her heartbeat pulsing behind her tongue as she narrowed her gaze, trying to see his face.

Tom.

His eyes came into focus, deep grey and glistening with intensity, expression sharply drawn with barely tamped hostility. It was the mask he always wore when leaving these weekly sessions. His gaze slowly roamed her face with such methodical precision she felt a damning blush stain her cheeks. And then he released her from his thrall, taking a step back, sunlight filtering in from around his head, blinding her.

“Let’s go,” he stated simply, voice clipped.

Hermione stood without hesitation, careful not to brush against him as she did so, snapping her book shut and clutching the frayed spine tightly. She reached for her bag next, the material worn so thin it was practically a paper knapsack at this point. She opened the top flap and tucked the book inside, nestled beside other titles she’d checked out the day before, and then gasped as he grabbed her wrist. The touch was so commonplace it barely registered in her mind, but his fingers were surprisingly cool to the touch, erupting chills along her spine.

Hermione was still fumbling with her bag as he began pulling her along the walkway, his long legs eating up the pavement so quickly she had to trot to keep up, adjusting the strap over her shoulder—

The fabric snapped, strap breaking loose and tipping her bag upside down, all its contents spilling free in an impressive avalanche of fluttering pages.

“Crap!” She hissed, tugging her arm back. “Wait a minute.”

Tom turned, gazing down and releasing her. She kneeled atop the pavement, carefully grabbing up loose pages and bent books, glancing up in annoyance as Tom continued to hover above, not offering a bit of assistance. Then she blinked, noticing his stormy gaze wasn’t fixed upon her but rather the building behind them, eyes aimed at the windows along the top floor. His hands clenched at his sides, the muscle in his jaw pulsing.

She opened her mouth to ask him what was wrong when a soft tweet stole her attention away. Her head snapped round to the stretch of grass at their sides. Her heart skipped.

A bird lied upon the dewy blades, sprawled on its back with its legs pedaling in the air, body twisting and jerking as though trying to right itself. Her brows drew tight in concern as she spotted the crumpled wing tucked beneath its small body, bent and broken. She tossed her papers aside, leaning forward on hands and knees, palms pressing the damp grass. “Tom!” She hissed, not wanting to startle the bird further. “Look!”

She heard his heavy sigh from above, dirty trainers shifting in her peripheral, facing the lawn.

“What?” His tone was impatient, as always. She ignored it, as always.

“I think it’s injured.” She edged closer, moving slowly. “Look at its markings. A goldfinch. Don’t you think?”
“How should I know that? How do you know that?”

Hermione could envision his scowl so perfectly she needn’t glance up to confirm it was in place. “It’s just a baby,” she whispered, chest aching as the bird’s calls turned shrill, panicked.

“Fascinating. Now let’s go.”

It was her turn to scowl, eyes snapping up at last, holding his gaze. “We can’t leave it.”

He lifted a dark brow, towering above her, radiating familiar dark energy she took perverse comfort in. “We most certainly can.”

“Tom—”

“Don’t start.”

Her jaw set, arms crossing as she sat back on her heels. “I’m not leaving it out here! It’ll starve.”

“And become dinner for another baby animal you’ll undoubtedly fawn over. The circle of life continues. Speaking of which, I’m starving. Now get up.”

She took a steadying breath, changing tactics. Her arms dropped to her sides, expression and voice softening. “Tom, please—”

“Nice try. I’m serious, Hermione. We’ve lingered outside for too fucking long.” He shot a murderous glare to the windows. She blinked, following his gaze, spotting a hazy figure centered in one of the glittering panes. The silhouette turned fuzzy as the person backed away slowly, disappearing from view a heartbeat later.

Hermione tilted her head, still searching the empty frame. “What—”

“We’re leaving. Now.”

He reached down, grabbing her arm and hauling her to her feet without ceremony. She panicked, his grip tight enough to suggest he wouldn’t let her shake him free, the hard angles of his face allowing no room for argument. So she turned into his body instead, clutching his shirt with both hands in a last ditch effort, a wild Hail Mary.

Tom detested begging, labeling it a sign of weakness, and weakness disgusted him more than anything. But every once in a while, when the blood moon shined brightly overhead and the planets were in perfect alignment, he would relent to her request. Only to her. She prayed that this would be one of those magical occasions.

“Tom, please don’t make me leave it behind!” She leaned into him fully, until he had to grab her other arm to steady her weight and remain upright. She tilted her head back, holding his tumultuous gaze. “Please.”

Tears welled in her eyes, unplanned and unbidden. He blinked, the harsh contours of his face evening out, just a fraction, but she was attuned to his every expression, each octave of his voice, the endless mannerisms of his body. And she sensed it...victory was in sight.

She swallowed thickly, emboldened, surging forward for the win. “Tom... I can’t leave it out here, all by itself. It’ll die alone and scared.” Her palms flattened atop his chest, smoothing their way to his shoulders, fingertips pressing knotted muscle.
He tightened further beneath her touch, eyes darkening, turning wild, feral, as though moments away from tossing her over his shoulder and lugging her to the Cruiser like a Neanderthal. Her pulse leaped in despair. She’d overplayed her hand. Taken it too far. He’d be pissed for the rest of the week, never letting her hear the end of it.

She began to draw back, defeat bitter on her tongue, when his hands shot forward and gripped her hips, turning her back into his body and trapping her in place, pinned flush against his front. Her eyes darted up, wide, hopeful. His continued to gleam otherworldly, a shadow passing across his visage. “It’s probably riddled with disease,” he uttered at last, words dripping acid.

She bounced on her heels, unable to contain the boundless excitement. “I’ll carry it home in my bag! Then I’ll burn the bag and all of my schoolwork.”

He rolled his eyes, palms hot against her flesh, scorching through the thin fabric of her t-shirt. “You burning school work, hell must be frozen over. Do you even know how to take care of a bird?”

“I’ll find a book at the library. I’m sure it’s not difficult.”

“How do you plan to hide it?”

She blinked, mind spinning. “In the closet, or under my bed. It can’t fly, it won’t be hard.”

His expression flickered, something sparking in the depths of his pupils, there one second and gone the next. “Trapping a wild creature in a closet or under the bed is crueler than letting it starve.”

She deflated at the words, hands sliding from his shoulders to her sides. “I just want to help it heal.”

A sweltering beat. She rocked in place, the hot sun beating down upon them. “Then I’ll let it go.”

He tilted his head, eyes slowly roaming her face. “You never let anything go.”

Her hands curled, blunt nails pressing her palms as she took a step back. Out of his reach. "I'll release it when it can fly."

Tom continued to search her gaze. She wasn't certain what he was looking for. What secret he thought she could possibly keep hidden. And for a breathless instant, it seemed as though he may grab her anyway, drag her kicking and screaming to the motorcycle. A wild, shameful part of her thought she wanted him to. A feral desire to scream and shout and rage against him, beat her fists upon his chest, rake her nails across his skin, unleash all this simmering resentment and mounting frustration in one massive blow-out, a violent purge to lead her back to serenity.

But instead of the rage she expected to find, his expression shut down entirely, turning into a blank slate as his eyes flickered to the windows at her back. “Whatever,” he muttered without inflection, tone lifeless and flat. His eyes remained fixed to the building, the tendons in his neck straining as though fighting an outburst.

Tom never fought against his outbursts.

She wondered if therapy was finally having an effect. Her stomach twisted at the thought. She’d spent tireless years trying to curb his explosive nature. But in less than twelve months a complete stranger was able to get through to him, to influence him. Hermione swallowed the bitter pill, disgusted with herself for being so selfish.

“Do what you want.” His voice drew her back to the present, grey eyes fastened to her once again. “Just don’t expect me to touch it.”
She shook her head. “You don’t have to do anything. Except drive home. Slowly.”

He stepped away, fishing the keys from his pocket and turning for the street. “Hurry. I’m bored.”

She ignored the slight, his tone too carefully measured to be genuine, hinting at something buried just beneath the surface of the words. There was a hidden depth to everything he said and did. But she had no time to delve into the mystery of Tom Riddle. She turned on her heel and lowered to her knees, heart thrumming as she gazed upon the bird. Tom had his bike. His job at the shop. His friends at school.

But all she had was him.

Until now.

She smiled gently, crawling forward. “It’s alright, little one.” She pulled the bottom hem of her shirt, creating a hammock, and reached down. “I’ll protect you.”

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**Sunday, July 17, 2005**

Hermione held her breath as Bella opened the driver’s side door, sliding out of her seat and landing atop the damp grass in a silent pounce. Her boots softly crunched the overgrown weeds as she made her way to the back of the van.

Hermione clutched the leather upholstery on either side of her lap, the seatbelt resting against her thundering chest. Her eyes flickered to the rearview mirror, watching with guarded fascination as the female assassin opened the hatchback. And then her focus darted to the fogged window at her side, desperately scanning the wild terrain. Endless rolling hills. No civilization in sight. She released a shaky breath.

*What do I do?*

Bolting outright held an absurd appeal, her fight or flight response in overdrive from the moment Bella started the engine. But no. The last few firing neurons in the rational part of her brain reminded Hermione that running *wasn’t* a viable option. Bella was built for speed, honed with agility. She’d tackle Hermione from behind before she even made it to the nearest hillside. And even if Hermione *was* able to somehow evade the professional killer, what would be the point? She couldn’t leave Tom.

*Tom.*

Her eyes scanned the green landscape a second time, as though willing him to materialize from thin air like a mirage.

*Where the hell are you? Please, please get here.*

“Coming, kitten?”

Hermione jolted so hard her knee banged against the glove compartment. She choked on her next breath, meeting the hungry feline gaze in the mirror. Bella watched her with steady intensity, though amusement was clear in her dark eyes, more unsettling than the bloodlust from moments ago. Hermione swallowed heavily. And unclicked her seatbelt. She reached for the door handle with a trembling hand, stumbling free of the interior without a shred of grace, legs locked with terror. And yet she found the strength to stagger around the van, meeting the woman at the open trunk.
Hermione peered into the open hatch.

And drew back swiftly, nearly toppling over in her haste to evade the sight before her.

Guns.

Lots and lots of guns. A treasure trove of death and mayhem.

“Oh my god,” she whispered, eyes transfixed.

Bella smiled, reaching out and selecting a long and narrow rifle with a silencer on the end. The casing of both pieces was matte black. Straight out of a Bond film.

But this was real life. A waking nightmare. Hermione wondered not for the first time what the hell she was doing here, what she could’ve possibly been thinking when she accepted to take on these missions with trained assassins.

*I’m so far out of my depth I can’t even see the light of the surface. Which way is up?*

And then the femme fatale was reaching back into the hatch, selecting a small handgun from a suitcase, gripping the weapon by the nozzle and extending the grip to Hermione.

Hermione shook her head rapidly, staggering back some more and nearly tripping over the uneven ground. “I can’t,” she croaked, voice edged in hysteria.

Bella’s grin widened, eyes gleaming like polished obsidian. “Would you prefer a knife?”

Hermione’s gaze darted up. “No.”

The brunette stalked closer, both guns resting casually at her sides. “Ah. You’re a hands-on kind of girl. I like that.”

Hermione started to hyperventilate, feet frozen in place as the assassin stopped just before her. “Please, Bella,” she spoke without thinking, vision awash in white as terror gripped her mind. “Please don’t make me.”

Bella raised a manicured brow, tucking the handgun into the back of her low waistband. Hermione exhaled sharply, skin flush.

Bella stepped back, teeth gleaming in the sunlight. “Come along, sweet one.” And then she pivoted on her heel, dark braid dancing behind her as she started on a path for the woods.

Hermione took a deep breath and forced her feet forward, following a few paces behind with clenched fists, knuckles as white and her bloodless complexion. They breached the treeline, stepping over bushes and weeds, rocks and roots.

Bella slowed her pace, eyes flickering to the grass and soil. “Lucky for us, our fat little mouse leaves the tracks of a moose.”

Hermione blinked, glancing down, seeing nothing but dead leaves and twigs. “You can read trails?”
The assassin started leading them to the left. “My training was extensive,” she stated simply, eyes still fixed to the forest floor.

Hermione’s pulse sped, thinking of Tom. Wondering what rigorous testing and gruesome horrors the boy was forced to endure to become the man he was today. A trained killer, able to pull a trigger and wield a blade without hesitation or remorse. She shuddered, wrapping her arms around her middle to chase away the sudden cold in her bones.

“Bella, I think we should wait for Tom.”

The woman peered back, brow quirked. “Would you rather watch your beloved kill the target instead?”

Hermione stumbled over a rock, throat tightening at the mere thought.

Bella grinned. “I didn’t think so.” The rifle bounced off her thigh with every step. “Don’t worry, kitten, I won’t force you to watch.” A heavy beat. “Unless you want me to.”

Hermione glanced away, face awash with heat even as a frigid chill raced along her spine. Throaty laughter emanated from the assassin as she faced forward, leading them deeper and deeper into the trees.

A small flutter of sparrows burst free from the canopy as they passed. Hermione followed their ascent with her eyes, desperate for any means of distraction. She felt faint, and then wondered if passing out would actually help her situation, buying more time for Tom to arrive. But that also meant leaving her unconscious body in Bella’s possession…

Welp. So much for that plan.

She glanced around the vast expanse of forest on either side, a kaleidoscope of leaves and broken sunlight. It seemed their Plan was also out the window. There was no feasible way to manage it now, not without Tom here, not with Rabastan in tow. Her mind rapidly scrambled for another means of escape, something they could still pull out of the hat, but she couldn’t think clearly, higher cognitive function silenced by her mounting dread and the oppressive weight of the wild, wooded terrain.

Her eyes settled on the gun sticking out of Bella's waistband. Gleaming. Beckoning. Her pulse galloped like a racehorse. She wet her lips, speaking slowly. "I think I would like that gun after all."

The assassin stopped in her tracks, glancing back. Hermione blinked, instantly wishing she could recall the words.

“Would you now?” Bella turned to face her fully, movements slow and methodical. Hermione rocked back on her heels as the woman proceeded towards her. “And what brought on this sudden change of heart?”

Hermione stumbled over a rock, veering sideways until her back hit a tree, halting her retreat. Bella continued to stalk her prey until they stood so close a sheet of saran wrap couldn’t fit between them.

“You aren’t thinking of using the gun on your partner, are you, darling?”

Hermione reached back to grip the trunk with both hands, bark cutting into her palms. “N-no. Of course not.”

Bella flattened her hand against the tree, just beside Hermione’s head, leaning in until their bodies finally pressed together, expelling the air from Hermione’s lungs.
“Becoming fond of me?” The assassin asked, voice low and sultry.

Hermione blinked once, twice, nails digging into the soft wood, splinters piercing her fingertips. “Killing you would only sign my death warrant and put an even bigger target on Tom’s back. Besides, you’d disarm me before I even took aim.”

Bella cocked her head like a massive bird of prey and grabbed a lock of Hermione's hair, twisting the curl around her finger. Her dark eyes lowered to Hermione’s mouth, causing her to wet her lips on instinct, squirming in place, the heat of the imposing body suffocating.

“I want the gun for protection. Against the target,” Hermione whispered. “And Rabastan. He frightens me.” That part was at least true.

Bella met her gaze, smile decadent. “I adore you more by the second.” She gently unwound the curl from her finger, letting it fall back into place among the rest of the tangled mess as she pushed away from the tree, reaching a hand behind her back. “But you needn’t worry, dove.” She gripped the glock, extracting it from her waistband and holding it out. “Tommy and I won’t let Buttercream lay a hand on you.”

Hermione continued to lean into the tree, utterly boneless. The casual declaration only threw her further, her overwrought mind unable to process the words or their meaning. She accepted the gun with a trembling hand. But her nerves steadied as her fingers wrapped the narrow grip. The casing was still warm from Bella’s skin. “Thank you,” she whispered, transfixed by the weapon, the weight and feel of it in her hand.

Bella watched her carefully. “By the second.”

Hermione blinked, glancing up. But the woman was already walking away.

“We can finish our girl talk later. After we’ve had our dinner.” The brunette gazed back, sidestepping a fallen log without a glance. “You never forget your first. Tommy will be so upset he wasn’t the one to share it with you.”

Hermione fought back a shudder and stumbled over the same log, despite seeing it clear as day. Bella’s laughter made her skin crawl.

“Relax, kitten.” Sunlight reflected off her dark gaze, two glossy pools of ink. “I promise to be gentle.”

Harry braced the dashboard as Luna jerked the wheel, the car veering around a vegetable patch and onto a dirt road, bouncing heavily. Neville yelped from the backseat, his computer leaping from its perch atop his knees. He caught it mid-air, mouth agape.

“Crouch, where the hell are you?” Harry shouted, phone clutched tight in his other hand, speaker volume cranked to the max.

“The woods!”

Harry blinked, then scowled. “I told you to stay on the road!”

“They drove me off the goddamn road!” Heavy panting emanated from the plastic. The Senior Officer’s words were clipped, breathless. “I can lose them in here, until you find me.”

Harry dragged a palm over his face, eyes narrowed on the country terrain stretching endlessly to
either side.

*Fucking hell...*

He glanced into the back. “How far are we?”

Neville shook his head, typing rapidly as he continued to slide all around the wide seat. “His signal is weak, the woods may be causing interference.” His gaze was fixed upon the miniature screen, sweet glistening along his temples. “I think we’re about twenty-five kilometers out.”

“Shite,” Harry hissed, facing front. “Crouch, listen to me carefully, if you run, they *will* find you.” The man keened, his heavy footsteps deafening, even with the commotion of the luxury sedan tearing through an overgrown field. “Your only chance of survival is hiding. Do you understand me?”

A heavy wheeze. “Yes.”

Harry licked his lips, eyes fixed ahead as his mind transported itself to an imaginary forest, placing him beside the detective and envisioning the best escape route. “Good. But first, I need you to backtrack.”

Crouch staggered to a stop, his movements ending so abruptly Harry checked the screen, terrified the call had dropped. But then, to his great relief—

“What!”

Harry released a sharp breath, placing the phone closer to his mouth as Luna navigated around a steep hill, the tires skidding across the wet grass. "Follow the path you just took back towards the car–"

“*Are you out of your bloody mind?*”

"Crouch shut the fuck up and listen! You’re running out of time!” He banged the side of his fist against the door. Neville jolted. “Whoever is hunting you is a professional. They’ll be able to track your footsteps directly to your hiding spot unless you double back *now!*”

A trembling sigh. “Goddammit.”

“Go!”

“*I’m going, you little fucker!*”

Harry braced himself as Luna burst into a field of sunflowers, the large golden blooms slamming into the windshield, obscuring their view of the hills beyond. But he trusted her abilities, knowing she would get them where they needed to be.

“I want you to go fifteen meters and look for brush heavy enough to conceal yourself in. Then you hide and you fucking wait, do you understand?”

Panting breath filled the interior of the car, broken by static.

“Yes.”

Harry could hear Crouch running, trampling over every stick and root in his path as though auditioning for *Stomp.*
“Don’t let me die here, Potter. Don’t you fucking let me die.”

Harry’s eyes gleamed, reflected brightly in the pollen-coated windshield. “We’re coming.” He fist tightened upon the dash. “We’re coming.”

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**Saturday, July 27, 1996**

Hermione glanced either way down the corridor before waving a beckoning hand, placing a finger to her lips as Carmen crept down the hall like a cat and slipped into the room, silently closing the door at their backs. Hermione padded across the small space, rounding her narrow bed and glancing up with a warm smile.

“Over here,” she whispered, then knelt, lifting the side of her blanket—well, *Tom’s* blanket, stolen once more, much to his grumbled dissent—and carefully reached for the shoebox hidden beneath the metal frame. She slid it free and smoothed her palm over the hole-punched lid, speaking softly. “It’s just me, Edmond, don’t worry.”

There was a faint fluttering from within. Carmen arched a brow, lowering beside her. “Edmond?”

Hermione nodded. “After Edmond Dantès.”

Carmen smirked. “And how does Tom feel about you naming your beloved pet after another man?”

Hermione ignored the quip, sitting cross-legged and settling the box between their knees.

“Considering he was keen to have me leave Edmond on the sidewalk to die, he didn’t get a say in the matter.”

“Finally standing up to the tyrant, good for you.”

Hermione’s gaze snapped up, chest tight. “Tom isn’t a tyrant.”

Carmen raised her palms in surrender. “Don’t mind me, I’m just here for some good old fashioned bird-watching.”

Hermione rolled her eyes and lifted the lid, revealing the feathered occupant within. A tiny goldfinch, its red face framed by a white and brown head. Carmen cooed and leaned forward, long braids swinging before her face. “He’s adorable!”

Edmond’s black eyes flickered rapidly between the girls.

“Isn’t he?” Hermione smiled, reaching inside and stroking the top of his head with a gentle fingertip. He chirped beneath her touch, wiggling in place.

“I thought you weren’t supposed to touch them?”

“I thought so, too. I did my best to minimize physical contact when bringing him here. But the book I found says human scent deters birds from interacting with each other.” Hermione shrugged. “While he’s here it won’t be a problem. I’ll just have to give him a nice scrub down before setting him free.” She stroked along his back and down his tail feathers.

“I don’t think he’ll want to leave after this five-star treatment,” Carmen stated. “Look at these digs, way better than a nest of sticks and molded newspaper.”

Hermione adjusted the corner of the bed she’d fashioned, comprised of a piece of Tom’s blanket.
Best to leave that detail to herself for now. She’d laid the material over a thick layer of cotton she’d taken from her own pillow, desperate to give her temporary pet a cozy little abode to call his own.

“Not to mention, he seems to have taken to you like a fat kid to cake.” Carmen watched as the bird tracked Hermione’s every movement with his little eyes.

“He’ll forget about me in no time,” Hermione replied. “I’m sure he’s eager to fly the coop as soon as possible, see the world.”

“He’ll come back.” A beat. “They always do. Eventually.”

Hermione glanced up. "Taken care of many injured birds, have you?"

Carmen smirked, holding her gaze. “Oh, are we back to talking about the bird?”

Hermione blinked. And then glanced away, flushing. “It’s feeding time, would you like to do the honors?” She asked, eager to change the topic.

“What does that entail?”

“Just put some feed into your palm, he’ll eat a little and take a break. I give him the rest as a snack later. It’s important to regulate his diet since he’s not burning many calories with a broken wing.”

Carmen nodded, holding out her cupped hand. Hermione opened the bag of nuts and seeds she’d put together, not trusting the generic feed from the store.

“Did you nick these?” The girl asked, examining the food as it was sprinkled in her hand. “Seeds and nuts are bloody insane.”

“I thought about it, but I didn’t want to risk getting caught and having Cole do a room raid.” She resealed the top of the bag. “I just borrowed the money from Tom.”

Carmen raised a brow. “Mm-hmm.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” Carmen lowered her palm, offering the bounty to Edmond. He adjusted on his pillow, bandages softly rustling. “Tom also patch up that wing?”

Hermione blinked. “How did you know?”

Carmen shrugged as Edmond began to gently peck at the seeds. “He’s a mechanic, used to handling small parts. Made sense.”

Hermione drew her knees up, wrapping her arms around her legs as the memory bloomed to life in her mind, pulling a small smile to the surface. “He threw a fit. I promised he wouldn’t have to touch Edmond. Less than an hour later I’m asking him to perform emergency surgery. That’s how he described it at least.”

“I’m sure he’ll think of a way for you to make it up to him later.” Carmen imparted a cheeky wink that made Hermione’s blush deepen.

“I really wish you wouldn’t tease me, I get enough of that from the others.”

The other girl’s expression fell. “Sorry, Mione. I don’t mean to upset you. Not like they do.” She glanced down, gently stroking Edmond’s head in the same manner Hermione had demonstrated. “I
like to poke fun. At everyone. Ever since I was a little girl. But sometimes I let my big mouth get
carried away. Don’t be afraid to slap me back into place.”

Hermione smiled anew, setting the feed aside. “I’ll keep that in mind. And it’s alright. I know you’re
nothing like Amy. I just…” She sighed heavily. “People have been judging me since I got here.
Befriending Tom only made things worse. When he’s not around…” She trailed off, chest aching.
Are we even friends? She shook her head. “It gets to be a lot sometimes.”

Carmen watched her carefully. “I don’t judge you, Hermione. Not for anything.”

Hermione drew a slow breath, nodding. “I appreciate that.” And then she tilted her head, pinning the
girl with a contemplative stare. “Why don’t we ever hang out?”

Carmen laughed. “I’d be happy to answer that, but I just promised to make a concerted effort to keep
my big gob shut.”

Hermione sat straighter. “I spend plenty of time away from Tom. Especially now that he’s working
nearly every night.”

“Saving up for a diamond ring?”

Her eyes narrowed. Carmen laughed softly. “Sorry, it was right in front of me, I’d be doing us both a
terrible disservice if I didn’t take it.”

Hermione fought back a grin, failing miserably. The light-hearted banter was a refreshing change of
pace from Tom’s round-the-clock intensity. “He’s saving up for his **Cruiser**. Christ, he’s obsessed
with that thing. If I were bleeding out he’d refuse to drive me to A&E out of fear of ruining the
leather.”

“Those priorities sound about right for a seventeen-year-old bloke.”

They shared a smile. It was glorious fun sitting with another girl, one who wasn’t constantly trying to
antagonize her, able to gossip and laugh like normal fifteen-year-olds. Freeing. And comforting,
knowing she continued to exist even after Tom left the room. Proof she didn’t dissolve into thin air
the moment his eyes strayed from her form, trapped in limbo, eternally awaiting his summons, eager
to hop to his beck and call. Hermione couldn’t remember the last time she enjoyed conversation with
someone other than him. Perhaps next time she could even manage to get through the activity
without discussing him at all. The prospect was exhilarating.

Carmen broke her reverie as she lifted her empty palm. “I think he’s done.”

Hermione blinked, glancing down with a nod. “I’d say so.” She reached for the plastic bottle in her
bedside drawer, unscrewing the lid and pouring water into the cap, carefully setting it inside the box.
“He’ll be good through the afternoon.”

She petted him again. He gazed up, his little face so adorable she could hardly stomach it. How she
wished she could keep him. Something that was just hers, after half a lifetime with absolutely
nothing.

“You never let anything go.”

She drew her hand back swiftly, burned by the touch, and reached for the lid. “The book says a wing
takes two weeks to heal. I should be able to release him next weekend.” Her heart ached at the
notion. She set the lid back into place, resting her hands along the sides.
Best not to get attached…

She slid the box under her bed, lowering Tom’s mangled blanket over the thin mattress and hiding the treasure from view. He’d be leaving her soon enough. And despite Carmen’s many assurances, Hermione held a sinking suspicion he wouldn’t be returning. Who would? With an endless world to explore, why would anyone return to this place?

To her?

She pushed the dark musing aside, not keen on having an emotional breakdown in front of the other girl. The last thing she wanted was to scare her away before their friendship even got off the ground.

“Mione.” She jolted as Carmen placed a hand on her shoulder. “You alright?”

Hermione nodded tightly, forcing a smile, face quaking with the effort. “Yeah. Just tired.”

“Taming wild animals is hard work.” A beat. “Then again, you’ve had lots of practice.”

Hermione huffed, her annoyance undercut by a reluctant grin. Carmen held her palms aloft once more. “Last one, I promise.”

“Somehow I doubt that.” Hermione gripped the edge of her bed and pushed to her feet. “I’m going to brush my teeth, call it a night.”

The girl beside her rose as well. “Care for some company?”

Hermione’s smile deepened, pulse thrumming at the prospect of a new friendship. She couldn’t keep Edmond, but perhaps another reward could be found in all this mess.

“Sure.”

They walked side by side down the hallway, trading more jokes and giggling uncontrollably, earning more than a few scowls from neighboring residents trying to sleep. Hermione waved her apology while Carmen laughed louder, not seeming to mind their animosity one bit.

They brushed their teeth and washed their faces, discussing their favorite drugstore brands, both thrilled to learn they preferred unscented lotions to the sickly sweet and floral concoctions the majority of girls their age seemed so fond of. By the time they dried their skin Hermione was reluctant to part company, lingering at the bathroom threshold before finally waving goodnight, trudging for her room at the end of the corridor.

“Mione.”

She jolted at Carmen’s soft voice, spinning on her heel with hopeful eyes, thrilled at the nickname. But the tense look on the girl’s face gave her pause.

“You need to be careful with him.”

Her heart skipped. The warning sent her mind into a tailspin, unable to construct a response beyond the simple truth, the words sitting heavy on her tongue. “I know.” She sucked in a breath, hands balling tight. “Unfortunately, that advice is about six years too late.”

Carmen blinked. And then smiled, crossing her arms. “I was referring to Edmond. Amy saw you sneak something into your room last weekend and is spreading rumors Tom has you stashing contraband.”
Hermione paled. And then flushed hot. “Oh.”

The other girl lifted a brow, grin unwavering. “But since we’ve breached the taboo topic at last, I feel inclined to add… you should be careful with Him as well.”

Hermione shifted awkwardly, too humiliated to speak further. She merely nodded, turning and walking as quickly as she could to her room without outright sprinting. She was in such a rush she paid no mind to the fact her door sat ajar, only registering the strange anomaly when she spotted Edmond’s box in the center of the floor.

She stopped dead, limbs turning to stone.

There was no way the injured bird was strong enough to move the box himself. Certainly not such a long distance.

“Edmond?” She whispered, palms sweating as she slowly crept forward, every step a feat.

His usual chirp in response to his name didn’t come, setting her heart into overdrive, blood rushing through her ears, drowning out the frantic scream in her head. She lowered to her knees just before the box, gripping either side of the lid and holding her breath, vision dimming as she lifted it away and forced her eyes down.

She gasped, tipping onto her backside as the lid fell from her numb grasp. The world turned to static, electricity snapping through the air, singing away her flesh and drawing tears from her eyes. A searing pain took root deep within her chest, spreading outward and filling her stomach with raw flame.

She sucked in a shuddering breath, releasing it in a shrill scream.

Hermione kept her eyes fixed on the back of Bella’s head, watching her long braid swing from side to side like a pendulum, timing their progress deeper and deeper into the woods. The gun was heavy in Hermione’s hand, weighing her down until her boots sank into the mud, quicksand at her feet. She bit her lip, wondering not for the first time why the hell she requested the weapon.

Bella stepped gracefully over a fallen log, long legs making easy work of the rocks and shrubs Hermione found herself stumbling past. The rifle rocked against her hip, hanging from a strap on her shoulder. Hermione swallowed. In truth, it never even occurred to her to use the handgun against the female assassin. Bella was clearly lethal without a weapon, Hermione harbored no fantasy of walking away the victor from such a match. Besides, she hadn’t pulled a trigger in nearly a decade, there was no certainty she could manage it now.

She wished she hadn’t asked for the gun. It was a heavy burden, a dark cloud obscuring her thoughts. And then she realized she was tainted long before now. Long before today. Long before Tom’s crash landing into her life. She was marked by death the moment the car skid off the road. Forever tied to darkness.

Bella hummed low in her throat, a soothing rhythm, a child’s lullaby. Tom’s words from earlier in the day came flooding back in a rush, the low spoken warning he’d repeated countless times throughout their youth.

“Trust no one, Hermione.” His weighted pause, the electrical storm in his eyes. “No one but me.”

But Tom wasn’t here. She was alone now. Just as she’d been alone for the last eight years. Perhaps this buried knowledge was the true reason she asked for a weapon. She needed the phantom memory
it evoked. Tom’s voice in her ear, the warmth of his hands on her body, guiding her arms as he taught her to aim. To squeeze the trigger.

Bella stopped in her tracks. Hermione staggered to a halt a moment later, torn abruptly from his ghostly embrace. The female assassin glanced in either direction, running a fingertip along the side of the rifle. “Hmm…” Her sing-song voice radiated off the trees and into Hermione’s bones.

“What is it?” Hermione asked tentatively, shuffling awkwardly as she glanced around, searching out whatever caught the woman’s attention. Her senses were overwhelmed by an endless expanse of green and brown, broken intermittently by shadow and sunlight.

“The trail ends here.” Bella averted her gaze down, toeing the side of a flattened weed that, until moments ago, appeared no different from its thousands of predecessors. “Interesting,” she continued. “Perhaps our fat little mouse has a functioning brain after all.” She arched a brow, burgundy lips curving with mischievous delight. "Or perhaps he's cheating. Oh, I *do* hope he's cheating.”

Hermione blinked. “Cheating?”

Bella spun gracefully on her heel, meeting her eye. “A clever fox is directing him through the maze, straight to the cheese.”

Hermione’s heart leaped at the notion. “You mean….”

Bella’s grin widened. She started forward, closing the distance between them. “Not to fret, luv. I’ve yet to lose the chase.” She tilted her head, eyes gleaming. “But we need to split up.”

Hermione felt the blood drain from her head in a rush, so taken aback she remained rooted to the spot as Bella stopped just before her.

“What?”

"If there are other players on the board we need to finish this sooner than later. We'll cover more ground separately.”

Hermione shook her head. Moments ago she was desperate to escape the woman, now she was terrified of being apart. Without Bella to take the reins Hermione would be forced to face the full onslaught of her choices, no longer a passenger to her own life. She’d have to make decisions. To choose.

To kill.

“I can’t, Bella. Please.”

“You worked your doe-eyed magic on me once already, dove, now it’s time to finish this.” Bella reached forward, grasping a chestnut curl and wrapping it around her finger, tugging gently. “If you spot him, call out for me. I’ll take the shot.” She tilted her head. “If he escapes us, Green will be furious.”

Hermione searched the woman’s gaze, swallowing audibly. Bella laughed softly. “And trust me when I say this, kitten: you *don’t* want to see him angry.”

Hermione's body rocked in place with the force of her heartbeat. The assassin smiled, releasing her hair and stepping back, seemingly content her message was received.

“Good girl. Run along now, I won’t be far.”
Hermione watched the brunette saunter off, heading through a dense wall of bushes, swallowed by the thick blanket of leaves and branches. She took a steadying breath, standing in place until the rush of her pulse drowned out the chirp of birds and sway of branches, the wild terrain pressing in on all sides, swallowing her whole. She forced her knees to bend, her feet to trudge ahead, eager to escape the rising sense of claustrophobia. But the passing trees all looked alike. Every bush a photocopy of the last, conjuring memories like Polaroids, an endless barrage of nightmares flashing before her mind’s eye.

Lucius Malfoy’s pale, twisted corpse atop a glittering pool of red. Tom’s face illuminated in a hellish glow by flickering stairwell lights. Bella’s shrill laughter. Green’s sinister smile. Her stomach clenched, intestines a cluster of knotted wires, sparking at the ends, making her muscles jerk with an overabundance of adrenaline. She glanced over her shoulder, desperate to see Tom. Bella. Anyone. Anything. But alas, there was nothing but trees. Nothing but endless solitude. A rapid descent into the madness of her own mind.

Hermione stopped in place, spinning in circles, quickly losing all sense of direction. Panic set in. A cold sweat drenched her from head to toe. She gripped the gun tighter, hands trembling as she inhaled sharply, holding it in her lungs, the urge to call out overwhelming. But she bit back the desperate plea, biting her tongue until she tasted copper, forcing herself to move forward, picking a direction at random and hoping it led to the edge of the earth.

A branch snapped, echoing loudly.

She gasped, spinning, braced for attack. But the only movement she discerned was flickering leaves in the wind. She backed up a few paces, limbs locking as fear displaced sanity. A bird burst free from a tree, wings flapping as its dark body was absorbed by the blinding light above. She squinted against it, raising a hand to shield her vision, shoulders easing.

A twig snapped just beside her.

She shrieked, leaping a foot into the air, her entire body jolting like a startled cat. Her eyes fixed to the bushes ahead, dense with leaves and berries. But centered within the shadowy interior was a gleaming set of eyes. Wide with terror.

And staring right at her.

“Crouch, please tell me your fat arse is in a bush.”

“If I survive this, I’m going to knock your fucking teeth in your insufferable little prick!”

“Good, it gives you incentive to survive. Now stop running and find a bloody hiding spot.”

Something snapped several feet to his left. Crouch yelped, stumbling over a raised root, staggering into a thorny bush.

“Shite! I hear something!”

“Keep your voice down! Hide!”

He half-knelt, half-collapsed into a row of tall shrubs, berries falling from the branches and pelting him in the head. Faint voices could be heard in the distance. His heart thundered, so intense it vibrated the ground beneath him. “Potter! They’re here!” He hissed into the phone, hand trembling against the plastic.
"For the love of Christ keep your mouth shut!"

"Oh my god…" Figures came into view, visible through the gaps in the leaves. "I see them! The crazy bitches! They have guns! A rifle!"

Potter’s heavy sigh surrounded him. “If you insist on rambling like a fool at least tell me something useful. What do they look like?”

Crouch squinted, lowering his chin to see past the low hanging branches. “One’s tall and lean, the other’s a few inches shorter, larger rack. They’re both fit.”

“Fucking hell. Specifics, Crouch!”

“They’re about the size of grapefruits, maybe cantaloupes, hard to tell at this angle–”

“Not their breasts, you fucking moron! Tell me height, weight, hair color! Act like a fucking Officer!”

“Oh. Right.” Crouch tried to adjust, leg trapped beneath his body. “Both brunettes. The tall one has long black hair, plaited back. The other–”

His heart jolted.

“Bollocks!”

“What?”

“They’ve split up! Why have they split up?”

“Another left and then a straight shot to the woods, Harry!” Another man called from the line, followed by Potter’s familiar and grating voice. “Crouch, we’re almost to you. So shut the fuck up until we get there, you hear me? Don’t say another word, just stay on the phone and keep breathing so I know you’re alive.”

Crouch wheezed into the speaker, eyes popping wide as the shorter assassin drew near. And then he cringed, gasping sharply. “Shite!” He whispered, expression twisted like a wrung mop.

“Did they spot you?”

“My leg… it’s cramping!”

A beat.

“Crouch, don’t you fucking dare make a sound!”

“Oh my god, she’s coming this way…”

“Keep still!”

“My leg–”

“Crouch, you useless meat sack, your leg won’t be hurting once they put a bullet between your bloody eyes. Now shut. The. Fuck. Up.”

Crouch trembled in silent agony. The girl was passing him now. Sweat dripped from his face, entire body awash in red hot pain emanating from his calf. He counted backward in his head, timing her
steps. Any slower and the bitch would be walking backward. He trembled, grinding his teeth until they were set to shatter.

He couldn’t take it anymore.

He straightened his leg.

A twig snapped beneath the weight. The girl stopped walking, jolting hard and spinning in place. Revealing the gun in her hand.

His mouth opened, throat clenching as he gripped the phone tighter, the muffled sound of Potter’s engine humming from the speaker. A bird flew out of a nearby tree, drawing her focus. She turned away from the shrubs, shoulders easing. His pulse stuttered as his foot spasmed, charlie horse in full effect. The leaves rustled with the movement. He cringed, dread pooling in his gut as she turned swiftly, facing him once more. Her eyes flickered down, searching the brush.

And because fate was a vengeful cunt that just loved to bugger him over a barrel at every possible opportunity, her eyes immediately latched onto his.

“Oh my god,” he hissed into the phone, vision tunneling. “She’s looking right at me.”

**Saturday, July 27, 1996**

Hermione pressed her face into Tom’s chest, tears soaking through the fabric of his shirt. Her cheeks were hot and flushed, eyes red and swollen. They’d been perched on the end of his bed since he’d arrived home nearly an hour earlier, glistening with sweat and caked in grease from the shop.

Yet she’d paid no mind to his disheveled appearance, leaping from her spot on the hard tile and throwing her arms around his neck, bursting into hysterical sobs. He'd stood rigid in shock, arms held aloft at his sides for several moments before finally embracing her gently as she was wracked by tremors.

He’d managed to unlock his door without disengaging their bodies, maneuvering her over the threshold and towards the bed. She’d broken away then, gasping and pointing frantically into the darkened hall. He blinked, searching the shadows until his eyes cast to the ground, flashing as he spotted the shoebox next to the spot she’d previously occupied. He paced towards it slowly, leaning down and picking it up as though handling dynamite, gazing at the hole-punched lid for several seconds before lifting one corner, just enough to peer in at the bloody mess it contained.

Hermione held her breath, watching as Tom closed the lid, his face betraying not an ounce of emotion as he proceeded to bring it into his room, slamming his door with added force. He set the container on his bedside table and reached for her without a word. She melted into his embrace, a fresh wave of tears erupting.

He’d sat holding her ever since, the silence around them heavy, suffocating, or perhaps her throat was swollen from screaming for so long, until half the floor came running into her room, dressed in pajamas and robes, gaping at the scene before them. Several girls had edged closer, offering words of comfort, sympathy. Carmen had been one of them. It was all such a blur. Hermione could barely remember their faces, their voices. All she wanted at that moment was Tom. So she’d gathered Edmond's box and raced from the room, hysterical and barefoot, charging headlong into the boy's dormitory, eyes wild enough to garner no dissent as she sat outside Tom's door, silently awaiting his return.
He ran his fingers through her hair now, a splendid comfort he’d only bestowed once before. But she
couldn’t enjoy the moment, too far gone in her misery. At long last her tears ran their course, head
throbbing from the violent outpour of emotion. His other hand drummed idly atop her hip, as though
counting the seconds or playing the chords of a guitar. She was too numb to absorb the sensation.

She drew back slowly, wiping damp hair from her cheeks. Their faces were so close she nearly went
cross-eyed holding his gaze. “Why…” The rest of the question was lost, the words too laborious to
contrive. But he understood all the same, arms tensing around her.

"There isn't always a reason,” he whispered, grease-stained hands clutching her tighter. "Some
people are born with darkness inside them. They look for ways to inflict pain on others. Through any
means possible."

She peered over his shoulder at the box, the bottom corner already stained through with red. “They
hate me that much?”

He took a deep breath, the motion causing her to rise against his chest. “They hate *me* that much,” he
corrected, voice paced and measured and hard as iron.

She searched his gaze, a lingering tear spilling free. “You didn’t even like Edmond.”

“They knew killing him would bring you here.”

Hermione released a shaky breath, dropping her forehead into his shoulder. “I said I would protect
him. I promised to keep him safe.” She closed her eyes. “I hate her, Tom.” Her hands fisted atop her
lap, clenched so tight her fingers were sure to break. “I hate her so much I can barely breathe.”

“She’s not clever or brave enough to pull this off.”

Her jaw set. “Billy.” She blinked, heart leaping at the notion. “But he has a rabbit. He loves it. How
could he—”

“He protects what’s his. Everything else is fair game.”

Hermione drew back, peering at his face. “I should have listened to you.”

He tilted his head. “What?”

“You were right. I was foolish to think I could take care of something. It would have been better to
leave the bird behind. Or to kill it then and there. It was cruel to nurse it back to health, to give it
hope. Only for…” She swallowed thickly, casting her gaze miserably to the ground. “Only for… someone to rip his head clean off.” She began to cry again, body trembling beneath the onslaught of
images flitting through her mind, drenched in red. “He was probably so scared. It must have hurt so
bad. I should have been there, Tom. I shouldn’t have left him–”

“Hermione.” He grabbed her chin and turned her face up, forcing their eyes to meet. “You fought to
save the bloody bird because *that's* who you are. That’s what you do. You protect and nurture and
stand up for the weak.” He leaned in, face so close their noses touched. “I agreed to bring it back
here because I didn’t want that to change.” His eyes gleamed, pupils blown, a vast cosmos contained
within. “And Billy fucking Stubbs most certainly won’t change a goddamn thing about you.” A
nebula swirled in his gaze. “I'll kill him first.”

“Tom.” She released a slow breath, hypnotized. “What are you going to do?”
He let go of her chin, lips pressing thin. She shook her head, leaning forward, clutching his sweat and tear dampened shirt. “Please don’t get kicked out. It’s not worth it—”

“I won’t get caught,” he stated simply. “I never get caught.”

No. He didn’t.

She released the fabric, laying her palms atop his thigh and nodding slowly. “In that case…” Her eyes turned glassy and cold, a frozen lakebed. “Make him suffer.”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “I will.” He pressed his lips to her skin, whispering softly against her temple. “That I promise you.”

Tom raced through the back streets of the quaint little village he was seriously considering burning to the ground. Rabastan stumbled several yards behind, staggering to a halt and doubling over, retching into a flower bush.

Tom scowled, stopping in his tracks. “Bloody hell.” He stormed closer, grabbing the man by the collar and pulling him upright. “You’re as useless as a dick at a roller derby. If you slow me down again I’m shooting you in the head and leaving you for the rest of the parasites to devour.”

“Fuck you, Ri–”

The idiot was cut short by another round of vomiting, puking down his front. Tom cringed, releasing him and taking a wide step back, but not in time to evade a chunk of lumpy green baby shite plopping atop the toe of his boot. He gazed down at the mess between their feet, scraping his shoe along the grass. “I’ve castrated men for less.”

Rabastan wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, eyes bloodshot and streaming. He mumbled something under his breath, the words indistinguishable but their meaning clear enough. His skin was bloodless, drenched in a clammy sheen as he took in a shuddering breath, swaying on his feet.

“Riddle… I can’t.”

“You keep moving or I shoot you where you stand. I won’t leave a bumbling fool behind for the Ministry to find.”

Rabastan swallowed convulsively, bracing his hands against his thighs as he tried to catch his breath. “Go ahead. Get the target. I’ll follow.”

Tom reached down, grabbing his arm and dragging him forward. “You’ll pass out in a pool of your own sick, thus bringing us back to square one.”

Rabastan stumbled beside him, struggling to keep up as Tom broke into a run. “I think I’m dying.”

Tom shook his head, frustration mounting. “Surely this isn’t your first time through withdrawal.”

“I just need–”

“I know what you need. And the chances of finding it in this picturesque little town are slim to none. So you’ll keep putting one foot in front of the other until you make it back to London. I’ll drive you to the dealer myself, with any luck you’ll overdose on the first shot.”

Rabastan clutched his stomach, gagging. “You’re a soulless bastard.”
“Don’t forget it.” Tom glanced at him sharply as they emerged from an alley, finally nearing the edge of town. “We’re going uphill. Try not to shite yourself.”

“I hate you.”

They started up the grassy incline, Tom’s mind racing all the while. He was off his game, thanks to the dead weight at his side and the giant sword dangling over his head, this inescapable fear for Hermione. Every moment she was alone with Bella was a chapter from a horror novel. He should have never left them in the van together. If anything happened...

Rabastan wretched again, dropping to this knees. Tom scowled, releasing him on the hillside and barreling ahead, unwilling to suffer any more delays. He’d circle back later. And kill him.

He rounded the top of the incline, eyes fastening upon the two vehicles below, parked along the edge of the woods. He recognized them instantly, racing ahead so quickly he nearly lost his footing, skidding to a stop at the bottom of the hill. He approached the van first, peering inside.

Empty.

His heart climbed into his throat when he gazed into the open hatchback. The gun rack was a rifle short, one of the suitcases missing a handgun.

_Hermione_...

He reached forward and grabbed a rifle, blinking at the low grunt that met his ears. He turned, watching Rabastan roll headfirst down the hill, a tweaking tumbleweed. Tom shook his head and proceeded on, darting between the vehicles and into the woods. He slowed his pace, gazing down, studying the markings through the mud and trampled grass. It was easy to distinguish the target’s heavy tread from the girls’ lighter steps.

Hermione was with Bella.

Bella was armed.

Fuck.

He opened his mouth to call for her, only to shake his head, lips pressing hard and eyes flashing murderously. He had no idea if the target had a weapon, if he was inclined to fight back. He knew nothing about the man, thanks to Green. He’d never entered the field so blind, so disadvantaged.

He continued forward, straining to listen for any signs of movement, of life beyond his own rapid pulse. Rabastan came crashing into the woods like a grizzly bear on sedatives, ramming into trees and tumbling over bushes. Tom ran ahead, eager to distance himself from the chaos. But within minutes he was staggering to a halt, rearing back as his senses flared red, atmosphere shifting, the tell-tale sensation of eyes upon him raking across his skin, steeling his spine.

His feet skid forward with unchecked momentum, body arching back as a glinting blade sliced through the air millimeters from his face, his eyes reflected in the gleaming metal as it swept past. His mind switched to auto-pilot, thoughts shutting down and body taking over. He grabbed the forearm extended past his head, wrenching the hidden assailant from behind the bushes and twisting the thin appendage behind their back, slamming them face-first into the nearest tree.

A witch’s cackle filled the woods a moment later, clearing the dark fog from his vision and revealing Bella’s laughing face, cheek smashed against the rough bark. The sound she emitted was a toxic gas, killing the plants at their feet and chasing furry woodland creatures into hiding. He ripped the blade
from her hand and drove it into the tree an inch from her grinning visage. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Just keeping you on your toes, lover.”

“Where’s Hermione?”

She laughed again. He growled, pulling her back and spinning her around, slamming her back a second time and knocking the breath from her lungs.

“What is she?”

Her laughter tapered off but her eyes shone bright with excitement. “Finishing the job you failed to do.”

Tom blinked, pulse stuttering. “You sent her out alone? Are you idiotic as well as psychotic?”

Her grin dissolved. “We have a lot of ground to cover, what was I supposed to do?”

“Not leave her stranded and defenseless!”

“She’s not as helpless as you like to pretend.” Her smile began to return, setting his blood to boil. “Besides. She has a gun.”

Tom shook his head in disgust, pushing away from the tree. “She won’t use it. You know that.”

“She asked for it all the same.” She rubbed her bruised forearm. “I knew you’d arrive in time to save the day and make the kill, shining knight and control freak that you are. So stop boring me and get on with it already.”

His gripped the rifle with both hands, already pacing away. “Help me find her.”

Bella stepped away from the tree with a sharp laugh, gripping the hilt of her blade and pulling it from the bark. “Only because you asked so nicely.” She tucked the blade into her boot and rose up, tipping her head back and calling into the sky. “Kitten! Play time’s over! Come back home for your spanking!”

Tom stopped in place, closing his eyes and reminding himself of all the reasons he couldn’t shoot the woman dead.

She walked past, shrugging lightly. “That would bring me running.”

Harry turned the speaker volume up, Crouch’s voice barely audible over the roar of their engine.

“She’s looking right at me.”

Harry paled, clutching the phone with all his strength as Luna stepped on the gas, propelling them faster through the countryside. He held his breath, waiting for the shot to ring out, the sound of Crouch’s body hitting the weeds in a dead heap.

But only the man’s wheezing breath emitted from the speaker, broken by static. There was a muffled sound in the distance, a voice, feminine. Harry couldn’t make out the words. An endless beat followed, and then Crouch’s hissing sigh filled the interior of the car.

“She’s leaving.”
“Stay quiet.”

“She saw me, Potter.”

“She didn’t see you.”

“I know she did.”

Harry shook his head, rubbing his brow as the car topped another hillside, starting its downward journey.

Then why wouldn’t she take the shot?

He peered sideways at Luna. Her gaze was hard-set, determined, gears rapidly turning within. His own thoughts surged and crashed, no sanity to be found in this madness. And then her eyes snapped forward, widening.

“Shite!” She slammed on the brakes, the tires screeched, Harry jerked forward, caught by the seat belt, its strap cutting painfully into his chest as he fought to maintain his grip on the phone. Neville wasn’t as fortunate, his laptop catapulting into the floorboards as his own seat belt snapped him back.

“Sorry!” Luna shouted, turning with the skid. The tires slid another few yards before rocking to a hard stop.

Just before a four-foot stone wall.

Harry gaped at the sight. “Fuck.”

Neville shook his head, scrambling for his computer, fighting the pull of his seatbelt. “No! This isn’t on the map!” He picked up the device, holding the screen so close his nose touched the plastic. “This can’t be here!”

“Tell that to the medieval sheep herder who built it,” Harry replied, glancing in either direction at the long stretch of stone dividing the field.

“Built what? What’s going on?”

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose. “Crouch. If you don’t shut the hell up I’m going to shoot you.” He unclipped his seatbelt, turning to the backseat. “Let me see it, Nev.”

His friend relinquished his most prized possession, eyes wide and sorrowful. “I’m so sorry, Harry, the wall isn’t listed.”

Harry sighed, pulling the laptop to the front and studying the terrain it showed, focusing on the blinking red dot at the center of the screen, marking Crouch’s location at the edge of the woods.

“Crouch, we’re about 900 yards away.”

“Thank fucking Christ.”

“But you’re going to have to come to us.”

A deafening pause.

“Are you fucking daft?”
“Keep your voice down!”

“I’m going to bash your–”

“You can threaten me all you like when you get here!” Harry yelled, handing the laptop back to Neville before he punched a hole through it. “Just fucking get here!”

“I can’t–”

“Listen carefully. Are you wearing a watch?”

Crouch’s breath stuttered through the speaker, clearly thrown by the question. “I… yes….”

“Does it have compass navigation?”

Another beat.

“Yes.”

Harry dragged a hand through his hair, each strand standing on end as though electrified. “Good. We’re directly east of you, on the other side of a stone wall in the middle of a field. There’s a hill between us. You may not see us when you emerge, but trust that we’re on the other side of it.”

“Why can’t you drive around the wall?”

Harry released a weary sigh, peering through the window. “It extends as far as I can see. It probably ends at the creeks on either side of the property line.” He set his jaw. “Crouch. We can’t get any closer. You have to come to us.”

“They’ll shoot me!”

“You’re a senior officer. You’ve been through all the same training as I have. You know what to do. You can do this. Just take a deep breath and use your head.”

“I can’t use my bloody head when they’re fucking shooting at it!”

“Then don’t think. Run. Just not in a straight line. Get here as fast as you can. The element of surprise will be to your benefit.”

“Potter, you said it yourself… if I run, I die.”

Harry tipped his head back, staring at the upholstered roof, temples throbbing in time to his heart. “That was true then. But circumstances have changed. You have to move.”

Crouch audibly gulped, static buzzing. “I’m going to get killed.”

Harry closed his eyes.

Probably.

He pried his lids open, casting his gaze ahead and staring at the large hillside with single-minded focus.

“Run.”
Tuesday, July 30, 1996

Hermione laid a flower atop the clover patch marking Edmond’s grave. The ground was soft, disturbed by the shallow hole Tom had dug for her two nights prior, long after the rest of the Home had gone to bed. She sighed, too drained to cry anymore, and continued to linger upon the corner of the courtyard turned pet cemetery.

“Where is she, bitch?” A voice shouted from behind, causing her to gasp and spin, staggering back as a fast approaching figure materialized from the swirling abyss.

Billy.

“Where the fuck is she?” He screamed, fists clenched as he charged into the clover patch. She backed away rapidly, until her spine hit the tall fence, blocking her escape. Billy continued forward, bearing down upon her. “Talk, bitch!”

“I…” She shook her head, voice hitched by fear, palms flat against the wood slats. “Who?”

“Jinx!” He towered above her, face twisted with demonic rage as he punched the post just beside her head, shaking the fence and pulling a shudder from her body. “Her cage is empty! There’s fucking blood all over the floor! What did you do, you sick demented cunt?”

Her breath evaded her in a rush. “I…” She shook her head again, trying to shrink back, slipping lower against the fence. Her heart beat so violently she was certain a bruise would form along her ribs. “I don’t know.”

“You’re a fucking liar!” He gripped the front of her shirt and wrenched her forward, into his body. “I know your psychotic fuck-boy did something to her! Now tell me where she is!”

She opened and closed her mouth wordlessly, a gaping fish rendered mute in the hands of its captor. Her muscles tensed, anticipating the physical strike that was sure to come. Her eyes darted over his shoulder, searching frantically. Other residents watched the scene play out with avid fascination, lining up along the far end of the courtyard, whispering and pushing for a better view. Their eyes shined bright with excitement, intrigue. Only one or two residents appeared uncomfortable, but no more inclined to help.

“Where is she!” Billy screamed again, drawing her undivided attention back to his snarling face. He jerked her roughly with every syllable, her head snapping back and forth like a ragdoll as spittle flecked her skin. “I swear to god if she’s dead I’m going to kill you with my bare hands!”

Fury sparked to life within her, his words breaking her from the dark trance. “Like you killed Edmond?” She hissed, gaze slit.

He blinked. And then reared back, keeping grip of her shirt and dragging her onto her tiptoes as the fabric stretched between them. “That fucking rodent with wings?” His voice was tinged black with disgust. “You took Jinx because of that disgusting little bird?”

“No,” a new voice spoke from directly behind the boy. “I killed Jinx because of that disgusting little bird.”

Billy released her shirt, eyes flaring wide as he spun around, expression wrought with fear and anger as he faced the third addition to the clover patch. He barely settled on his heel when Tom decked him upside the chin with a balled fist, sending him tumbling into the fence. Hermione staggered aside just in time to avoid being smashed, throat tight as she watched Tom fall upon his prey in the next heartbeat.
He punched him again, in the side of the cheek, red streaking the chipped post as blood flew from Billy’s split lip. The force of the impact caused the boy to hit the ground in a heap, scrambling for his bearings. The audience at their backs burst into explosive chatter, jumping around for better visuals, a wave of excitement rippling across the growing crowd.

Billy turned over in the grass, gripping his bruised jaw. “You sick fuck!”

Tom’s smile was lethal, haunting to her eyes as he stalked closer, every step slow and methodical, knuckles red and swollen. “You don’t even know how I did it.” His gaze gleamed black as a shark. “I held her by the scruff and slit her open from throat to stomach, watching her insides spill out all across your shiny floor.”

Billy screamed with righteous fury, smoke billowing from his mouth as he pushed up and charged forward, catching Tom around the middle. But it was a rookie move Hermione had seen Tom evade countless times before, and this occurrence was certainly no different. He easily spun out of the way, gripping Billy’s wrist and twisting it back, the boy’s own momentum causing the joint to pop loudly. His scream turned shrill, face contorting in agony as he dropped to his knees.

Tom maintained his grip on the appendage, drawing close to the crumpled face, voice radiating with dark intensity. “She was alive through all of it. Twitching and screaming. I never knew rabbits could scream. But they can. Fuck was she a screamer.”

Billy bucked and thrashed, trying desperately to free his arm from the iron grip, using his free hand to punch at Tom’s side, his ribs, his thigh, anything he could reach. But Tom remained unmoved, absorbing each impact like craters to the moon’s surface, his face a frozen mask of malevolence.

“The last time a man put his hands on her I nearly beat him to death.”

Her heart jolted painfully at the memory. She took a step back, legs numb, knees trembling.

“The only thing that saved his life was his friends jumping me. It took four of them to bring me down,” Tom continued with a grin, glancing up and looking around, making a grand show of it. “I don’t see any of your friends rushing to help, Stubbs.” He peered down once more, clicking his tongue and twisting the wrist tighter, eliciting a keening wail from the figure on its knees before him. “So tell me… what’s to prevent me from killing you right here and now?”

Billy gagged and sputtered, face a brilliant red, eyes bloodshot. “Sick… fuck…”

“We’ve already established that.” Tom’s smile deepened. He twisted the wrist harder, another pop filled the air, Billy screamed like a dying animal.

Hermione’s stomach rolled with the sound, pulse fluttering so hard she turned light-headed. “Tom,” she whispered, voice barely registering in her own ears.

But he heard her all the same, eyes fastening to her at once, sparking at the center. “What do you say, Hermione? Should I tear his head off? Seems pretty poetic.”

She swallowed thickly, gaze darting back to Billy. She couldn’t speak, couldn’t think, couldn’t recall the simmering rage she felt two nights before when she begged Tom to make the bully pay for his crimes. She met Tom’s eye, at a loss for words, unable to articulate her horror. This mounting terror Tom inspired. He continued to study her face until his expression stuttered like a bunched film reel. And then it fell, the feral gleam fading from his gaze as he blinked, releasing Billy's wrist. The boy gasped, doubling over and retching in the grass, clutching his broken wrist to his chest as he heaved.

Tom took a step back, eyeing the fallen boy closely. And then rage sparked anew.
She cringed, glancing away as Tom kneed Billy in the face, sending him sprawling flat on his back, mouth filled with blood as he clutched his broken nose with both hands. Girls shrieked in the background, residents covering their own faces, concern and fear finally coloring their shocked gazes. But Hermione was numb to their audience, her attention fully absorbed by one sight only.

Tom. Always Tom.

He stepped beside the groaning figure, gazing down like a fallen angel of vengeance, eyes wild, dark energy pulsing from his towering form in waves, caressing her skin like an electrical current.

“That’s for killing her bird,” he growled, and then drew his foot back, driving the toe-end of his work boot into Billy’s side. The sound of snapping ribs echoed through the air, rendering her breathless. “That’s for going into her room.”

Billy screamed anew, curling in on himself. And then Tom reached into his back pocket, withdrawing something small and shiny. Her vision dimmed.

“And this…” He flicked the switchblade open, dropping to his haunches and grabbing the boy by the collar, dragging his blood and snot-soaked face forward, the metal glinting in his horror-widened gaze. “This is for touching her.”

He drew his hand back, intent clear as the bright blue sky. Billy was too terrified to scream, to fight, falling limp in the jaws of the wolf.

"Tom!" Hermione screamed, pushing off the fence and surging forward. "Stop!" She fell to her knees, gripping his blade-wielding arm with both hands, nails pressing into his flesh. He froze, head snapping round. She met his eye, body turning rigid at the dazed look in his gaze. Like he'd forgotten she was there. Like he'd forgotten who she was.

She knew that stare. Had seen it upon his face once before. The night of the pub fight. When he’d lost his mind to blood lust.

Hermione released his arm and grabbed his shirt, attempting to pull him closer, but it was like trying to move a boulder. She leaned into him instead, pressing her full weight upon him, if only to prevent him from lunging forward with the blade.

“Tom, listen to my voice.” She searched his gaze frantically, looking for some spark of recognition to take hold. His body was strung taut, cold as metal, more machine than man. “Come back to me.”

He blinked. And then blinked again, eyes slowly coming into focus, honing in on her face. She felt the muscles beneath her hands relax little by little, limb by limb, until warmth returned to his skin, human at last. She released a long breath, reaching up and grabbing his face, thumbs framing the corners of his mouth. “It’s over,” she whispered, holding his gaze steady.

He swallowed heavily, Adam’s apple bobbing high, voice a deep rumble she barely recognized. “He hurt you.”

She nodded. “And you hurt him. He scared me. And you scared him back... and then some. It’s over now.”

He lifted his chin but didn't pull away from her touch. Billy spat blood to the ground, rolling onto his uninjured side with a muffled wail. Tom exhaled slowly through his nose and closed the switchblade, dropping his arm. And then he peered down at the quivering pile in the grass. "You’re a lucky man, Stubbs."
Tom turned away from her, she lost her grip on his face, grasping his thigh instead, hoping the physical contact would keep him grounded in the here and now, tethered to her, a light through the darkness. He made no move to retake his blade, merely leaning down, placing his face close to Billy’s, waiting until the trembling boy met his eye.

“If you set foot in her room again, if you touch her again, if I catch you so much as looking at her… I’ll come into your room when you’re sound asleep and sever whatever sorry excuse you call your cock from your body.” His voice was low, barely audible, but she heard every word as though they were shouted through a loudspeaker.

Tom arched a brow, focus unwavering. “Do I make myself clear?”

Billy's eyes had widened with every word until they reached cartoon proportions, tears streaming non-stop.

Tom tilted his head. “I need an answer, Billy.” The boy nodded frantically, twisting back as far as he could. Tom stared at him for another endless beat. “Good.” And then he rose swiftly, Hermione falling back with the quick movement. “Then we’re all done here.”

He reached down, grabbing her arm without a glance and drawing her to her feet. She swayed in place, blood rushing to her head. And then they were in motion, Tom pulling her through the now packed courtyard towards the gate door. Onlookers gasped and sprang out of their way, the Red Sea parting at Tom’s silent command.

Hermione studied his profile as she staggered to keep up with his long strides. “Where’s the rabbit?” She asked.

“A giant carrot castle in the sky.” His voice was carefully void of emotion, grey eyes fixed ahead. “Or wherever the hell rabbits go when they’re torn to bits.”

She tilted her head, eyes drifting to his hair, glinting bluish-black in the sunlight. “Where is it, Tom?”

He released her arm, grabbing her wrist instead, a familiar comfort in the wake of the explosive violence she’d just witnessed. They reached the gate door. He opened it wide, tugging her through at his side.

“My closet. Shitting all over everything. Little red-eyed fucker.”

She smirked as they reached the sidewalk. “And the blood?”

“Ketchup. Not my finest work, but all I could get on short notice.” He led her around the corner, a car passing to their left, smoke exhaust heavy on the air. “Lucky for us, Stubbs is an idiot.”

He released her at last, reaching into his back pocket to replace the blade and grab his keys, the jingle of metal a soothing melody to her heart.

“He’s going to report you,” she warned.

"An official report of him pissing all over himself? Christ, I hope so."

Hermione rolled her eyes. The Cruiser came into view at the end of the street, half-hidden by bushes. They continued towards it for several moments before Tom broke the resounding silence.

“How did you know?”
She straightened her shirt, the collar stretched from Billy’s rough handling, and was tempted to feign ignorance. But she didn’t see the point. Tom knew she understood him. She was the only one who understood him.

“You’d never kill an innocent creature.”

A heavy beat. The sunlight seemed to intensify above, beaming upon her like an interrogation lamp, sweat beading along her hairline and nape.

“I wanted to leave the bird behind,” Tom replied casually, eyes fixed determinedly ahead.

Her brows furrowed, head snapping up. “That’s not in the same hemisphere as gutting a rabbit.”

“I was prepared to cut Stubbs open.”

Hermione blinked, taken aback by the statement, by the memories playing out in her mind. “He’s hardly an innocent creature,” she uttered slowly, unsure of her own response.

Tom finally gazed down, holding her stare, his expression unreadable. Until he smirked. “You’ll always find an excuse for me, won’t you?”

She lifted her chin, gaze defiant. “No. I’ll always find the light in you.”

His amusement faded, eyes flashing bright as his steps slowed. She quickened her own pace with a grin, stepping off the curb, towards the bike. “Coming?” She asked cheekily, facing forward. Rendering Tom silent was a feat worthy of celebration. Her heart soared as his footsteps picked back up a moment later, following in her wake.

Hermione stood in a dark trance, unable to break the gaze of the gleaming eyes watching her from the bushes. The body was well concealed by leaves but easily discernible now that she knew where to look, an optical illusion morphing before her very eyes.

Oh my god.

She couldn’t manage any more coherent thought. Her body swayed in place, caught in a vortex of rising panic, certain her expression bore as much unbridled terror as the man hunched before her.

“Kitten!”

She jolted, nearly leaping out of her skin.

“Play time’s over! Come back home for your spanking!”

Hermione never knew she could be so grateful to hear the female assassin’s voice. She backed away slowly, maintaining eye contact, the gun vibrating in her hand. Or perhaps it was her body that was wracked with tremors, causing her stomach to twist like a swarm of eels. After putting several yards of distance between them Hermione spun on her heel and sprinted for the source of voices. She rounded a cluster of petrified oak trees, spotting faces at last.

“Tom!”

He whipped his head around, rifle in hand. She charged forward, leaping forward like jumping off a cliff, wrapping her arms around his neck and burying her face against his neck, forgetting the gun in her grasp until Bella shifted out of the way, the barrel pointed directly at her.
Hermione blinked, starting to mouth an apology but forgetting the words as Tom wrapped his free arm around her waist, holding her off the ground and pressing her flush to his body as he propped his rifle against a nearby stump. He nuzzled his face into her hair, breathing in deep, causing her to rise against his chest. He gripped the back of her neck, squeezing once, and then dragged his fingers up, tangling them in her curls and gently tugging her head back, meeting her wide gaze.

“Are you alright?” He asked, face so close his lips brushed her own.

Hermione nodded, a bit frantically perhaps, judging by the concern in his eyes. He started to speak again when a new voice emerged from the trees.

“What the fuck is this?”

She paled, gazing over his shoulder and spotting Rabastan. He looked like death warmed over. White as a corpse and dripping sweat, his hair slick with it. The bags beneath his eyes were so heavy it looked as though his face was melting off. Tom went hard as stone beneath her touch, arm tensing at her waist, painfully, before he gripped her hips and directed her feet back to the ground. She was bereft of his touch, the safety she felt in his arms, but stepped back at his silent command.

Tom turned to face the new addition. But Rabastan’s eyes remained fastened to her, dark and murderous. “I assume this little Telenovela is in celebration of killing the target?”

Tom arched a brow, stepping closer to his discarded rifle, the movement slow and casual. “You’re lecturing us about mission objectives?”

Rabastan’s fist clenched. The other held a handgun. It trembled with his every word. “You threatened to kill me if I delayed the hit, what the hell do you call this?”

Bella laughed throatily from her leisurely position against a redwood. “Come now, Buttercream—”

“Shut up, you vile bitch!” He raised the glock, pointing it at the woman’s head. Hermione stiffened, heart rioting in her chest. But Bella only laughed harder, tossing her head back, braid swaying as she shook.

“You crazed cunt! I see right through your bushel of madness! Everyone knows you only earned your spot into this organization by spreading your legs for every man brave enough to stick their prick into a barrel of gasoline!”

Her laughter turned higher, maniacal.

“You probably fucked Green, too. Anything to get to the top.”

And all at once, her amusement faded. Her eyes glinted like a cat in the dark, fixed upon him with eerie intensity.

His own gaze appeared clouded, distant, arm trembling as he kept aim, teeth bared like a snarling dog. “That’s right. I know all about you. All the bullshite you put Rod through. I should kill you for that alone.”

Bella tilted her head, limbs frozen in their casual sprawl, eyes unblinking. “You have three seconds to get that gun out of my face.”

His lips curved in a cruel grin. “Or what?”

“Or I’ll jam it so far up your arse you’ll be deep-throating metal for the rest of your very short
lifespan.” She smiled just as wickedly, absently tapping her red nails along the bark. “Don’t pretend
the prospect doesn’t thrill you. I know all about your pastimes as well.” Her dark eyes sparkled.
“Addiction has finally made you into an interesting boy, Buttercream. It does me proud to know you
earned your nickname with good old-fashioned hard work and elbow grease.”

Rabastan blinked, a heavy bead of sweat rolling down the side of his face. “Fucking bitch.”

Hermione was certain he was going to pull the trigger. She stood frozen in terror, overwhelmed with
the prospect of watching Bella’s head explode. Tom shifted towards the stump, barely an inch, just
enough to register in her mind. Rabastan continued to gaze down the barrel of his glock as Tom
reached for the rifle—

And then noise and movement burst to life several yards away. Hermione turned. Their target
appeared, emerging from the bushes in an explosion of leaves and snapping twigs, limping heavily
and wheezing like an asthmatic.

They all blinked.

Rabastan recovered first, turning his gun on the man and releasing a feral shout. He pulled the
trigger. The explosion was deafening, cracking like thunder as the bullet whizzed past Hermione’s
head, so close she heard its sharp trajectory. She screamed, throwing her arms overhead as Tom
grabbed her waist and threw her back with such force she lost her footing, collapsing against a tree,
gasping and blinking rapidly, hair in her eyes.

Rabastan fired again, bullet clipping a tree several feet away from the screaming target. Tom hissed,
stumbling back and clutching his arm, red blossoming to life across his sleeve. Hermione gasped as
blood welled over his fingers, dripping to the ground. He grit his teeth and rounded on the shooter,
grabbing the barrel as Rabastan pulled the trigger a third time, bullet lodging in the dirt.

Rabastan screamed as Tom punched him in the side of the face, causing him to collapse in a heap.
Tom towered above the man, hands opening and closing at his sides, expression positively lethal.
Hermione clutched the tree at her back, breath stuck in her lungs, suffocating her from the inside out.

“What the fuck, Riddle? He’s getting away!”

“You’re a liability, Lestrange. You know what happens with liabilities.”

Rabastan seethed, scrambling in the leaves, trying to rise. Hermione glanced to the woman beside
her, watching the scene play out with fervid excitement. And then Rabastan settled back into the dirt,
lifting the gun a second time.

Pointing it at Tom’s head.

Hermione’s vision flashed white, her fear blinding, numbing. She went limp against the trunk,
separating from her body entirely.

“You deserve to die, Riddle. You both deserve to die.”

Tom lifted a brow, making no attempt to evade the barrel. “Your aim is as pathetic as the rest of
you.” He edged closer, voice low, sinister. “You only get one shot to put me down.”

Rabastan held his gaze, something wild housed beneath the cloudy haze of withdrawal. “I guess I
better make it count then.”

He lowered his arm, changing targets.
Pointing the gun at Hermione instead.

Her eyes flared wide, spine pressing the tree, jagged bark scraping against her palms. And then the air was knocked from her lungs, her feet ripped from the ground as Bella charged into her side, knocking them both to the hard-packed earth as a fourth shot rang through the trees, echoing off the walls of her skull until it mimicked her own pounding heart.

Bark exploded overhead as the bullet lodged into the wood, in the same spot her shoulder was pressed moments ago. Bella lied atop her, filling Hermione’s field of vision. And then a pained grunt drew their focus to the side.

Tom was poised atop the gunman, his fists raining down in rapid succession, hands stained as red as his arm. Rabastan’s head lolled from side to side with every impact, the glock discarded in the leaves beside them. Hermione shuddered. Bella stiffened atop her, gripping her waist before pushing up and away.

“Finish it, Tommy,” she instructed lowly, eyes fixed and gleaming.

Tom reared up, only the long line of his back visible to Hermione’s watchful gaze. She blinked, tears spilling from the corners of her eyes, dripping onto the grass. His chest heaved as he reached for the gun.

Bella shifted above her. “Close your eyes, little dove.”

Hermione followed instruction without thought or hesitation, cringing back as another shot rang out.

All fell still. Quiet. The wind whistled through the trees and rustled the dead leaves at her sides and in her hair. She opened her lids, vision blurred by tears and glaring sunlight. And then Bella materialized from the fog, smiling brightly and extending a hand. Hermione accepted the offering, numb and pliant as the woman pulled her upright. She leaned against the same tree marked by a bullet hole, gazing at Tom’s rigid form. He stood as well, tucking the glock into his waistband. The movement reminded Hermione that she was still holding a gun. She gazed at it in disgust.

"Want me to take that, luv?" Bella's voice was sickly sweet. Hermione relinquished the weapon eagerly. The assassin took it with a wink, adjusting the rifle over her shoulder.

Tom turned at last. His face was cast in heavy shadow, unrecognizable. His eyes appeared wild, half-crazed as they latched onto her. “Are you okay?”

Hermione swallowed thickly, throat swollen, words caught. She nodded instead, clinging to the tree to remain upright.

Bella bounced on her heels. “I’m fine, too, thanks for asking.”

His gaze flickered to the other woman, watching her in silence for several heavy moments until he spoke. “Thank you.”

Bella arched a dark brow, smile widening. “What are partners for?”

Tom nodded, and then turned away, searching the woods. Hermione shifted awkwardly, careful to keep her eyes off the body sprawled between them.

“What now?” She asked tentatively.

Tom’s eyes cut to her once more. They were back to their normal gray. Haunting and familiar. As
A gunshot tore through the blue skies, sharp and unmistakable. Harry surged forward, tearing off his seatbelt.

“Crouch!” He opened the car door, leaping out. “Crouch!”

“Jesus!”

Harry nearly doubled over in relief as a colorful string of curses emanated from the other end of the line. He leaned into the side of the car.

Another shot filled the air.

His spine snapped straight. Luna emerged from the vehicle next, staring at the hillside that blocked their view of the woods. A third shot rang out. Crouch continued to pant into the phone, gasping like a man on the torturing rack. Harry’s entire body throbbed in time to his pulse.

“Keep running! Don’t look back!”

“They aren’t shooting at me!”

Harry blinked, glancing over the roof to meet Luna’s gaze, silent questions flitting between them.

“Where the fuck are you, Potter?”

He glanced forward, stepping closer to the stone wall. “We’re here. You see the hill?”

“Bollocks. I can’t make it up that.”

“You can. Dig deep. You’re almost here.”

Crouch wheezed. “Don’t… let…” a choking gasp “…me… die.”

Harry swallowed heavily. “I won’t.”

No way in hell he was giving those bastards the satisfaction of stealing another victim right out from under him.

A fourth gunshot cracked across the sky, setting his hair on end. He climbed onto the wall, trying to peer over the hillside.

“Hurry!”

“Shut… up… you… bastard.”

Seconds bled into minutes, each crawling past with laborious intensity. And then, at long last, a new shape appeared on the hilltop. Crouch stumbled into view, face beet red and glistening. Harry waved his arm frantically, nearly losing balance. “You see us?”

“I’m dying.”

“No you aren’t, you’re almost done, keep going.”

“I’m having… a heart attack.” Crouch clutched his chest, collapsing to his knees.
Harry shook his head, nearly snapping the phone in his fist. “Crouch, you do not get to die of high fucking cholesterol now! You get your fat arse down here now goddammit!”

The senior officer gasped for breath, beyond speech as he staggered to his feet, gripping his side. “Fuck,” he managed to wheeze before grunting like a wild boar and stumbling forward.

Harry nodded. “You can collapse in the car. Just–” He blinked, jaw hanging loose as the rest of his thought dissolved into nothingness. “Shite.”

Crouch drew up short. “What?” He gazed down at the wall, staring at Harry. And then he blinked, glancing over his shoulder, searching the terrain for whatever caught his attention.

Spotting it at once.

“Oh for fuck’s sake!”

Tom’s hand tightened upon the clutch as he shifted gears, rapidly navigating across the uneven field. He could hear Hermione sliding all over the backseat, clutching the upholstery and walls in a desperate attempt to stay upright.

“Tom–”

“Hold on.”

She gasped as he hit a narrow ditch, the van shaking hard, sending her across the seat once more.

Bella laughed in sheer delight from the passenger seat, glancing back. “Brings back memories, doesn’t it, luv?” She winked, laughing anew as Hermione clung to the back of Tom’s seat for dear life.

He turned the wheel tight, skidding around a massive haystack. His blood was still simmering from the altercation in the woods. The memory of Rabastan pointing the gun at Hermione, the bark exploding as the bullet lodged in deep. It could have just as easily been her shoulder. Her chest. Her head.

He blinked, gripping the wheel until the plastic groaned. He couldn’t think about that now. They had a mission to finish. Distractions could still prove fatal.

Focus.

"Christ, you're a Sunday driver!" Bella called out, drawing him back to the present. "Step on it, grandpa! Otherwise, we'll have to reverse over the fat bastard the rest of the afternoon."

Tom rolled his eyes, changing gears once more as they careened over rocks. “I’m not running him over.”

Hermione leaned forward, face appearing between the killers. “You aren’t?”

He met her eyes in the rearview mirror. Her expression was full of hope. Innocence.

Bella sighed, breaking the spell. “Wonderful. Perhaps Green will let us choose which limb he amputates with his Alibaba sword.”

Tom kept his gaze focused ahead. His fellow assassin released a withering sigh, leaning back and tapping her nails along the window sill. “At least scare the mouse a bit. The day shan’t be a total
He gripped the clutch, reaching the hillside at long last. His eyes narrowed upon the summit. Their target staggered in place, gazing upon them with a gaping maw, an idiotic deer in the headlights.

“The day isn’t a waste.” Tom smiled, stepping on the gas, the van surging upward. “In fact, it’s about to be a smashing success.”

Crouch released a shrill scream into the phone as the van appeared on the hilltop, engine roaring like an angry dragon. Harry cringed, pulling the speaker from his ear as he leaped off the wall and onto the field.

“Get in!” He shouted to Luna. She did as bade, blonde hair fluttering in the wind before slamming the door.

Harry’s eyes remained fastened to the hill. He began to speak into the phone, only to groan as Crouch lost his footing, somersaulting headfirst down the incline, phone flying from his hand in the process. Harry dragged a hand through his hair, watching as the vehicle zoomed after the tumbling heap of limbs and trenchcoat.

*He isn’t going to make it.*

But to Harry’s great consternation, the van didn’t mow Crouch into finely-milled roadkill. Instead, it slowed.

He blinked, heart thumping painfully as Crouch staggered to his feet, limping across the grass as though trudging through a war-torn battlefield. The van reached the bottom of the hill.

And stopped.

Harry opened and closed his mouth.

*What the hell?*

Luna fired up the engine, breaking his train of thought. He inhaled sharply, pocketing the phone and shouting across the field.

“Run!”

Crouch was within reach at last, collapsing against the stone wall in a heaving pile. Harry grabbed the back of the man’s waistband and dragged him over the ledge.

“Ow! Fucking hell, Potter–”

“Shut up, get in the back!”

He let Crouch tumble to the ground on the other side, emerald gaze focused on the darkened windows of the van. He couldn’t see inside. But he sensed eyes upon him. Watching him in turn.

“Potter!” Crouch wrenched open the back door. “Come on!”

Harry remained transfixed, unable to look away, knowing without a shred of doubt he stood upon the very edge of a major precipice. He turned for the car at last, opening the passenger door.

“About bloody time!” Crouch shouted, sprawled across the backseat in a sweaty heap, lying half-
atop a mortified Neville.

But Harry made no move inside. He merely leaned over, locking eyes with Luna. “What do you think?” He asked.

She gripped the wheel with both hands, holding his gaze. He knew she read his mind correctly when she nodded to the glove compartment, voice calm. "There's a stainless Beretta inside."

Neville cringed, scrambling out from under Crouch’s panting weight, glancing rapidly between them. “Wait, what’s happening?”

Harry opened the compartment. The weapon sat atop a pile of documents, gleaming like a beacon.

Crouch grabbed the back of the seat and pulled himself forward. “What the hell are you doing? Potter! Answer me!”

Harry checked the clip. He addressed Luna without glancing up. “If it goes south, you get out of here, understand?”

“We’re not leaving without you.”

He tucked the gun into his waistband, using the open door to block the movement from the van. “Crouch is our most valuable lead. Protect the asset at all costs. That’s the number one rule of being an Officer.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I’m not an Officer yet. We aren’t leaving without you.”

Harry smirked, nodding once and rising to his full height, gripping the edge of the door.

Neville sputtered, eyes wide. “Harry, what are you do–”

Crouch elbowed the young man aside, face red as a traffic signal. “Potter, you goddamn lunatic, get your arse in the fucking car! They're trying to kill us!”

Harry took a deep breath. “No. They’re waiting for something.” He wet his lips. “And I’m going to find out what it is.”

“You really do have a bloody death wish, same as your father!”

Harry blinked, meeting the man’s enraged stare. “Perhaps so. And if I’m not mistaken, he once saved your life as well. Like father like son.”

Crouch scowled, lips pressing thin. Neville shifted forward, smashed as he was. “Harry…”

“It’s alright, Neville. I’ll be right back.” He swallowed heavily, glancing to the field.

_Until I’m killed._

He slammed the door on Crouch’s roaring face, adrenaline surging, eyes locked on the parked vehicle ahead. He crossed to the stone wall, bracing his hands atop the ledge.

And climbed over.

Tom killed the engine.
Hermione shifted restlessly at his back, Bella sat frozen at his side, all eyes fixed steadily ahead.

“What is he doing?” Hermione asked, leaning forward for a better view.

Tom tilted his head, watching the man gracefully leap the wall. He had a wild mane of black hair that was shockingly familiar. Tom’s gaze narrowed upon the face, unable to make out details at this distance, but the hair…

The hair.

Realization struck like lightning, pulsing through him in a rush. Bella leaned forward in the same moment, hands braced against the dash, breath quickening. Her eyes glittered like onyx. Tom knew that look.

“Friend of yours?” He asked, pulling the keys from the ignition.

She smiled, teeth straight and sharp. “A lady never kisses and tells.”

Tom glanced into the rearview. Hermione sat still as a statue, pale and unblinking, sticks and leaves littering her hair. He waited until she met his gaze to speak. “Stay put. He already has my face. I won’t give him yours.”

She continued to stare at him in silence. He read the understanding in her eyes as she nodded. “Please… be careful,” she whispered, worrying her hands atop her lap.

His bloodied fists clenched atop the armrests, bruised knuckles cracking loudly. “This shouldn’t take long,” he replied, reaching for the handle. But before he could open the door a set of claws bore into his arm, pressing the wound Rabastan left behind. He hissed, stilling beneath Bella’s clutches, turning his head sharply.

Her eyes glinted red. “The Lamb is mine, Tom Riddle. Don’t touch a hair on his head.”

Tom searched her gaze, taken aback by the passionate declaration. And then he smiled. “Of course not.” The door swung wide beneath his touch. “We’re just going to have a little chat.”
What an unfortunate name

Chapter Notes

Hello again, my crystal raindrops! I’m so thrilled you’re still following this trainwreck ❤

Sunday, July 17, 2005

Harry took a tentative step, palms raised in the universal sign of Don’t Shoot, Arsehole. His eyes remained fixed on the dark windshield ahead, an endless expanse of green between him and the vehicle. Time slowed to a crawl. He counted the seconds using his heartbeat as the measure. As anticipated, no bullets tore through the sky. No lightning crashed and no meteors hurtled to the earth.

He proceeded forward.

Step by step, his hands slowly dropped to his sides. He navigated the field as carefully as a landmine, pace only faltering when the driver side door opened and dark boots appeared in the grass. Harry held his breath. The door blocked his view of the person on the other side, but he sensed it was a man. And then the door closed. His heart skipped once, twice, rioting painfully against his ribs.

The Janitor.

The assassin met his gaze across the clearing, features blurred from this distance, but his smirk shined bright as a spotlight. Harry felt his fists clench of their own accord, blood simmering as the man proceeded forward at a leisurely gait, mimicking a midday stroll through the marigolds. His eyes swept the darkly clad figure. No weapon in sight. But the man was armed. Harry felt it down to his marrow.

The gun’s behind his back. Same as mine.

The thought didn’t induce fear. Harry was beyond fear. Beyond reason. Propelled only by gut instinct and raw adrenaline. He was committed to seeing this through. To whatever end, however bloody.

Harry’s attention flickered to the van, towering above the grass like a dark steed. He wondered if She was inside. His hands trembled at the possibility. The mere thought of her eyes upon him. Watching. He envisioned his hands around her neck, her face a blank mask, a mannequin head, but he would strangle the life out of her just the same…

The sound of boots treading over weeds drew his eyes forward. The Janitor was closer, his face easily discernible now. It looked just as Harry remembered, Luna’s caricature come to life. Handsome, smug… and cold. Harry tried to analyze the killer’s expression, the emotion in his grey eyes, anything to better gauge the exchange to come, what approach to take.

But the longer Harry stared the more he thought about their first encounter, that brief, fateful exchange in the men’s room. The hum of the fluorescent lights, the squeak of the trolley wheel, the whoosh of the door swinging closed… Narcissa’s wide, pleading gaze as she bled out, the coldness of her skin as she clutched Harry’s hands, the warmth of her blood coating his palms—
He took a deep breath, forcing the memories back inside the wooden trunk in his mind, a mirror image of the chest in the Dursley’s attic. And then he focused on the Janitor, anger rising as the man’s smirk gave way to a full-fledged grin.

*I’ll be wiping that off your face soon enough, smug bastard.*

At long last they reached the center of the clearing, barely ten feet apart, stopping at the same time. Clouds merged overhead, blocking the glaring sun and casting the field and all its inhabitants in shadow.

Harry’s attention cut to the man’s hands on instinct, waiting for a weapon to materialize. Instead, he noted the dried blood on his palms, filling the cracks of the skin and marring his bruised knuckles. His gaze tracked higher, following the path of red along his arm to the tear in his sleeve.

Crouch didn’t have a mark on him.

Harry lifted his chin, gaze casting up.

Fascinating.

He met the Janitor’s eye. They stared at each other in silence for several moments, a warm breeze sweeping the grass and leaves in a gentle vortex before dissipating, as though signaling the start of the play.

Harry took hold of the reins, voice calm and steady. “Hello.”

A beat. Amusement danced in the assassin’s gaze.

“Thanks for taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with me,” Harry continued, feeling a surge of triumph as the man lifted a dark brow.

“Seems the least I could do, given the trouble you’ve gone through chasing me across the country and continent.”

Every word made Harry’s skin twitch. His emerald gaze flickered to the van at the callous reminder. The windows seemed darker. Bigger. His teeth clenched. “Is she in there?”

The bastard’s smirk only deepened.

Harry’s attention snapped forward once more. “Doesn’t want to talk to me?”

“Quite the opposite. But I had an inkling the two of you would have a far less productive conversation.”

Harry released a slow breath. No more beating around the bush. “Why are you after Crouch?”

“Crouch? What an unfortunate name for an unfortunate looking man.”

Harry studied him carefully, searching for the lie. “You don’t know him?”

“We didn’t have the opportunity to meet. He was a bit preoccupied with leaving his mother for dead whilst driving her car through the garage door.”

Harry filed the information away for future contemplation. “He’s your Ministry informant. Seems a bit short-sighted to close your window into the enemy’s house.”
A fresh wave of amusement marred the man’s features, one emotion Harry was confident in recognizing.

“The enemy’s house…” The assassin shook his head. “You think the Ministry is our enemy?”

Harry noted the choice of pronoun, cramming it into his mental stores beside the rest of the crap he struggled to retain.

“If you go up the chain of command far enough, I think you’ll find we’re employed by the same people,” the Janitor concluded.

Harry blinked. So many things to dissect in that loaded statement. But one realization quickly surfaced to the top.

_He thinks I’m still employed by the Ministry._

Huh.

Another addition to the crap heap.

“You work for an organization.” Harry hadn’t bothered to frame it as a question.

“Freelance pays shite.”

“You’re assigned targets without knowing their name or occupation?”

“The boring bits are above my security clearance. You don’t give an intern the missile codes.”

“A humble psychopath. That’s a first.”

The Janitor smirked. “You _really_ shouldn’t call out a psychopath to their face. Didn’t they teach you that in MI6 etiquette class?”

“Must have missed school that day.”

“Must have missed a lot. You aren’t like other agents I’ve encountered.”

Harry spotted the misdirection a mile off, easily sidestepping the bait. “Why didn’t you kill Crouch when you had the chance?”

“Who says I missed my chance?”

Harry refused to react. The assassin laughed shortly, tucking his hands into his pockets, thumbs hooking the fabric. “Consider is a professional courtesy. For the mess I left you to clean up last time.”

Harry went rigid, the trunk in his mind bursting wide with a deafening bang as memories of Narcissa flooded his vision. Her pale body thrashing atop the cot, glossy blood overspilling his hands, pooling on the floor, marking the curtain, the wall, the equipment, his heart pounding uncontrollably as the red continued to come and come and come—

The image blurred, Narcissa’s visage morphing into another face, pale blue eyes changing shape and color until Harry was staring at a mirror image of his own gaze, auburn hair spilled across the hardwood. The paramedics pulled him away, fingers digging into his flesh as he fought their hold, reaching desperately for his mother—
He rolled his shoulders back, blinking rapidly as he fought against the memories’ hold. The images slowly faded into a murky fog, but a single voice lingered behind, steady and determined.

“...when I find the person responsible no courtroom or prison cell will be able to protect them from me.”

Harry lifted his chin. “You made some very powerful enemies when you killed the Malfoys. Do you really think your employer will protect you from the fallout?”

The Janitor remained unmoved. Harry wet his lips, unsure if the man’s silence boded good or bad but charging ahead with single-minded focus. “What will they do when they find out your target escaped? That you let him escape?”

“I’m not known for following the rules.”

Despite the flippancy of the man’s responses, Harry suspected he’d struck a nerve at long last. "Why did you do it? Why let him go?"

The Janitor’s smile never wavered, but it appeared more strained than moments before. “So we could meet properly, of course.”

“Could’ve just invited me out for chips and a pint.”

“I get bashful.”

“I can see that.”

The assassin’s eyes shimmered like smokey quartz. Their brilliance was unnatural. Unsettling.

“This ensures everything stays civilized,” the Janitor continued, gaze flickering past Harry’s shoulder. “You won’t risk the safety of your asset. Or your team.”

Harry shifted, a subtle attempt to block view of the car. The killer at his front saw right through the gesture, laughing anew. Harry felt the reins slipping from his grasp. Or perhaps they’d never been there at all. Control was merely an illusion, like this entire conversation.

So he threw his last shred of caution to the wind, veering off-road on a powerful hunch.

“You’re a young man. Obviously skilled and highly intelligent. You have your whole life ahead of you. Why devote the rest of it to killing strangers? Letting someone else pull your strings, dictate your every move, every breath? Don’t you get sick of being controlled? Knowing your life could end at the will of the people pulling your strings?”

The Janitor’s eyes flickered, grin slowly fading.

Victory tasted sweet.

Got you, fucker.

The grass swayed in a gentle breeze as clouds rolled by, sunlight dancing across the field in tendrils.

“You appear no older,” he finally replied, voice carefully measured. “Skilled, intelligent, walking the path of truth and justice, following the law to the letter and obeying every command. Every assignment chosen for you. Every target selected. And here you stand. In the same field as the man you’ve been sent to hunt. With a gun hidden behind your back.” His eyes burned bright. Harry’s heartbeat slowed. “I don’t see how we’re that different, you and I. Besides the fact your killings have
earned you a pretty medal.”

“I don’t kill the innocent,” Harry stated without pause, blood pounding in his ears.

“The innocent are far beneath my organization’s concern. But you already knew that. Surely you’ve built extensive profiles on past targets.”

“It’s your future targets I’m most focused on.” Harry stepped forward, drawn by the force of his curiosity. “Why did you get out of the van? Why this burning desire to meet with me?”

“I’d call it more of a general curiosity than burning desire, but I appreciate the poetic flourish.”

“Crouch is still breathing because you want something. Something worth risking the wrath of your employer. Worth risking your life.” He inched forward with every word. “Something you think I’m capable of giving you.” Only five feet stood between them now. “So tell me what it is.”

The Janitor remained eerily still, a statue in the garden, weeds and ivy growing over the side. “I merely wanted to meet the man leading the charge for my head.”

Harry blinked, air deflating from his lungs. He settled back on his heels, tension uncoiling. “Well, now we’ve met.” Disappointment colored his voice, the sting of failure burning his lungs, scorching every breath. “What now?”

A beat.

“Now, we depart to our vehicles and continue on with our merry little lives.”

“I won’t stop hunting you,” Harry vowed, abandoning all sense and reason with both hands.

The Janitor remained unphased. “I’d expect no less.”

“The next time we meet, it won’t be this cordial.”

“Will always have Lancashire.”

Harry’s gaze shifted to the van beyond his control. He could feel eyes upon him, skin crawling with the sensation.

She was in there.

Fuck he wanted her. More than he’d ever wanted anything. But he forced his attention ahead. The Janitor watched him steadily, seeming to read the visceral hunger in his eyes, his next words confirming as much.

“I’ll tell her you said Hi.”

Harry’s fists rested heavily at his sides. "I'll be telling her myself very soon."

The Janitor’s laughter was low and deep, filled with genuine delight.

And then he started back away.

Harry did the same.

They kept eyes on each other, staying carefully apprised of every movement. Until at last the assassin turned on his heel, laughter echoing back as he shook his head and proceeded to the van, not
bothering to cast a parting glance. Harry knew because he kept his eyes fixed upon the retreating figure— and the black 9mm tucked into his waistband— refusing to fall victim to his own pride and stupidity.

He didn’t break focus until his back hit the stone wall, requiring his full attention to surmount. Once his feet hit the grass he crossed to the car in a numb stupor. The engine was still on, its steady purr radiating into his bones as he opened the door and folded into the seat, only to realize he’d been holding his breath for nearly a minute. He inhaled sharply, waking from his dream. Voices filtered in, muffled and distant, then stunningly clear.

“Bloody hell, Potter! Are you insane? Why didn't you kill him?”

Harry dragged a hand over his face, then leaned forward to extract the Barretta from his back, checking the safety before depositing it into the glove compartment. “If either of us pulled our weapon it would have been a blood bath.”

“They tried to kill me!”

Harry glanced up. The Janitor was gone, but the van remained. “They let you live.”

Crouch began to speak again but Luna cut him off, voice calm and firm. “Are you alright?”

Harry blinked, the question taking him off guard. He met her serene gaze, nodding shortly. “Yeah.”

She held his eye, both hands tight on the wheel. “What did you learn?”

He opened his mouth but promptly closed it after catching sight of the seething agent in his peripheral. "I'll debrief you and Nev when we have privacy. Crouch can't be trusted."

“I'm sitting right here!”

“We’re all painfully aware.”

His gaze flickered ahead. The van hadn’t moved. The hair along his nape stood on end. They were watching him.

“Let’s go.”

Luna faced forward, reaching for the gear shift. “Where to?”

Harry leaned back, carding a hand through his hair as his stomach twisted. “Somewhere I can get a decent burger.”

She smirked, stepping on the gas and propelling them forward. “I think I can manage that.”

Hermione leaned forward, nearly crawling onto the center console as she fixated on the scene ahead. “What do you think they’re talking about?” She whispered, as though the agent could hear her through the van and thirty yards of distance.

Bella propped her knee against the dash, idly picking her nails. “I’m a dab hand at reading lips— but I can’t see Tommy’s pretty face.” She tilted her head, eyes locked on the clearing. “Luckily, you two love birds share a psychic connection. Surely you can channel him in your mind?”

Hermione let the quip pass, too rattled to care. Her fingertips pressed along the cracks in the leather upholstery. “What will he do?” Her eyes darted to the female assassin. “Green,” she clarified.
“I’ve honestly no idea, kitten. Beyond the basic knowledge it won’t be pleasant.”

Hermione released a trembling breath, forcing the words free. “Will he kill us?”

Bella dropped back, manic laughter erupting from her throat. “Green kill his beloved?” Her voice turned sharp, edged in bitterness. “He wouldn’t give that boy a hangnail. And he’s had ample opportunity to kill you before today. Obviously, he has specific designs for your future.” She licked her lips, eyes gleaming. "Me on the other hand… I hold no such value to him. Never have."

Hermione’s brow knitted together. “With everything that happened, I forgot to thank you.”

The assassin blinked, eyes snapping sideways. Hermione’s pulse skipped, palms itching beneath the intensity of her dark gaze. “For pushing me out of the way,” she continued tentatively, feeling inexplicably foolish. "You saved my life. Thank you."

Wind swept over the van, whistling in its wake. Bella smiled. “Tommy wasn’t lying, Rab was a terrible shot. I doubt his bullet would have struck anything vital.”

“I consider not getting shot pretty vital.”

“I made you a promise, dove. And I always keep my word.” She leaned into the door, tilting her body to face Hermione and the windshield. “Besides, you’d have done the same for me.”

Hermione paled, squirming in place as Bella’s smile deepened, dark eyes casting to the field. “Isn’t he simply divine?”

Hermione blinked, confused for several seconds before following the assassin's gaze, focusing on the men once more. They seemed to be standing closer than she remembered. Tom's gun caught the sunlight, glimmering in his waistband, causing her nerves to sizzle and snap. "I assume you're referring to the agent."

Bella responded with a low hum.

Hermione leaned in, bracing the console and focusing on Tom. “How do you know him?”

“We’ve yet to be properly acquainted.” Bella’s smile was hungry, a sinister longing Hermione was starting to recognize. "Which I intend to fix at the first available opportunity."

And then the men shifted apart, earning both of their undivided attention. Hermione’s breath quickened, body rigid with fear as Tom started backing up slowly. The agent followed suit, their movements carefully measured, eyes fixed steadily upon the man opposite. It reminded her of the black and white westerns she’d seen as a child, cowboys counting their paces before drawing their guns, the town gathered to watch in front of the saloon.

Tom remained tense, his clipped mannerisms easily discernible to her eyes despite his carefully crafted mask of amusement. Something had upset him. The prospect terrified her, and yet provided a blessed distraction from her fear the agent would pull the weapon he undoubtedly concealed behind his back. And then, to her great consternation, Tom turned away from the man, facing the van and continuing ahead. She clutched the seat with both hands, mouth agape.

“Relax, kitten. My Lamb would never shoot his adversary in the back.”

Hermione blinked, head snapping round. Bella’s gaze was fixed upon the officer as he reversed towards the stone wall.
And then Tom was at the van, long legs making easy work of the field. She released her breath in a rush as he opened the door and slid inside. She gripped his arm, mindful of his wound, desperate to feel him against her skin, proof he was real, proof this wasn’t some vivid fantasy of a traumatized mind. Hermione started to speak but the other woman beat her to it.

“Did he ask about me?”

Tom rolled his eyes, starting up the engine. “He did.”

Bella surged forward. “What did he say? Tell me everything.”

He shook his head, making no move to put the van into gear. Instead, he loosened Hermione’s death grip from his arm and placed her palm to his mouth, hot breath billowing against her skin as he pressed his lips to its center. Her pulse spiked, vision clouding. And then he released her, responding casually.

“He wants you dead.”

Bella bounced in her seat, squealing like a child at the amusement park. “He said that? Those were his exact words?”

“He didn’t need to say it. I read the bloodlust in his eyes.”

She collapsed into her seat, gaze clouded with desire. “His eyes… they’re utterly magnificent, aren’t they?”

Tom watched the car back away from the stone wall. Hermione shifted anxiously, sensing the lingering tension in his body. “What happened?” She hedged carefully.

He tilted his head as the smaller vehicle rounded the hillside, disappearing from view. “I made a new friend.” He shifted gears, pulling forward. “And we have approximately three hours to get our story straight.”

Hermione blinked. And then fell back into her seat, realization pressing hard upon her chest. “For Green,” she whispered.

He turned the wheel, guiding the van around the hill they’d just descended. “We’re going to follow your advice.”

“My advice?”

Bella smiled, glancing back. “Holding out on me, kitten?”

Hermione shook her head, at a loss. Tom met her confused gaze in the rearview mirror. “There’s only one way to lie to him,” he stated simply.

She released a slow breath, the memory taking root in her mind, dark tendrils wrapping her tight as she spoke the thought aloud. “We tell him the truth.”

Harry balled his napkin and tossed it onto his half-empty plate. Luna sat beside him, swirling her fry through a pool of honey mustard before taking a dainty bite. The jukebox changed tracks with a soft click, Buddy Holly’s voice mingling with the low murmur of conversation from surrounding diners.

Crouch reached across the table with a grunt, nearly smacking Neville in the head as he grabbed the vinegar. He shook the bottle vigorously, face still a blotchy red from his cross-country sprint. Neville
glanced between their plates, nursing a mug of lemon tea between hands. “I don’t understand how any of you can eat right now.”

Harry shrugged, pushing his plate to the edge of the table for the waitress to grab. “Road trips make me hungry. And I skipped breakfast.” His eyes narrowed on the opposite side of the booth. “I wasn’t planning on visiting the countryside this morning.” The Senior Officer held his gaze with open contempt, taking a hearty bite of his burger and chewing loudly. Harry rolled his eyes. “Alright, Crouch. Start talking.”

“I need a moment,” the man mumbled around his mouthful, bits of food flecking the table as Neville cringed back. “I’ve just been through a deeply traumatic experience.”

“You’ve had a moment—”

The waitress appeared suddenly, grabbing Harry’s discarded plate with a smile. “Cherry pie?” She asked, lifting her other arm to reveal picture-perfect slice with a dollop of cream on top.

“Over here.” Crouch raised his hand, ketchup marring his chin. She nodded, carefully setting the plate in front of him before turning on her heel.

Harry watched as the man grabbed up his fork and began tucking in. “Bloody hell.”

“Oi!” Crouch snapped. “I burned ten thousand calories running up that goddamn hill!”

Harry leaned back, crossing his arms as the agent demolished the dessert, speaking through each bite.

“I need to be in witness protection, Potter. I need round the clock security detail, armed officers and a private driver—”

"Dumbledore is arranging a safe house. You'll have on-site security, but you're mad if you think you'll be allowed to set foot outside."

The fork slipped from the agent’s hand, hitting the plate with a loud clank. “Dumbledore?” He swallowed his bite in a convulsive gulp. “He knows then.”

Harry raised a dark brow. “As much as I do. But you’re going to fill in the gaps. Starting now.”

Crouch took a steadying breath, gripping the edge of the table. “How did you find out?”

“We traced your son’s account at Janus Thickey. We know they’ve been flipping the bill.”

The man’s pallor turned grey. “Junior… is my son in danger?”

"He’s in no more danger than your mother, who you seemed perfectly content to leave in the company of assassins this morning."

Crouch’s fear dissolved away in a flash of white-hot anger. "I knew they wouldn't harm her!"

Harry cocked his head, gaze unrelenting. “Did you now?”

The staring contest commenced. Luna idly sipped her lemonade, tapping a foot against the floor as though counting down the seconds. Her blue eyes remained on the senior officer, serene and inescapable.

Crouch looked away first, face flushed. “I did this for the right reasons.”
“The right reasons?” Harry’s fists dropped to the plastic place setting. “There’s a *right* reason for betraying your family, badge and nation?”

“Cut the sanctimonious bullshite, I’m trying to eat my pie.” As if to prove his point, Crouch snatched up his fork and stuffed another heaping bite of fruit filling into his gob.

Harry pounded his hands on the table, rattling the plates and glasses. Neville jumped, steadying his tea with a quiet yelp while Luna tilted her head, nibbling another fry.

“You’re in deep shite, Crouch. And I’m not just talking about the people sent to kill you. The Ministry will be out for your blood now, too. You’re a traitor to your own government. You’re lucky execution is out of fashion.”

Crouch rolled his eyes, stuffing another forkful past his lips.

“The only way to help yourself is to help us,” Harry continued, voice low and menacing. “You’re only way out of this mess is through me.”

Crouch threw his fork down, face twisting into a sour sneer. “The whipped cream is off.” He pushed the pie aside, nearly dumping it in Neville’s lap.

Harry leaned forward, eyes bright and determined. “Who are they?”

“It isn’t safe to talk here,” Crouch hissed.

Harry’s remained frozen, refusing to budge. “Tell me what happened in the woods.”

“You heard everything over a live feed!”

Neville glanced around nervously as a few nearby patrons peered their way, eyes drawn by the commotion.

“Keep your voice down,” Harry warned, the urge to leap the table and throttle the bastard making his entire body quake. “You said one of the women saw you.”

Crouch squirmed, the pleather seat groaning beneath his arse. "Yes. But clearly, I was mistaken."

Harry wasn’t so sure. “How many were there total?”

The agent sighed heavily, face stricken with resignation. “Four. Two men, two women.”

“Did you hear any names?”

A loaded pause.

Crouch’s eyes darted to the bar, limbs fidgeting anxiously. Harry’s heart soared, body pressing forward until the table began to skid back, pushing into the men on the other side.

“What did you hear?”

The man gulped audibly, throat bobbing high beneath his sweat-stained collar. His jaw worked silently for several moments before he spoke, voice barely above a whisper.

“*Tom.*”

Harry grasped the edge of the table, hands trembling. “You’re certain?”
Crouch nodded tightly, gazing forward once more. “I heard one of the women shout it.”

Harry released a slow breath. “Do you know which man?”

Crouch started to shake his head.

Unacceptable.

“Think!”

The agent scowled. “I was a bit distracted with running for my life after you lot left me stranded and defenseless!”

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose, doing his best to tame his rising ire. And then his phone chimed, breaking his concentration. He tore it from his pocket, already knowing the message it contained. He read the text anyway, the glowing screen reflecting brightly in his emerald gaze.

“Dumbledore is ready for us.”

Crouch pulled at his collar, sweat beading along his temples. "Potter…”

Luna took the napkin from her lap, wiping her hands clean. Harry glanced up, meeting the officer’s desperate gaze.

“I’m not a villain. I wasn’t out to hurt anyone.” He leaned in, voice strained. “Please. Help me.”

The air grew stale with tension. Harry reached for his wallet. “We’ll finish this discussion at the safehouse. With Dumbledore in attendance.” He pulled free a stack of crumpled notes. “Better get your pie to go.”

Hermione wiped her palms atop her thighs, jeans stiff with dried mud, and then pushed the hair from her face, mortified by what she must look like. She glanced sideways at her traveling companions to better gauge her own appearance, only to cringe.

*We look like we survived a spelunking accident.*

She gazed around warily, worried someone would spot them and call authorities. But the opulent street was barren except for a couple walking their dog at the far end, engrossed in each other’s company. Her gaze lingered on the pair as the gleaming door of Tom’s building was pulled open, the elderly man on the other side smiling brightly as the trio made their way inside.

“Ah, Mr. Gaunt, good evening to you and your guests, Sir.”

Hermione tucked a curl behind her ear, flushing as a dried leaf fell free. Tom reached down, taking her hand in his as he led her across the threshold, their fingers interlaced. She could feel the dried blood on his palm.

“Good evening, Mr. Finnbar,” he replied cordially, fake grin in place. His voice was cheery and hollow, like a radio announcer.

She wanted to slap him.

Hermione blinked, shocked by her own violent musing.

*What the hell was that?*
Her stomach clenched tight as she pulled her hand from his grasp, pressing it to her middle. Tom’s shoulders stiffened, gaze snapping down in obvious surprise. But Hermione kept her eyes fixed firmly ahead, counting the steps to the elevator.

Bella broke through the mounting tension with a skip and a laugh, pushing the lift button before launching her hand into the air. “Dibs on the shower!”

Tom released Hermione from his thrall to focus on the female assassin. “I don’t think so.”

Bella smirked, leaning against the wall and picking a stray twig from her braid. “Alright, we’ll share, if memory serves correct it’s plenty big enough for us all.”

“You’re only staying until Green arrives. Out in the open, where I can see you.”

She sighed dramatically, stepping towards Hermione. “Always so boring after a mission. Such a waste.” And rested her chin on Hermione’s shoulder.

The doors dinged open.

Hermione surged forward, desperate to distance herself from them both, rattled by the overwhelming need for privacy, this rising panic festering in her gut. Tom followed a step behind, gaze raking across her skin like a physical touch. Bella entered last, rocking on her heels as the doors shut. Hermione watched the woman play with her braid, removing the elastic band and unwinding the dark strands with nimble fingers. Classical music emanated from above, shrouding the scene with a veil of normalcy that only perturbed her more.

Tom released a heavy sigh, tilting his head back and closing his eyes before lifting a hand to his neck, rubbing his nape with a quiet groan. Hermione jolted when his other palm pressed her lower spine, large and warm, running along her back until reaching her hair. His fingers snaked through her curls, wrapping the back of her neck and kneading the muscles in the same manner he massaged his own.

She bit her lip to contain her moan of pleasure, skin heating as she felt the tell-tale sensation of his eyes upon her. She glanced up warily, meeting his charged gaze and reading the question contained within, releasing a slow breath and nodding silently. His fingers slid into her hair once more, blunt nails raking her scalp before sliding around to her face, palm cupping her cheek as his thumb swept across her lips.

The elevator rocked to a stop, pulling her from the dream-state his touch induced. The doors slid open, his hand fell away as Bella skipped into the narrow hall leading to his door. He gestured Hermione forward, following a pace behind. The tension in her muscles had all but dissipated, the sudden dread that seized her in the lobby reduced to a faint echo.

Bella reached the door, reaching for the handle—

“Stop,” Tom snapped, grey eyes darting ahead.

Hermione halted in her tracks, heart jolting as his body slipped into its lethal repose, shoulders squared and fists clenched. Bella seemed to undergo a similar transformation, expression lit with a bright enthusiasm that could only mean something truly horrible lied beyond the barrier.

Tom stepped in front of Hermione, elbowing Bella aside before gripping the knob tight, turning it slowly. It didn’t appear to be locked. Hermione paled, stepping back as the female assassin shifted, blocking her path to the doorway. Tom swung the barrier wide, braced for impact. She held her breath, desperate to close her eyes but forcing them to remain open, terrified of what would be
revealed. But all she could see were the tops of his windows.

And then she heard a voice, worst fears confirmed.

“No need to linger in the hallway. You must be exhausted, please do come in.”

Tom eased from his fighting stance, but his fists remained. “Inviting me into my own flat, how very generous.”

Hermione edged forward, caught between terror and relief, grabbing Tom’s arm and peering over his shoulder. Green came into view, seated upon a chair beside the couch facing the door. His grin tugged higher as his pale gaze fixed upon her.

“Oh, Hermione, splendid to see you, my dear. Do come in. Sit. Relax.”

Bella slid past Tom’s other side, casually pacing inside. “I think I will.”

Green’s eyes flickered, brow lifting. “Bella. How delightful you should all be together.” His smile gleamed like a knife.

Hermione swallowed tightly.

*He knows.*

She fought back a shudder, feeling the tension in Tom’s arm. But Bella seemed to harbor none of their apprehension, sprawling across the couch on her stomach and kicking her mud-caked boots back and forth like a child, face resting in her hands.

Green paid the female assassin no mind, keen gaze affixed to the doorway. “And will Rabastan be joining us?”

Tom lifted his chin, face carved from stone. “No.”

Green tilted his head. “Didn’t feel like joining the after party?”

“He’s dead.”

The handler’s smile never wavered. “The target killed him?”

Tom released the door frame, crossing his arms.

Green nodded slowly. “I see.” He leaned back, glancing to Bella and back again. “And which of you had the pleasure of terminating the target?”

Tom held his eye for another tenuous beat before stepping inside, waiting for Hermione to enter behind him and closing the door.

Green perched his elbows on the armrests, fingers steepled before lips. “My, my. What an interesting turn of events. I’m positively riveted to hear the fantastical farce you contrived on the journey home.”

“No farce. Only the truth.”

“As always, I’ll be the judge of that.”

Tom held himself so still he barely seemed to breathe. “The target escaped into agent custody while I was preoccupied with killing Rab.”
Green blinked, hands dropping. “There was an agent on sight?”

Tom eyed the man carefully. “Your source didn’t tell you?” The corner of his mouth lifted. “Something you didn’t already know. Will balloons be dropping now or later?”

Hermione cringed.

Green did a much better job of hiding his displeasure. “A minor oversight. I was detained with cleaning up Bella’s colorful escapades in Vienna. I won’t allow it to happen again.”

The woman in question twirled a strand of black hair around her finger, though her eyes remained carefully averted. Seeing the assassin chastised was perhaps the most bizarre thing Hermione had witnessed all day.

“Now, you’re going to tell me exactly what happened.” Green continued, gaze hardening to diamond points. “The truth. So I may twist it into a lie that will satisfy our superiors and keep our heads off the chopping block.”

Tom stepped forward, lips parting. His handler shook his head. “No. Not from you.” His jade stare cut to Hermione, pinning her in place. “I want Ms. Granger to tell me.”

She rocked back, hands twitching at her sides. She clenched them tight, stripped bare beneath his penetrating gaze. “Rabastan turned the gun on Bella,” she started slowly, thoughts rapidly scattering. “Then Tom. But they were still intent on seeing the mission through until–” She blinked, heart skipping painfully at her misstep.

Shite.

Green’s eyes glowed from within, allowing no reprieve. “Until?”

She took a deep breath, holding it for a three-count and releasing it in a torrent of words. “Until Rabastan turned the gun on me… and Tom lost control.”

Tom glanced at her sharply as Bella released a shrill peal of laughter. The last part hadn't been planned or rehearsed in the van. But Hermione knew the handler would dissect her lies with ease. Truth was their only weapon. Their only chance. She forged ahead, baring her throat and shielding her heart.

“He beat Rabastan to a pulp.” She wet her lips, forcing her hands to loosen. “And then shot him. Bella stuck around. Which was fortunate since she saved me from getting shot.” She met the woman's dark gaze for a tense second before continuing. “By the time we got into the van and caught up with the target he was already with the agent. A stone impediment prevented us from giving chase.”

Hermione inhaled sharply, swaying in place as silence encased the expansive room. All eyes were affixed to Green, awaiting his final verdict. But the handler’s gaze remained steadfast on Hermione, holding her immobile. And then he blinked, the malevolent gleam in his irises fading as though a dial was being turned down.

But nothing unsettled her quite as much as the smile he bestowed her with. “What a harrowing tale. I’m terribly sorry your first mission resulted in such internal sabotage.” His fingers drummed along the armrest. “And I am deeply relieved to see you made it through the ordeal unscathed.”

Hermione’s lips parted but no words came, thoughts scrambled to high hell.
Green sighed, crossing his legs and straightening the front of his jacket. “Rabastan was always a loose cannon, then his addiction turned him painfully predictable, a rather nauseating cliché.”

“You knew this would happen,” Tom scathed, then shook his head in disgust. “Of course you did.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I had no idea he’d threaten Hermione’s life.” The handler picked a piece of invisible lint from his lapel. “I’d merely hoped.”

Tom rocked in place, color rising.

Green studied his nails without care. "Rabastan has been a thorn in our side for some time now. We've been meaning to terminate his contract but feared his brother would catch wind of our plan and warn him. Being eliminated on assignment was the simplest remedy."

“He could have killed one of us!”

Green peered up at last, hands calmly folding atop his abdomen. “I knew you’d never allow such a tragic event to befall you or your team. You take too much pride in your work.” He tilted his head, studying his charge at an angle. “And I knew if he turned his wrath on Hermione you wouldn’t hesitate to end it.”

Tom crossed his arms once more. "I'm thrilled I could do your dirty work for you. As always."

“Don’t get smart with me. Letting your target escape is unacceptable.”

“I was preoccupied with putting down the rabid dog you saddled us with!”

“We both know you've completed assignments with far greater obstacles in your path. If you wanted the target dead, he'd be dead.”

Tom’s chest heaved, nostrils flaring as he visibly fought whatever demon was clawing beneath his skin. “Why would I let him go?”

“Why indeed?”

The men continued to glare, each so still Hermione shifted her weight just to ensure time hadn’t stopped.

Bella rolled onto her back with a groan, dark hair overspilling the cushion. “I detest when you boys have your staring contests. Makes us girls feel terribly left out.”

Green continued to watch Tom as he addressed the couch. “You shoulder the same burden of blame, my dear. You’ve never let a target escape either. How fortuitous you should both break your perfect records on the same assignment.”

She sat up, hair a tousled mess. “I was busy keeping the kitten alive.”

“I know exactly what you were busy doing.” He looked away from Tom at long last, but his focus wasn’t on Bella. “The only one I’m not grossly disappointed in is Hermione.”

Hermione blinked, blood draining from her head in a powerful rush that left her staggering. She remained upright through the intensity of his gaze alone.

“Did he see any of your faces?” The handler asked, the question so unexpected her mind couldn’t fabricate the proper lie.
She chewed her lip, trying to bide her time, knowing full well what the truth would mean for their target. “No,” she whispered, praying for a wormhole to open in space-time and suck her through.

She paled at Tom’s heavy sigh. She hadn’t told him about the brief encounter in the woods, telling herself there simply hadn’t been the right opportunity. But deep down, she knew the truth.

She feared he’d change his mind about letting the target live.

Green cut her clean through with his next words. “Well done, Tom. Your genius play at freedom just landed Hermione on MI6’s Most Wanted list. What a miraculous feat she made it there before you.”

She stepped towards Tom, worrying her hands. “I’m so sorry—”

“No need to apologize, darling,” Green interrupted, stopping her in her tracks. “The fault lies with my errant children. Not you. It was their duty to see this mission through.”

Bella scooted to the edge of the couch, bouncing in place as though trying to garner his attention. “For the record, I wanted to run him over.”

“The road to hell is paved with such endearing sentiments.” His eyes remained on Tom. “Your way to freedom is through me and me alone. The Ministry will whisper sweet nothings in your ear only to throw you into a deep dark hole to rot and die.”

Tom stood straighter, jaw clenching convulsively. “I’m not working with those bastards.” He reached into his coat. Hermione held her breath, terror seizing her by the throat as he withdrew a matte black object. “I let the target escape so I could get this.”

She blinked, vision hazed, but realized a moment later it wasn’t a gun.

Green eyed the piece of plastic with boredom. “And what, pray tell, is that?”

“It’s known as a phone, a modern communication device developed several eons after the Bronze Age—”

“Hilarious. Are you telling me you would have been otherwise unable to obtain the phone off your target’s corpse?”

“It would be useless if he were dead. This will lead us to the agent tracking us across the bloody globe, and he’ll lead us to whoever’s heading the charge.” Tom lifted his chin, voice laced with smug satisfaction. “Crouch is merely a drop in the bucket. I’m after the source of the flood.”

Green’s expression revealed little, but his eyes seemed to darken. “Well done.”

Tom smirked.

“Assuming you’re actually capable of pulling it off.”

Tom’s lips flattened, hackles rising. “I am.”

“We’ll see.” Green stood swiftly, buttoning the front his jacket in a seamless motion. “You have twenty-four hours.”

Tom blinked, arm dropping to his side, phone gripped tight.

Green straightened his cufflinks. "Ministry procedure is to secure compromised assets in a safe house for twenty-four hours before moving them to a more secure and permanent location. The target will
be untouchable at that point.” The handler stepped forward, radiating a powerful energy that drew focus like a gravitational force. "So you have one day to fix this mess. To eliminate the target and bring me the name of the person responsible for my recent string of migraines." He stopped just before his charge, their gazes level. "No more loopholes. No more allowances. I want this finished, Tom. Nice and clean. If you defy me again, I will make good on my promise regarding Ms. Granger's fate."

Hermione pressed a hand to her neck, pulse thrumming beneath her fingertips.

Tom looked homicidal, eye clouding with black smoke. “I’ll take care of it,” he growled.

“You’ll all take care of it. Given the time-frame you have to work within you’ll need all hands on deck.” And then he glanced over his shoulder with a smile. “Good evening, Ms. Granger. I apologize for having to reinstate my threat on your life. I assure you, it isn’t personal.”

She swallowed, feeling the motion against her palm. “Of course not.”

His pale gaze moved to the couch. “Bella. You and I will be chatting soon.”

She rolled her eyes, sprawling back. “Can’t wait.”

The handler turned to Tom, exchanging another loaded glance before exiting the flat, taking all the breathable air with him. Hermione collapsed into the nearest chair, curling in on herself as the events of the day came crashing down all at once. Tom carded a hand through his hair, appearing equally harried.

Bella watched them with open amusement, folding her hands behind her head and propping her boots on the edge of the coffee table. “Well. Looks like I’ll be taking that shower after all.”

His eyes cut to her. “Later. Get me Reggie’s number.”

She lifted a dark brow, lips curving with delight. "Oh, I do love when the old band gets together.”

Hermione slowly unfolded, glancing between them with guarded eyes. “Who’s Reggie?”

Harry unfastened his seatbelt as they pulled out of the trees and off the gravel path, the cabin coming into view at long last. Two black sedans were already parked in front, windows tinted dark, revealing their ownership at once.

Crouch shifted forward, grabbing the back of Harry’s seat as Luna pulled to a stop.

“You have got to be kiddi–”

Harry opened his door and leaped free, slamming it shut on the second half of Crouch’s bitching. He started for the front, drawing up short as the door swiftly opened, a man appearing in the frame.

“Dean,” Harry stated, blinking twice.

Dean hesitated in the doorway, eyes wide. “Detective Potter–“ His jaw snapped shut with a click. “Sorry, I… habit.”

Harry nodded, tucking his hands into his pockets and edging forward. “No worries. It’s good to see a familiar face.” The man nodded in turn, awkward silence swelling. Harry sighed. “About Mungo’s… I’m–”
“It’s alright. I know that—” Dean opened and closed his mouth, shaking his head.

They held each other's gaze for another suffocating beat before laughing shortly. Harry stepped onto the porch. “I hope they didn’t drag you into this mess as punishment.”

Dean raised a brow. “What mess?”

“You weren’t debriefed?”

“They just said the asset would be meeting us here, priority level one. Is it related to the Malfoy case?”

“The same people are chasing—”

The car door opened, a new voice shaking the leaves and grating Harry's nerves. "Jesus Christ, look at this place! There are more termites than wood!"

Dean’s eyes flared. “Crouch?”

Luna and Neville trailed behind the idiot as he trudged up the rotting steps. “This is despicable, Potter! It already looks like a murder cabin, how the hell is this considered a safe house?"

“What can I say, I’m a fan of The Evil Dead, now shut up and get inside.”

Crouch scowled, knocking shoulders as he passed and nearly barrelling through Dean as he entered.

Harry shook his head, eyeing the younger officer with open remorse. “Sorry, mate.”

Dean rubbed the back of his neck, peering over his shoulder into the darkened interior. “I better get inside, we’re not supposed to let him out of our sight.”

“In that case, I’m really sorry.”

The man smirked, meeting his gaze. “Can’t be worse than the week I spent belly down under armored tanks in Syria.”

“The ceiling is leaking!” Crouch shouted from the next room. “There’s not even any rain! There had better be indoor plumbing, I want to take a bath!”

“Nevermind,” Dean muttered. “This is much worse.”

“It’s only for a day,” Harry consoled.

“I’ll be counting every second.”

Dean slipped inside. Harry turned to the pair lingering on the porch. “Do you guys want to wait in the car?”

“Yes,” Neville said immediately, overlaid by Luna’s equally assertive “No.”

They glanced at each other. Neville flushed. “Erm… I mean, it’ll be good to stretch my legs.”

Luna smiled brightly, causing his blush to deepen. Harry eyed them with amusement. “In that case, do you mind doing a perimeter sweep? Make note of any weak spots, possible points of entry and so on. They found this place last minute, I want to make sure it’s fortified.”
The blonde nodded with enthusiasm. “On it.”

Neville followed her off the porch and around the side of the building. Harry took a steadying breath and entered the cabin, floorboards creaking with every step. He followed Crouch’s incessant voice into the den where Dean stood silent guard at the boarded window. Water stains marked the popcorn ceiling, a cloudy grey liquid dripping steadily into a bucket positioned beside a wicker rocking chair.

Crouch shook his head, rounding on him at once. “Fucking hell, Potter! A heavy sneeze could blow these walls down!”

“The three little pigs made it work, so can you.”

“Let me stay in a hotel~”

“Hotels are brimming with guests and staff.”

“The rooms have one door and the windows are sealed!”

Harry's face pursed in supreme annoyance. "The point of a safe house is to keep a low profile, away from the public eye. Or have you forgotten your training along with your ethics?"

Color rose high in the agent’s cheeks, eyes burning with resentment. “I’m tired. I want to lie down. Preferably on a mattress no one was murdered on.”

Dean nodded, stepping free from the wall. “I think we have one of those lying around here somewhere. Follow me.”

He led them into the hall and past a few open doorways, including the kitchen. Harry peeked in, spotting two officers seated at a small table, cards strewn before them, weapons fastened to their hips.

“Will all three of you be stationed here tonight?” Harry asked, glancing forward.

“Yes. Esposito will walk the perimeter, Collins and I will guard the interior.”

Harry wet his lips, shoulders tightening. “Can you call anyone else in?”

Dean slowed his pace, glancing back. “They said three was more than enough.”

Harry held his gaze, fighting to keep his voice casual. “Better to be prepared.”

The officer seemed to read the disquiet in his eyes, nodding slowly. “I’ll call around, see if anyone is in the area.”

Harry felt his chest deflate at the assurance. They traveled another few feet before reaching a closed door at the end of the narrow hall, heavy scratches marring the wood.

“How’s your master suite,” Dean announced cheerily, reaching for the knob.

Crouch’s lip curled back. “Somehow I doubt either of those words are accurate.”

The officer opened the door, then flattened against the wall as Crouch elbowed past, charging headlong into the room. But he barely made it past the threshold before staggering to a halt, rearing back as though struck.

Harry’s adrenaline surged, fear overtaking his senses as he darted inside, defenses at the ready. And then he spotted the room’s third occupant, relief crashing overhead.
Dumbledore smiled, hands folded calmly behind his back. “Hello, Bartemius.”

Crouch paled and flushed at the same time, color traveling across his face like a lava lamp. "Albus…” His eyes turned wide and glassy, lost to unbridled panic. "I don't– I didn't– it wasn't–"

“Take a breath, and then take a seat.” Dumbledore’s grin held strong, eyes twinkling in the lamplight. The windows were boarded in this room as well, shadows clinging to every corner. “In fact, I think I’ll join you. My knee has been acting up today.” The Head Agent folded his long limbs gracefully, perching on the edge of the mattress with a low groan, joint popping. The springs squeaked noisily, dust rising from the stained fabric.

But Harry’s focus was drawn back to Crouch as the man clutched his heart, eyes squeezing shut. “I’m having chest pains. I need a hospital.”

Harry rolled his eyes, exchanging an annoyed glance with Dean before facing the ranting idiot. “You’re fine–”

“I am not fine! I have a heart condition, it’s a miracle I didn’t die on the field!”

Harry stepped forward, fists clenched, but was stayed by Dumbledore’s raised palm.

“Officer Thomas,” the Head Agent spoke calmly, though his voice still managed to shake the very walls.

Dean snapped to attention, shoulders back and chin up. “Yes, Sir?”

“Would you mind giving the three of us a moment alone?”

“Of course not, Sir.”

Dean backed away swiftly, exiting the room with one last glance at Harry, eyes brimming with sympathy, before shutting the door.

“Take a seat, Bartemius.”

“Albus, I’m not lying, I think I’m having a heart attack–”

“You’re having an anxiety attack, they are easy to confuse. Have a seat and the feeling will dissipate.”

“I need my pills–”

“I will only ask you one more time, old friend. Then I’m asking Harry to assist you.”

Harry lifted a brow, hunger rising high in his chest, a burning heat that only violence would quench. Crouch opened and closed his mouth like a gaping fish, realization seeming to settle upon him at last. There was no escape.

He trudged forward, each step heavy and ominous as though his ankles were manacled. He sat on the edge of the mattress beside Dumbledore, sweat beading along his temples. He tore free of his trenchcoat with frenzied haste.

“It’s a sauna in here. Please, can we open a window?”

“You know that we cannot,” Dumbledore replied, watching the man struggle to pull his arms out of
the sleeves. “All the windows have been nailed shut for your safety.”

“My safety? It looks like the roof is going to cave on my head!”

“This structure has stood firm for many decades. I am confident it will last one more night.”

Crouch emerged from the straitjacket at last, throwing the garment down with a huff. “Albus–”

“Relax. Catch your breath. I will lead the conversation and strive to make it as simple as possible for you.”

“Please–”

“How long have we known each other, Bartemius?”

Crouch blinked, jaw hanging loose. “Nearly thirty years.”

Dumbledore pivoted to face the man, ankle propped atop his knee. “And how many assignments have we undertaken together in that time?”

Crouch swallowed thickly, chest rapidly deflating. “Hundreds.”

“I remember when you first met Maria, and the day you showed me the ring. The pride in your eyes. And the fear that she’d say no.” Dumbledore tilted his head, gaze inescapable. “I attended your wedding. I was at the hospital the day your son was born. I came to countless birthday parties, karate tournaments and swim meets. I even picked him up from school on days her sessions ran long, so you could stay at her side.”

Crouch’s eyes gleamed. “I remember.”

"I am so sorry you lost her. She was a truly remarkable woman. I have known many in my time, and count her among the kindest, most generous and loving.”

Crouch glanced away. Dumbledore remained undeterred. “The silk gown you chose for her burial was beautiful.”

Crouch wiped his eyes. Harry looked to the floor, shifting awkwardly. It was unnerving to see his former boss in such a state. Vulnerable. Human. The air felt thick against the back of his throat, toxic.

“Do you remember what I told you that day, standing beside her casket?” Dumbledore prompted gently, watching the man closely.

Silence settled upon them, long and suffocating.

"Yes," Crouch finally whispered, eyes still averted.

“I said you could always come to me. For anything. No request was too big. No problem was insurmountable.” Dumbledore leaned in. “Were you already working for them then?”

Crouch closed his eyes, a stray tear spilling free as he nodded miserably.

Dumbledore sighed heavily, reaching across the expanse to grip the man’s shoulder. “My dear friend. Talk to me. Tell me who they are and how they got their hooks into you. Let me help.”

Crouch leaned over, elbows propped atop his knees and wrists pressing his temples, eyes squeezed
tight. “They call themselves The Knights,” he whispered.

Harry’s entire body tensed in anticipation.

Dumbledore stiffened as well, pale gaze turning to ice. "The Knights?" He repeated grimly, gentle tone forgotten.

“They reached out to me,” Crouch continued, lids still closed. “Five years ago. They knew everything about me.”

“They blackmailed you?”

“Worse.” He glanced up, eyes bloodshot. “They offered to pay for Maria’s treatment.”

Dumbledore dropped his hand. Crouch swallowed thickly. "The NHS refused to cover certain procedures, anything deemed experimental, which all of her drug trials were. The out-of-pocket was more than I earned in a year. Even with a raise, my Ministry salary couldn't make a dent. I had no choice."

Harry stepped away from the wall. “You can’t blame the NHS for selling off our national security.”

Crouch whipped his head around, gaze narrowed. “I don’t blame NHS. I blame the British Government. And I was happy to turn my back on them if it meant protecting my family, the family they were content to see broken apart.”

“Tell me about Barty,” Dumbledore prompted, voice patient and calm once more.

"After Maria died I couldn't manage him alone. His condition only worsened, therapy was having no effect, and after a particularly violent episode, he was expelled. With his reputation, no school in the area would have him." He scrubbed a hand over his mouth. "Once the paranoid delusions started the doctors told me he couldn't be left alone. Said he was a danger to himself and others." A hissing sigh escaped his lips, eyes fixed upon a cigarette burn in the carpet. "I didn't want to send him away. He's my flesh. My blood. My boy. All I have left of her."

His voice turned hollow, haunted. “But I didn't know what else to do. I was terrified I’d come home to find him dead. Or arrested for some horrific crime. He didn't…” A tense beat. His hands clenched between his knees. “They contacted me out of the blue, told me about Janus Thickey, even sent me brochures. The price was outrageous but they said they’d handle it.” He glanced up, expression wrought. “They even made an anonymous donation to have a pool built. They knew Barty loves to swim.” Crouch laughed miserably, rubbing his brow. “They knew everything.” He glanced sideways at last. “I would do anything for my wife and son, Albus. Anything.”

Dumbledore held his gaze, posture pristine. “What information did they want in return?”

Crouch’s eyes shuttered. “They just wanted to know what conversations were being had. Big picture type stuff.”

“Specific about Russia?”

Harry’s heart stuttered. He leaned forward, hanging on every word.

“No. Not specific. Though the agent who first approached me was Russian. I think. It was so long ago.” Crouch shook his head, rubbing the back of his neck as he stared at the floor between his feet. “All they wanted was inside gossip. Agent whereabouts, big projects, any dealings happening off the books. I figured they were selling it off to competing governments, organizations wanting to outshine
us on hot button issues. You know how desperate Interpol is for recognition.” He licked his lips, leaning back. “But no one got hurt.”

Harry scoffed, shaking his head in disbelief. Crouch's eyes snapped up. “In five years they never once used the information to kill anyone!”

“Certainly not for lack of trying,” Harry seethed. “Sirius is on life support.”

“That isn’t on me! I didn’t know they’d go after him. I never even gave them your names.”

“How did they know about us then? How did they know the Ministry would send investigators to Vienna?”

Crouch exhaled sharply through his nose. “I don’t know. I didn’t tell them about you,” he repeated, and then he paled, eyes darting back to the floor.

Dumbledore watched him carefully. “What did you tell them, Bartemius?”

Crouch continued to rub his neck, refusing to meet his superior’s intrusive gaze. “Only to keep an eye out for British agents visiting the scene.”

Harry balled a fist, tapping into every last morsel of self-control to stop from driving it through the drywall.

“I didn’t know it would be you!” Crouch shouted, shaking the bed. “You were fired, how was I to know?”

“Your heads up got my godfather stabbed in the heart.”

Crouch reared back with the force of the words. “I never thought they’d kill a British agent. Or someone they thought was one. I didn't think they'd be so reckless. They never were before.”

“Why didn’t you come to me, Bartimus?” Dumbledore asked. “Surely you wanted out before now?”

“Because I didn't want this to happen! Hunted by assassins and labeled a traitor by the organization I've devoted my entire goddamn life to!” Crouch spun to face him, eyes pleading. “After Black was stabbed I knew I was in too deep to walk away. I knew they’d send someone to silence me. Please, you have to help me, Albus, you have to assign agents to my son!”

“I've already dispatched a team to New Beginnings. Barty is well guarded.” Dumbledore lifted his chin, expression darkening. “And now I want something from you.” The atmosphere grew dense. “Tell me everything you know about them. Every meeting, every phone call, every name and accent. No detail spared. Starting with the agents sent to kill you this morning.”

Crouch slumped over, defeated. “I don’t know who they are. I just heard voices in the living room. I was already in the garage, cleaning out the car.”

Harry scowled at the renewed memory of the man abandoning his elderly mother.

“You saw no one?” Dumbledore prompted.

“I saw the women. From a distance.” Crouch rubbed his knees. “Until one of them approached.”

Harry practically leaped out of his skin. “You saw her face?” He demanded.

Crouch refused to meet his eye. “Yes.”
Harry dragged a hand through his hair, heart pumping a mile a minute as he began to scan the room. “Let me get Luna, she did the Janitor sketch, we need to find some paper, a pen or–”

“Potter, please, I’m exhausted.”

Harry rounded on the bed. “I don’t give a shite! This is far more important than a bloody nap!”

“I told you everything I know, I’m cooperating goddammit!”

“We’ll end the conversation here,” Dumbledore stated abruptly.

Harry blinked. “What?”

“And resume it first thing in the morning. Crouch may rest until then.”

Harry shook his head. “We shouldn’t wait, we need to know–”

"And know we shall. There’s five years worth of information we must gather, Harry. We will embark on the process with clear heads and the right equipment." Dumbledore rose swiftly, his joint popping once more as he glanced at the boarded window, slivers of faded sunlight peeking through. "It is late, and after a day of avid excitement, we are all in dire need of rest. I will return in the morning to finish the questioning alone."

Harry balked. “I want to–”

“You can return in the evening with Ms. Lovegood to obtain the sketch, as well as oversee his transfer to the second location.”

Harry ground his teeth, sensing a losing battle in his midst. He wanted to argue the matter further but wanted to avoid sounding like a petulant child even more. "Fine." His gaze cut to the bed and the man perched atop. "Tomorrow."

Crouch ignored his warning tone, eyes fixed to Dumbledore. “What will happen to me?” He wiped the sweat from his forehead. “Will I go to prison?”

“I will do my best to mitigate your punishment, my friend. I understand your motivations were born of the heart.” Dumbledore’s expression tensed. “But you made a long series of very poor decisions that cost the safety of many good officers.”

“If I testify against The Knights maybe they can remand my sentencing to house-arrest.”

“That may be an option. But we are still a ways away from such conversations. Your immediate safety is our driving concern. We’ll allow you some privacy now. I’ll return in the morning.”

Dumbledore began to turn away. Harry reluctantly followed his lead.

“Albus.”

They both stopped, turning towards the bed. Crouch leaned in, lamplight painting his face like a jack-o-lantern. “There’s something else you should know.” Shadows stretched beneath his eyes, creating a haunting mask. “There’s a pattern to these killings. I don’t know how they’re connected. But I know they’re happening in a specific order.”

Harry took a deep breath, the information weighing heavy on his mind, too large to cram into his mental stores with everything else from the day.
“That is very helpful, Bartemius,” Dumbledore replied simply. “Rest now.”

Harry followed him to the door, pausing at the threshold. “I’ll be back in the evening,” he promised, voice hard as steel. “I want that sketch.”

*And her face.*

Crouch had enough energy left to sneer.

Harry entered the hall and shut the door, only to sag into the wall, desperate to process everything they’d just obtained.

Dumbledore took a few steps down the darkened corridor before turning on his heel. “It’s so very dreary inside. Let’s step out, get a bit of fresh air.”

Harry nodded, following the man through the cabin to a screen door at back. It fed out to another porch, the structure equally hazardous as the one in front. His eyes narrowed on the busted slats, carefully minding every step. The sun dipped low behind the trees, shadows heavy on the horizon.

“I know you’ve had a tedious day as well so I’ll get right to it,” Dumbledore began, stepping to the edge of the wood and gazing out at the dense canopy. “I was informed they found a body in the woods. Male, mid-twenties to thirties, face beaten with a bullet wound to the head, discovered not far from Crouch’s vehicle.”

Harry tensed, recalling the Janitor’s bloodied hands, choosing his words carefully. “We heard gunshots, several rounds, but Crouch claims they weren’t shooting at him.”

Dumbledore cocked his head, the sunset reflecting off his lenses. “What a fascinating turn of events.”

Harry wet his lips, stepping beside him. He’d wanted to keep his exchange with the assassin a secret, still hesitant to turn over every bit of information. But he suspected Crouch would relay the exchange in the morning anyway. Better Harry be the one to set the story’s framework.

“I spoke with one of them.”

Dumbledore glanced sideways.

Harry continued to gaze ahead, hands clenched in his pockets. “Malfoy’s killer. The Janitor.”

“When did this occur?”

“After Crouch was secure in our vehicle.” Harry’s jaw tensed, words bottlenecks in his throat. “I…” He released a slow breath, trying again. “I approached the van. He met me in the field.”

Dumbledore watched him carefully, studying his profile in the violet light. “And what compelled this brazen act?”

Talk about the question of the decade.

“I’m not sure. My mind was… it just seemed the right thing to do at the time.” Harry’s stomach knotted at the memory his own words evoked. Crouch’s plea at the diner.

“I did this for the right reasons.”

“And what did you learn?” Dumbledore asked, drawing him back to the present.
“He confirmed he works for an organization. But he doesn’t seem to know much about his employer. Or today’s assignment.”

"Are you certain it wasn't a ruse?"

Harry shook his head, turning to face the man. “He tried turning it into one. To mask the truth as well as his own frustrations at being kept in the dark. Narcissa’s murder led me to believe he likes to work alone, on his own terms. I suspect this explains the dead operative in the woods.”

Dumbledore eyed him with blatant appreciation. “What else?”

Harry pushed ahead carefully, knowing the magnitude of his next statement. “He let Crouch live. They all did.”

Dumbledore rotated to face him fully. “Why do you say that?”

“One of the women spotted him hiding in the bushes. That’s why he got such a good look at her. But she didn’t take the shot. They also had the opportunity to run him down, or shoot through the window. He was only yards away. It would’ve been child’s play.”

The sun was fully set, the bug zapper beside the door their only source of light, casting them in an eerie green glow.

“What else?” Dumbledore prompted, eyes gleaming even in the shadows.

“The Janitor thought I was still an agent,” Harry tread slowly. “I think…” A breath. “The tone of our conversation led me to believe he was gauging my willingness to work with him.” He stood straighter. “I think he wants out.”

Crickets began to chirp, their rhythmic call deafening. Dumbledore smiled, pinning Harry with an appraising stare that was highly unsettling. “That was quite the conversation.”

“I’ve been over it a million times in my head. Nothing else makes sense.”

The agent nodded, pale gaze drifting to the dark treeline. “That would be very beneficial to us, having the inside knowledge of one of their operatives.”

“Would we be able to grant him immunity?”

“If I argue the matter hard enough there is little I cannot obtain.” He glanced sideways at Harry. “And how would you feel about that?”

The question sent Harry’s mind reeling. He blinked, thoughts drenched in red. “He slit Narcissa’s throat. She died beneath my hands, her blood painting the walls and floor.” His jaw tensed. “I want to see him burn.”

Dumbledore nodded, as though expecting as much. “And what if his cooperation could deliver his partner into our custody?”

Harry went rigid as a signpost, speaking without permission from his brain. “I’d sell my soul to Satan himself to get my hands on her.”

Dumbledore lifted a gray brow, smirking outright. “Well then. Let’s take it one day at a time. But I appreciate your dedication to the job.”

“It’s more than a job.”
The senior agent's expression rapidly sobered. "I know. It's a calling. That's why I picked you for this investigation. Your keen ability to see what others do not, as well as your endless drive to see the mission through." His eyes suddenly took on a faraway look. "But you can still be compromised. Same as any of us. Vengeance will not lead you to justice."

Harry’s shoulders drew back. He nodded, eager to step free from this particular subject matter. “It’s getting late. I need to get my team back to London.”

Dumbledore blinked, eyes coming back into focus. “Of course.” He turned to the woods, releasing Harry from the conversation.

Harry started towards the door.

“Oh, one more thing,” the agent stated.

Harry paused at the screen, glowing radioactive beneath the bug lamp.

“In light of recent developments, namely Crouch’s involvement in this mess, I believe I can convince the Ministry to absorb the investigation in-house.”

Harry blinked, staggering into the wall. “You’re firing me?”

Again?

Cold dread seized him around the neck, cutting off his airway.

The agent smirked, chuckling softly. "Quite the opposite. You would still head the project."

Harry opened and closed his mouth half a dozen times before regaining his senses. “You mean…”

“You'd be reinstated as an Officer.”

His hands began to shake. “That’s…” Holy fuck. “… Holy fuck. He swallowed heavily, at a loss.

And then another voice filled his head. Deep, ominous words delivered in cruel jest...

“If you go up the chain of command far enough, I think you’ll find we’re employed by the same people.”

Harry pushed away from the door, knees locked. “I don’t think that would be good for the investigation.”

Dumbledore blinked, though his amused expression remained. “No? Surely you could benefit from the added resources the Ministry has to offer?”

“I could. And I’d love to get my badge back.”

“But?”

“But…” Harry’s fists balled tight. “We’ve already proven the collusion of three major governments, our own included. There’s no telling how far this goes, or what other spies they have lurking in the Ministry. Absorbing the investigation would be putting it at risk. They’re already one step ahead of us, I don’t want to give them any more access to information than they already have.”

Dumbledore folded his hands behind his back, seemingly unsurprised by Harry’s response. “You’d like to continue the investigation independently?”
“If you’ll allow it.”

“Of course. But I most certainly thought you’d jump at the opportunity to have your badge returned.”

Harry stood firm, resolve strengthening as the words finally came to him with ease. “I became an Officer to protect the innocent. To put an end to people and organizations profiting off human suffering. In this instance, I believe I’ll be better equipped to do so without the burden of the badge.”

Dumbledore’s expression tensed, deep lines appearing across the weathered flesh, eyes startling flat and lifeless. Harry’s pulse skipped at the anomaly, brow raising. “Sir?”

The senior officer swayed in place and then blinked, visage set right again. He shook his head, laughing ruefully. “My apologies, Harry. You just reminded me so much of your father for a moment.” He smiled, shadows dispelled from the crevices of his face. “I’m so very happy I chose you to lead this mission. I trust your judgment, as I trusted his. If you feel the Ministry will only hinder your progress, we’ll continue on as we have been.”

Harry nodded tightly. "Thank you, Sir." He was unsure what else to say, uncomfortable broaching the topic of his parents with the man standing before him. He was eager to leave, ready for this loaded exchange to end, but still had one more bone to pick, a scab he couldn't leave unscratched. "Are you sure you don't want me to come in the morning?"

Dumbledore eyed him knowingly. “I believe Crouch will be more forthcoming in my presence alone. You will likely inspire animosity.”

Harry glanced away.

“I know you’re frustrated,” Dumbledore continued patiently. “But it is as you said; we must make sacrifices for the good of the investigation. I’ll record everything, I assure you.”

Harry nodded, backing away. “I understand. Good evening, Sir.”

“Good night, Harry.”

Harry opened the door at last, escaping into the dark cabin with a heavy sigh. The smell of mildew and dust filled his senses as he searched for Luna and Neville. He followed the source of light and voices to the kitchen, spotting his team at the table, laughing with the two officers. He assumed Dean was stationed outside Crouch’s door.

Harry drew back into the shadows before they spotted him, taking a moment to collect his bearings. He leaned into the wall, the darkness providing a movie screen backdrop for his memories to play across. Yet even with all he obtained today, Harry still couldn't see the entire picture. He held all the pieces of the jigsaw but couldn’t find where they fit, what image he was trying to create.

They had two of the assassin’s faces, one of their names… and yet Harry already suspected both findings would lead to dead ends.

Where to go next?

He rubbed the back of his shoulder, eyes closing. He refused to sit on his arse for another day, waiting to hear back from Dumbledore.

And then he remembered, all at once and with bone-crushing swiftness—

He’d had the thumb drive on him the entire fucking day.
He reached into his pocket, extracting the gleaming beacon that led them to Crouch’s door in the first place, shaking his head as he studied the plastic with gleaming eyes.

“Bloody idiot.”

Hermione pressed her shoulder against the cold pane, arms tightly crossed as she peered down at the city lights. London glittered before her eyes, shops brightly lit and cars zooming by, everyone going about their night without a care in the world, none the wiser to the killer dwelling on the top floor of the picturesque brownstone.

She released a long sigh, breath steaming the glass and hiding her reflection from view. Tom’s voice filtered in from the hallway, muffled by the bedroom door and the sound of running water from the bathroom.

The tap shut off as though on cue.

Hermione focused on a cab pulling along the curb below. A man emerged from the backseat, lingering beside the door to offer his hand to the woman inside. She accepted it with a laugh, emerald skirt fluttering in the breeze as she took to her feet and leaned into him with a coy grin. He wrapped his arms around her waist, pressing a kiss to her lips.

Hermione’s heart skipped. She wondered if they were dating, out to celebrate a new anniversary or even meeting for the first time… maybe they were married, enjoying a night on the town without the kids… perhaps they were having an affair.

She wondered where they were coming from and where they were heading, suspecting the handsome couple hadn’t spent their morning hunting a man through the woods with the sole intent of shooting him. And she imagined they wouldn’t be spending the rest of their evening plotting murder.

A door opened in the hall.

Hermione straightened, stepping away from the window and lifting her gaze, braced for Tom’s presence at her back. But it was soft footsteps that padded across the hardwood, a slender reflection appearing in the glass beside her own. Hermione turned, facing the other woman.

Bella was adorned in a white towel, beads of moisture clinging to her skin as she straightened the terry cloth around her hair, a dark tendril curving along the side of her neck.

“All yours, darling. I did my best to leave plenty of hot water, though we really should share next time, better for the environment and all.” She winked, a droplet of water running from her collarbone to the valley between her breasts. “Mind if I borrow something to wear? I abhor putting on dirty clothes.”

Hermione blinked, gaze snapping up, cheeks heating. “What?”

Bella smirked. “Clothes, darling. I doubt Tommy will appreciate me strutting about his flat in the buff. Though if you join in on the fashion trend he’s less likely to have a conniption.”

Hermione shook her head, pulling free of the daze. “Yeah. Sure. I mean, yes you can borrow some clothes. But my pants will be shorts on you.”

Another door opened and closed as Bella paced to the breakfast bar. “Pajamas will be fine. Something silk preferably, with lots of lace. See-through is also acceptable.”
“You aren’t staying the night,” Tom’s voice radiated from the shadows. “Reg can’t get here until morning.” He emerged from the doorway, blood and dirt on his face and phone in his hand. “So you’re leaving.”

Bella rolled her eyes, leaning against the counter. “My flat’s being fumigated.”

“I heard you burned it down.”

“It really is the best way to exterminate.”

He set the phone on the island and crossed to the fridge. “Get a hotel.”

She sighed dramatically, crossing her bare legs at the ankles. “Such a waste of money, especially when you have a perfectly suitable couch.”

He reached inside, pulling out a carton of milk. “Don’t even think about it.”

Bella tipped her head, clearly intent on arguing further.

“Let her stay,” Hermione interjected, hardly aware of her own words.

Tom met her eye from across the kitchen, surprise evident in the lines on his face.

“It’s late. And she has to come back in the morning anyway.” She glanced to the carton in his hand. “I hope you plan to use a glass.”

He blinked, gazing at the container in bemusement, then shook his head, setting it on the counter with a thump. “Bloody hell.” He reached for the cabinet beside his head.

“Utter barbarian,” Bella chimed, winking at Hermione. “But I’m sure he has his uses.”

“I’m thrilled to be the new proprietor of a bed and breakfast,” Tom quipped, extracting a glass from the shelf.

“In that case, in the morning I’d like eggs benedict with a side of bacon, extra crispy. What about you, kitten?”

Hermione watched Tom open the carton and pour a glass. Her hands opened and closed at her sides, a sudden numbness overtaking her senses. “My overnight bag is on the bed. Grab whatever you need.” She pulled her gaze from the kitchen and started for the hall. “I’m going to take a shower.”

Bella’s grin faded as she watched Hermione dart past, her dark eyes flickering to Tom. He met the assassin’s gaze, expression tense, and then Hermione turned the corner and lost sight of them both.

She entered the bathroom calmly, closing the door with a steady hand. And promptly collapsed against it, pressing her forehead to the wood and closing her eyes. Her breathing turned hitched, broken, dizziness setting in. Tears burned behind her lids, barely tamped. She knew if she started crying they’d be able to hear her from the other room, so she dashed to the standing shower and turned the water on full blast, steam rising high.

The vanity mirror was still fogged from Bella's session, sparing Hermione from having to confront her own reflection. She could only imagine what she looked like. She carded her fingers through her hair, pulling it away from her face and clutching either side of her skull until it threatened to cave in. She fought desperately to rein in her rising hysterics but only succeeded in pulling dark memories to the forefront of her mind with stunning clarity.
Hermione saw the pale face staring out from the bushes, eyes wide with terror. She felt the weight of the gun in her hand. Heard the crack of gunfire like thunder shaking the earth, watched the bark and splinters rain down as the bullet lodged in the tree, listened to Tom’s bloody fists pounding against the broken body beneath him...

Her stomach somersaulted. She sucked in a breath, trying to quell the rising nausea.

*Today was a success. The target lived.*

*But for how long?*

She pressed the heels of her palms against her lids, blotting out the vanity lights.

*Someone died today…*

*He was a bad man.*

*So he deserved it?*

*He tried to kill me…*

*And Tom killed him first.*

She swallowed thickly, changing tactics, trying to drown out the arguing voices with movement. She tore off her clothes and tossed them into a pile, stepping beneath the scalding spray and closing the glass door with a loud click. She tipped her face back, letting the water blur her vision and plug her ears, washing out her surroundings until all that existed was the spray pounding against her, stripping her skin raw.

Hermione stood as thus for several minutes, perhaps even centuries, time evading her as swiftly as reality. She'd nearly forgotten where she was, shrouded in the heat and the darkness until a soft knock sounded at the door.

She jolted, hard, nearly losing her footing as she spun to face the entrance, eyes wide and guilt-stricken as though caught red-handed. It was in that moment Hermione realized she’d been silently sobbing since entering the tiled oasis.

She pressed a hand to the wall, nails scratching the grout, praying the person on the other side would go away.

“Hermione.”

She closed her eyes as Tom’s voice filtered in.

*Fuck my life.*

“What?” She asked, fighting to keep her voice steady.

A long pause. Followed by the inevitable—

“I’m coming in.”

She shook her head frantically. “No, I’m fine—”

He opened the door. She sank into the corner, hiding behind the dense spray. “Tom, I’m fine.”
“I heard you the first time.”

He shut the door. And then locked it. She cringed, wishing she had thought to do the same, and watched as he paced to the counter and leaned against the sink, his dark silhouette outlined by the bright bulbs framing the vanity.

“I’d like to be alone,” she stated, arms wrapping her middle as water dripped from her hair in a river.

“We’ve both been alone for a very long time.” His voice was deep, steady, causing her heart to stutter painfully. “I’ve certainly had my fill of it.”

She shook her head, tears brimming anew, overspilling her bottom lashes in a torrent. She pressed her hands to her face, fighting back a sob and failing miserably. He pushed away from the sink, opening the shower door. She tried to turn away, ashamed by her outpour of emotion, overwhelmed by his presence.

“Tom, please don’t–”

He reached in and grabbed her wrist, pulling her forward as he stepped inside fully clothed, boots squelching wetly against the tile. He tugged her into his body, arms wrapping her back and pressing her flush. She leaned into him at once, crying into his shirt, the fabric quickly soaked through by the overhead spray.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, burying her face against his warmth.

He ran a coaxing palm along her spine, a caressing pet that soothed her frayed nerves. “Don’t apologize.”

“I know. It shows weakness.”

His hand stilled. “That’s not what I meant.”

“It’s true though. I’m weak.”

He stiffened against her. "No, you aren't."

“I am. Compared to you. Compared to Bella. I’m a liability on missions. I’m a liability to your entire life.”

“Hermione–”

"You wouldn't have had to kill Rabastan if it wasn't for me."

His bitter laughter rumbled beneath her cheek. “I assure you, his death was his own doing.” He began to rub her back again, voice calm. “Today wasn’t the first time that fool pulled a gun on me. I would have killed him eventually. Better sooner than later.”

Her pulse throbbed at the words, his casual use of them.

“Not being a killer doesn’t make you weak, Hermione.” He grasped her chin and tilted her face up, forcing their eyes to meet. “You have a moral compass I will never possess.”

She blinked, tears and spray blurring her sight. Water dripped from the tip of his nose onto her lips.

“I couldn’t get through this without you. That's why I–” His words ended abruptly, expression freezing like a screensaver.
Hermione searched his gaze, fingers curling against his sopping shirt. “That’s why you what?”

He reanimated once more, motions fluid, as though the glitch never occurred. “That’s why I’m so grateful our paths crossed. That fate drew us back together.”

She pressed her palms flat to his chest, framing his heartbeat. “You don’t believe in fate.”

His gaze darkened, head lowering. “I’ve changed,” he whispered against her mouth, and then pressed a soft kiss to her lips. Patient. Assuring. He pulled back, resting his forehead against hers.

She stared into his smokey gaze, leaning into him harder. “You have to kill the target.”

He released her chin to cup the side of her face, fingers tracing her cheekbone down to her neck, gently grasping her throat. “Don’t think about that now,” he murmured.

She closed her eyes, content to obey his command, lost to the pressure of his fingertips against her pulse. She exhaled slowly, dropping her cheek against his chest.

“Tonight, we pretend our lives are normal,” he continued, wrapping her tight in his arms as he rested his chin atop her head. “Tomorrow we face reality.”

Hermione opened her eyes, staring blankly ahead, and then gazed down. Blood and dirt marred the shower floor, rushing across the tiles and swirling down the drain, the violence of today washing away with each passing second, along with the final vestiges of the life she’d once known.

And the life she might have had.
I believe I asked for crepes.

Chapter Notes

Alright, pretty vixens. Let’s have some fun :D

Monday, July 18, 2005

Hermione pressed her heels into the blanket, pushing closer to Tom, away from the grass needling her arm.

“Stop squirming,” he commanded, lying still as a corpse at her side.

“I’m not squirming.”

“You’re worse than a bloody worm.”

She rolled her eyes. “Maybe I could get comfortable if you weren’t hogging the entire blanket.”

“It’s my blanket.”

“I dragged it out here.”

“Only because you keep stealing the damn thing.”

She huffed loudly. “Can we please go one night without a row?”

He broke from his frozen state, shaking his head with derision. “This is a waste of time. Why bother sneaking out if we’re going to stay on the grounds?”

“Because we came to watch the meteor shower, not swipe car parts.”

“I should be sleeping right now, I start work—”

“Then go inside if you’re going to complain,” she demanded, at her wits end with arguing.

He turned into a block of ice, radiating a wave of cold that sent chills through her limbs. She swallowed thickly, head snapping to the side. “I’m sorry—” Hermione cringed at her slip, but it was too late to take back.

Her shoulders braced for the lecture she was certain would follow. But instead, it was the churn of rushing water that met her ears. The grass felt damp beneath her fingertips, the edge of the blanket soaked through. She blinked, peering around in confusion, wondering if a sprinkler had turned on.

The courtyard doesn’t have sprinklers...

“Don’t apologize.”

The phantom voice seemed to surround her from all sides. Tom’s voice, but deeper, stranger.

“I know. It shows weakness.”
She gasped at the sound of her own words in her head, both familiar and foreign. She glanced in either direction, searching out the source of the madness. It must have been a prank. A cruel game derived by Amy and her cruel posse. But all Hermione saw was a dark blur along the perimeter of the gate, the landscape nothing more than spilled ink on the page.

A dense fog began to roll in, covering the ground in white mist, heading straight for them. She reached for Tom, intent on warning him, but her limbs remained frozen in place.

“You drag me out here in the dead of night to stare at the bloody gate.”

Her eyes snapped to him, panic seizing her heart and squeezing tight. “Tom, something is—”

“It’s starting.”

She blinked, head snapping forward. The stars twinkled in a magnificent light show, shining brighter than she’d ever seen before, no trace of smog in sight. The moon hovered large in the sky, eerily close, blinding in intensity.

“I don’t see—” Her words ended with a gasp as sparks began to rain across the black backdrop of space. “Oh my god,” she whispered, awed by the display. “It’s beautiful.”

Hermione felt warmth at her thigh, an increasing pressure that slipped higher, higher, catching the hem of her nightdress and dragging it up up up—

She reared forward, limbs breaking free from their invisible binds, heart skipping painfully as she spotted Tom’s hand upon her. She glanced sideways, unnerved to see his decidedly bored expression, gray gaze fixed to the sky, indifferent to his actions.

“What are you doing?” She whispered, too startled to move.

“Staring at flaming balls of gas, apparently. Positively riveting.”

She shook her head, hands clutching the blanket. “No, I mean—” Her words caught in her throat as his fingers slid around to her inner thigh. “Tom…” Her entire body throbbed. “This isn’t right.”

“Hm.”

She took a shallow breath, pressing her thighs together to halt his hand’s upward journey. “This isn’t supposed to happen.”

He continued to gaze at the light show, fingertips tracing the seam of her legs. “No?”

She swallowed thickly, voice hoarse. “You never touched me like this.”

The fog rose higher, denser, until it blanketed him entirely, hiding his face and body from view, only his disembodied hand remaining, fingertips pressing her flesh.

This isn’t real.

His cool touch slid beneath her thin nightgown, playing with the fabric of her underwear.

Stop...

Hermione dropped back as his middle finger slipped under the thin barrier, tracing her intimate folds. She gasped sharply, inhaling a lungful of white smoke, frigid and bitter, causing her lungs to twitch and burn.
Please don’t stop.

And then the fog parted, as though making way for its Master as Tom rolled on top of her, weight crushing, inescapable. But even more startling was his face, for it no longer bore its youthful teenage visage. No, it was a very grown man poised atop her, eyes black with hunger. He smiled, teeth gleaming. “Time to wake up, Hermione.”

She blinked, taken aback by his sudden transformation, the strange command. And then the ground dropped out from beneath them, sending her into instant freefall. Her stomach turned inside out, scream lodged inside her throat as she plunged into darkness, down down down—

Until at last she hit bottom, a mattress creaking beneath her as she bounced once, twice, hair tossed every which way over the pillows. Sunlight bathed her skin, cutting across her eyes in a bright strip. Hermione blinked rapidly, trying to gain her bearings, come to grips with these new surroundings. She was on a bed, the comforter tossed aside, nearly on the floor, her bottom half pinned by a warm, hard weight...

“Good morning,” Tom muttered with a devilish grin, voice mostly gravel. A hand was between her legs, lips at her stomach, underwear hooked around her knees and camisole bunched beneath her breasts.

And then a long, thick finger was sliding inside her, dragging a guttural moan from her throat, voice still thickened by sleep. A calloused fingertip stroked along her walls until his palm bottomed out, the heal of his hand rubbing her clit in tight circles until her hips writhed, trapped in place by his pelvis.

"Tom, we can't," she gasped, pushing the hair from her face to meet his heated gaze. "Bella is in the living room."

“Then we better be quiet.” He slipped another finger inside, spreading them apart, spreading her, causing her to keen and pant, nails raking his bare chest.

“Regulus will be here soon—"

“Then we better be quick.”

She prepared to argue further, and then he slipped a third finger in while working her clit with his thumb and the words lodged in her chest, a tight cluster set to burst with every scrape of his knuckles. Her skin burned feverish, eyes squeezing shut as she arched off the bed, as much as his weight would allow, throat bared as she ground her teeth, desperate to quell her moans.

His mouth trailed up her stomach, freehand pushing her thin camisole higher, lips rounding her breast, hot breath cascading across its peak. Her hips gyrated in time to his movements, a frantic tempo that rattled her brain against her skull and the headboard against the wall. She slapped her hands to the wood, mortified by the commotion, trying desperately to pin it flat. But she lost the battle with the next fractured breath, plunging headfirst over the edge with his hand's rough twist and thrust, the orgasm taking her by storm, all the more intense for how unexpected it was.

Her lips parted wide, a startled cry tearing free beyond her control, sparks raining down behind her lids, transporting her back to the courtyard for a blinding beat. And then Tom’s large palm was clamping over her mouth, smothering her moans as her muscles clenched tight again and again and again, sex pulling upon him in powerful spasms, drawing his fingers in deep even as her spine settled upon the bed. She panted hard through her nose, coming down to earth piece by piece until she was a boneless heap atop his twisted sheets.
Tom pulled his hand away from her mouth, thumb tugging at her lower lip, down her chin and across her throat, settling at her throbbing pulse. He smirked, an aura of smug seeping from his pores in powerful waves as she blinked slowly, dazed, bucking hard as he slowly withdrew his fingers from her clenching sex, dragging soaked fingertips over her sensitive clit for good measure, pupils blown wide as he watched her squirm, unable to evade his touch.

She held his gaze as she caught her breath, hands dropping from the headboard to card through his hair, nails raking his scalp, tugging the silken strands, something wild and feral unleashed within her. He moaned at the rough touch, weight settling upon her fully, heavy, suffocating, his head dropping to press an open-mouthed kiss against her throat, all teeth and tongue. She spread her legs, losing all sense of time and reason, eager to feel all of him, everything, now—

He rolled away abruptly, legs swinging over the edge of the mattress as though intending to stand. The coldness of his sudden absence sank into her bones, rendering her frozen.

“You didn’t…” She trailed off, squirming atop the bedding.

He cast a heated glance over his shoulder, eyes full of dark promise. “Oh, I intend to. Tonight.” And then he leaned down, hand pressing the pillow beside her head, lips hovering just above her own. “When I can take my time on you. And be loud as fuck about it.”

Desire rekindled in her gut, embers sparking to life along her thighs, making her sex clench tight. She wrapped her hands around his neck, staring blatantly at his mouth, hungry, desperate for his scorching touch to consumer her again—

A hard knock sounded at the bedroom door, turning them both to stone, statues locked in a lovers’ embrace.

“Fuck, that took long enough!” A feminine voice called from the other side. “Your technique could use some improvement, Tommy, I’d have her undone in half the time!”

Hermione released him at once, cringing back and burying her face in the sheets, utterly humiliated.

“I’m happy to offer pointers!” Bella added, laughter sharp and muffled.

Tom rolled away, dragging a hand through his disheveled hair, face pinched in annoyance.

“I can feel the homicidal longing through the door. Help me out, kitten, how constipated does he look?”

“Fuck off!” He called out, rising to his feet.

“Don’t blame me for your blue balls. Reg just texted, he’s on his way from Heathrow and demanded espresso and crepes or he refuses to help. You’ve turned our little brother into quite the primadonna.”

Tom shook his head, ignoring the disembodied voice as he strode for his dresser.

“And because I’m the second coming of Mother Teresa herself I’m taking requests before popping to the overpriced café down the street.”

Hermione couldn’t see his face but heard his taxing sigh as though it came through an intercom.

“Tea, black.”

“I appreciate your commitment to aesthetics.”
He opened the top drawer, extracting a white undershirt.

“And for you, poppet?”

Hermione lowered the sheet, face hot enough to fry an egg. “A croissant, please!”

“Alrighty, kids, back in a jiffy! Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do unless you plan to film it!”

Tom shook his head, back undulating as he pulled the shirt over head, smoothing it over his muscled abdomen before turning for the bed. Bella’s footsteps echoed down the hall as she skipped away. He leaned over Hermione’s prone form, forearms bracing her at either side as he dipped his head low, lips grazing her bare shoulder. “Think my technique needs improvement?” He smirked, eyes bright with latent desire and just a hint of boyish charm that took her breath away.

And then she blinked, replaying his words and reliving Bella’s impromptu interruption, burning hot once more. She sank back with a groan, pushing him away as his laughter echoed through the room.

Harry groaned into his pillow, back stiff as he lifted his head and searched out the source of the incessant ringing. He rolled over, palm sweeping the sheets, fumbling for his phone, inadvertently ripping the charging cable from the wall as he pulled the device to his face, flipping it open with a heavy hand. The screen was blinding to his foggy gaze, but he spotted no flashing name. The ringing continued, clearer, from a distance.

The landline.

He scrubbed a hand over his face. No one ever called the landline. He didn’t know why he even had the bloody thing.

“Coming, coming.”

He stumbled out of bed and down the hall, nearly falling headfirst down the stairs as he blinked the sleep from his eyes, clipping his shoulder against the doorframe before entering the galley kitchen. The shrill ring continued to reverberate off the walls of his skull, drowning out his low string of curses as he grabbed the phone off the wall and yawned into the back of his hand, a lion’s roar, before pushing the blinking talk button.

“I’m not interested in changing my cable provider or buying energy efficient windows. Have a great day, arsehole.”

“Fine, miss out on The Wire and pay too much for utilities, Sunshine.”

Harry’s vision cleared in an instant. “Ron?”

“Ah, so you do remember my name.”

“I…” He opened and closed his mouth, complexion paling in the reflection of the microwave. “I was going to call you—”

“I know it’s a lot to deal with, but how could you not tell me about Sirius?”

Guilt tipped him sideways against the counter. “I’m so sorry, Ron. I meant to, I really did. But I’ve been so buried under work—”

“You’re working?”
He paused, pulse thudding erratically. “Yeah.”

“That’s great! Why didn’t you tell me? I’ve been worried sick about you since…” Ron’s sigh echoed in his ear. “I’m so glad to hear you’re on your feet, mate. And fucking relieved. When I spoke to Rem he made it sound like you were in Vienna when it happened.”

“What did he tell you?”

“That some crazed bint stabbed Sirius in the middle of a bloody nightclub. Christ. Probably loaded out of her mind on PCP and battery acid. Idiots today would swallow horse shite if it had a designer stamp.”

Harry’s mind spun, logic at direct odds with his heart. Ron was his oldest friend, their kinship sparking the moment they met on their first day of officer training. He’d worked alongside the man for years, trusting Ron with his life countless times. But now the Ministry hung between them, the organization that once bound them so tightly now responsible for this great divide.

“Harry? You there?”

He closed his eyes, gripping the edge of the counter. “Yeah, I’m here.”

“You okay?” A humorless laugh. “What the hell am I saying, of course you aren’t okay. Are you visiting Sirius today? I’d like to see him—”

“Ron.”

“Yeah?”

Harry backflipped off the diving board, trusting his infallible instincts to guide his landing. “I was in Vienna.”

There was a soft thump from Ron’s end. “Wait, what?”

“I found Sirius on the dancefloor. I held him in my arms as he bled out.” Harry took a steadying breath. “I thought he was going to die. I’ve never been so terrified in my entire life.”

“I… shite… that’s… I’m so sorry, mate.” Harry could practically hear the gears turning in his friend’s mind. “Wait, what were you doing in Vienna? What were you doing in a club? I can’t even drag you to the sports bar across from your flat.”

Harry opened his eyes, staring pointedly at the take-out menus pinned to his fridge. “I can’t talk about it over the phone.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll catch you up later, but right now—”

“Don’t you dare give me the brush off, Harry Potter!”

“I’m not brushing you off—”

“You are. And I won’t stand for it. Something is happening, I can hear it in your voice, and I want to know what it is.”

Harry rubbed his brow, gaze dropping to the linoleum. “Ron, I can’t—”
“So the Ministry ended our partnership as well as ten years of friendship?”

He shook his head, standing away from the counter. “Are you seriously guilt tripping me right now?”

“You’ve met my mother, it runs in my blood.” And then the amusement faded from his voice. “We haven’t talked since you were terminated. You haven’t returned any of my calls and now Sirius is…”


Harry’s chest tightened.

Help.

He met his emerald gaze in the microwave door, the raging vortex of his thoughts solidifying into a solid thread. Perhaps it would be beneficial to have a Ministry connection outside of Dumbledore. Someone he trusted to his very core...

“Alright.”

“Don’t you try to dick me aro— wait, did you say alright?”

Harry stepped forward, opening the fridge. “Let’s meet in person.”

“Um… yeah, okay.” Suspicion colored his voice. “Let’s grab lunch this afternoon.”

“I can’t meet today.”

“And there it is.”

Harry rolled his eyes, reaching for a carton of OJ. “I’m not trying to get out of it, I can meet you tomorrow—”

“What about this evening?”

He turned the carton over in his hand, searching for the expiration date. “Seriously, Ron, I’m busy —”

“One drink. Thirty minutes. You can spare me that.”

He thought of Crouch, the safehouse.

The sketch.

“Ron…” He unscrewed the cap and peered inside, cringing at the science experiment sitting at the bottom. “Alright. One drink, thirty minutes max, I’m fucking serious.”

“I know, you’re using your fucking serious voice.”

Harry smirked, tossing the carton in the sink before whatever was living inside ate its way out. “Arsehole.”

“I’ll search for a decent happy hour and call you.”

“I’m having one drink, Ron.”

“I’m trying to save money on booze so you can keep overpaying for cable and heating, ungrateful
Harry shook his head, kicking the fridge shut. “I'll see you this evening.”

“You better.”

He hung up, hanging the phone with a pained heart. The thought of confiding in his best friend was a heavy burden lifted, but it merely set another weight in its place. It was selfish to drag Ron into this invisible web of killers and lies for the simple sake of furthering the investigation.

*It’s alright.* Harry carded a hand through his hair, turning on his heel. *I won’t let Ron come into any danger.* He started up the steps, clutching the railing tight. *I’ll catch the bastards soon enough.*

Bella tilted her head, catching her reflection in the glittering door of the café. She reached for the handle, pulling it wide, only to wrench back as a middle-aged woman in tailored silk burst free of the entry, nearly bowling her over. Bella pivoted out of the way, reflexes instinctual, as was the driving need to grab the upper-class bitch by the throat and slam her head through the beveled glass.

Bella took a deep breath, reminding herself of the mess she made the last time she taught a rude patron a much-needed lesson. She was never able to wash the blood out of her limited-edition Chanel boots. Fuck she’d loved those boots.

The woman continued on her merry way, bidding no apology or parting glance as she stepped onto the sidewalk and merged with pedestrian traffic. Bella grit her teeth and entered, fists tightening as she came face-to-face with the end of a monstrous line extending from the register.

“Are we waiting to board Noah’s Ark?”

The young man in front of her turned, pulling free an earbud hidden by a beanie and dreadlocks. "Sorry, you say something, ma'am?"

“Fucking hell.” She dismissed him at once, lest her bloodlust overtake her senses before her morning dose of caffeine. Her gaze cut to the menu posted on the wall instead, rolling her neck along her shoulders, muscles stiff from sleeping on the couch.

And then her phone chimed.

Mother Fu—

Her tongue pressed the roof of her mouth as she pulled the device from her pocket, quickly scanning the message scrolling across the front. She rolled her eyes, exiting the line and proceeding to the back corner of the venue, pausing beside an intricate cityscape mural to perform a sweep of the crowd. Mostly college-aged, laptops and artisan coffees littering their tables, making her target easy to spot along the back wall, furthest from the windows. Aged, refined hands held a newspaper aloft, blocking view of his face. But she could feel his aura from across the room. Across the city. A black hole sucking up all the light and warmth, plunging her into an endless abyss.

She leisurely made her way to his high-top table, pausing beside the empty chair.

“You’re late,” he stated simply, newspaper still masking his face.

“I was busy.”

“Stabbing someone else in the heart?”
She arched a brow. “Don’t tell me you’re still mad about that?”

He lowered the obstruction at last, pale eyes gleaming in the morning sun. “Sit.”

She did as bade, forcing her spine straight and limbs still, refusing to make this easy for him. But the longer his eyes bore upon her the hotter she skin grew, an ant trapped beneath the magnifying beam of his gaze.

“Stop it.”

“Stop what, dear?”

She crossed her arms, glancing away. “You know what. If you’re going to scold me get on with it.”

"Scold you?" He folded the newspaper into a pristine square. "If such an urge were to ever grip me in its throes I would choose a far less public venue to carry out the task." He set the paper aside, idly pivoting the bottom of his tea saucer. "But the point is moot since scolding has no effect upon your behavior whatsoever."

“Why am I here then?”

“To gather caffeine and sustenance for your team. Tom’s kitchen bears more dust than food, and Regulus has always had a penchant for crepes.” He picked up his cup, taking a delicate sip while watching her over the rim. “I imagine Tom called him last night.”

She rolled her eyes. “Doesn’t it get boring living in other people’s heads all the time?”

“Boring? No.” He set the cup back into place, leaning back and crossing his legs with graceful fluidity. “Tedious, often. Tiring, even more so. Though once in a millennia I find myself sufficiently challenged.”

“You challenged?” She leaned forward, setting her elbows on the table in the hopes of annoying him. “You mean someone was actually able to keep you out of their mind? Do share, darling.”

“An affable attempt at subversion. But we aren’t here to talk about me.” He straightened his suit jacket, every square inch of fabric perfectly pressed. “We’re here to talk about Rabastan. And the fallout his death will trigger.”

“Fallout? I thought everyone wanted him dead.”

His body turned still as stone, causing her pulse to stutter in anticipation. “Not everyone.”

She blinked. And then fell back into her chair, words evading her.

Green lifted a graying brow. “Someone needs to tell him.”

She blinked again, lips slowly parting in disbelief. “You mean… me?”

“Who better for the job?”

She scoffed indelicately, crossing her arms once more. “He doesn’t want to hear from me.”

“Of course he does.”

“He threatened to set me on fire the next time we spoke.”
“If he phrased it as thus he clearly anticipates your reunion.”

She set her jaw, glaring at the packets of sweetener on the table. "I shouldn't be the one."

The handler tilted his head, tone evenly paced. “Would it be better if he hears the tragic news from me?”

She swallowed heavily, lids pressing shut as she struggled to gain control of her rising emotions, chest tightening painfully. “I’ll do it,” she uttered lowly, opening her eyes.

He nodded, as though expecting no less. “And what do you intend to tell him?”

Bella shook her head. Such a bastard. “You mean do I intend to share your plans to murder his brother?”

He released a short chuckle of genuine amusement, its rhythmic melody sweeping across her skin like charged particles. “Of course not. I know you’d never betray me.” Her pulse slowed. The corner of his mouth curved up. “But I am curious how you’ll detail Tom’s involvement when recounting the tale.”

She released the breath she’d been holding, arms lowering. “If I tell the truth he’ll come after Tommy and get himself killed.” Her hands tensed on her lap, claws aching to burst free. “But you wouldn’t ask me to make the call if you thought I’d betray your Golden Boy.”

Green smiled outright, face utterly beatific. “It warms my heart to see my daughter taking after me.”

Electricity pulsed through her entire body. It was all she could do to stay seated. “You haven’t called me that in a very long time.”

His gaze flickered. “Does it upset you?”

She wet her lips, eyes turning dark, glassy. “Yes.”

“Would you like for me to stop?”

Her heart pounded steadily against her ribcage, the sensation keeping her rooted, alive. “No.”

His pale gaze slowly roamed her face. Her nails pressed into her thighs, dimpling the flesh through her jeans, waiting waiting waiting—

He glanced away, reaching for the newspaper. “Update me after you’ve made contact.”

She blinked, the spell utterly broken. Ruined. Her body stiffened as he shook the paper open once more, a silent dismissal. Stabbing pain alighted at her center, a steel spike holding her in place. “Why did you do it?” She whispered, hardly aware of her words.

He glanced up. “Do what?”

Her claws threatened to tear through the fabric. “You know what.”

His expression remained neutral, indifferent, but his hands stilled, palms flattening over the black print. “I didn’t relinquish you, Bella. I asked permission to oversee you both.”

She felt her body jolt beyond her control.

“But your psych evaluation prohibited your handler from having additional charges. I was forced to
choose.”

“So you picked Tom.”

“He needed me.”

“I needed you,” she hissed, grabbing the sides of the table and leaning across it, eyes wide and possessed as the wood rattled beneath her touch.

“You wanted me. There is a substantial difference.” He tilted his head, unaffected by her display.

“You didn’t need me, darling. You’ve never needed anyone.”

She blinked rapidly, vision blurred.

“You still can’t see it, even after all these years.” His gaze remained fixed, calm, yet the intensity of his focus rendered her helpless. “Tom will always require something to cling to. A life jacket to keep his head above water. A voice of reason to guide him through the ocean of his own darkness.” He leaned in, hands interlacing atop the gleaming wood, centered between her own. “And you, my dear girl, will always require a head to push underwater. An outlet for all that you harbor in the deepest recesses of your soul.”

Bella slowly released the table, slithering back into her chair with boneless limbs. Green remained unmoved, gaze unyielding. “Alas, I cannot sink. I let you go so that you may continue drowning men to your heart’s content.”

She swallowed, afraid to blink, terrified the moment would dissolve to smoke before her eyes. “I’ve changed.”

"A tigress cannot change her stripes," he replied with a smirk. "Nor should she. They define her very being. From the moment I first laid eyes on you in the detention center, I knew you were perfect. I never meant to tame you, to break or change you. I merely wanted to guide you." Sunlight cut across his gaze in a perfect strip, causing it to sparkle otherworldly. "I still do."

Bella released a searing breath, body swaying in time to her throbbing pulse, the urge to leap the table overwhelming. She wanted to kiss him. She wanted to break his mug and slash his throat open. She wanted she wanted she wanted she wanted—

“You’ve waited so very patiently to kill me.” His teeth gleamed, white and pointed. “Don’t spoil all your hard-earned plans by jumping the gun in an overpriced bistro. You'll merely award the owners with greater publicity.” Her arms hung limp at her sides as he grabbed the newspaper, shaking it open with skillful flourish. “I promise, you’ll have ample opportunity to cut my heart from my body soon enough. But right now, I need you focused on the mission.”

And then he lifted the paper, face hidden from view again. She tried to remember how to breathe.

“Carry on. Your team is waiting.”

Bella blinked slowly, waking from the dream at last. She slid out of the chair with stilted movements, slowly gaining her equilibrium, and proceeded for the end of the line on legs numb, mind adrift in a sea of blood and regret.

Harry ascended the spiral staircase two steps at a time, still on edge from his morning wake up call. He gripped the railing on either side, feeling the tremor in its frame, signaling the oncoming figure before spotting them on the landing above. Harry stood aside to let the stranger pass, recognizing him
as the marionette man from his first visit with Dumbledore. His arms were filled by a box yet again, though this time it was brimming with broken doll parts, chipped and cracked limbs sticking out at odd angles as their owner nodded his thanks, trotting past without a word.

Harry blinked, tearing his gaze away and continuing his upward journey. Warmth permeated his chest as he reached the red door, the sight of the office more familiar to him than his own home. He gripped the knob and reached for his keys, only to realize it was unlocked. He braced himself, shouldering it open with bated breath, knowing what awaited him inside but feeling on edge nonetheless. Sure enough, as the barrier swung wide he spotted the familiar faces of his team staring back at him from behind their twin desks, faces lit by computer screens.

“I told you guys you could come in later,” Harry stated by way of greeting, stepping inside and closing the door behind him.

Neville turned his chair to face the entry. “Neither of us could wait.”

“We’re here to help,” Luna added, eyes gleaming bright.

Harry’s chest tightened, the warmth rapidly spreading to his limbs. Fuck he loved his team.

“Alright.” He crossed to the center of the room in a couple steps, reaching into his pocket and extracting the thumb drive. “This is our focus until we hear from Dumbledore. I want it dissected, all of its secrets exposed.” He held it to the light, meeting Neville’s wonderous gaze. “It led us to one target already, it stands to reason it could uncover more.” Harry tossed it across the divide. Neville scrambled to catch it, nearly toppling out of his chair. “According to Crouch, these killings are happening in a specific order. If we can find the pattern, the connection, we can finally get ahead of them.”

Neville glanced up, gripping the plastic tight. “Is Crouch alright?”

Harry fought the urge to roll his eyes, knowing his friend only meant well but feeling unable to muster an ounce of sympathy for the traitor. Dumbledore may have been quick to forgive the former agent of his crimes, but Harry held no such sentiments.

“He’s fine,” he replied simply, turning his focus on their female member. “Speaking of which, I have a favor to ask. Would you mind swinging by the cabin with me tonight? Crouch claims to have seen one of the women’s faces, I want to get the sketch done before the transfer is made and we lose access.”

“Of course. I’ll pick you up at your flat.”

Neville glanced between them, ears turning red. “Um.. should I come along?”

"It's not necessary," Harry supplied, gaze skimming the cases pinned upon the corkboard wall. "And the fewer stops we have to make the better."

Neville nodded slowly, eyes cast down in disappointment. Harry blinked, wondering what he missed, but Luna drew his focus with her next question.

“Do you think he saw Nakita?”

His pulse soared, eyes flashing with uncontrollable hunger. “She left her calling card behind in Vienna, it’s possible she wants us to have her face as well. Another taunt.” He collapsed into the empty roller chair between their desks. “But even if it’s not her, all it takes is catching one of them to bring the rest down.”
Neville loosened his fist, revealing the thumb drive. “So… anything we’re looking for in particular?”

Harry nodded, carding a hand through his hair, realizing he’d forgotten to brush it this morning.

Screw it.

“Start with highlighted documents, trace them as far as you can, like you did with New Beginnings.” He leaned back, fingers idly tapping the plastic armrests. “In the meantime,” his eyes darted to Luna, “has Dumbledore given you Ministry login access?”

She nodded. “That’s how I compiled the research on the walls.”

“Good. I want you to search the criminal registry for the Janitor. Look at every assassin already on file. I doubt he’s there, but we might get lucky.” His fist clenched, knuckles cracking loudly. “Assuming you don’t get a hit, move onto juvenile records and prison registries in the UK. We have his physical description and first name, that should be enough to narrow the search to something manageable.”

She tilted her head, blonde hair spilling past her shoulder. “What if the dead operative was named Tom?”

Harry stiffened, pulse echoing in his ears. “How did you know he was found dead?”

“Collins told us,” Neville supplied innocently. “At the cabin.”

Harry blinked, shoulders easing. “Right.” He cleared his throat and glanced away, troubled by his own reaction. “We have a 50/50 shot the Janitor is Tom. If he’s not, we’ll use the victim’s description to rerun the search.” He wet his lips. “But my gut tells me this is our guy.”

Luna nodded, seemingly unaffected by his slip, pulling her chair closer to her computer and typing softly. “Just the UK?”

“To start. He spoke Queen’s English but I detected a hint of Estuary when he broke character. He’s local.”

Neville plugged the drive into his computer. “What about you? Will you need a computer?”

“I’m hitting the case documents, looking for connections between past victims.” Harry stood swiftly. “There’s something else.”

They both paused, hands hovering over their keyboards as their eyes fastened upward.

“The organization we’re after calls itself The Knights.” He stepped between their desks and approached the discovery board. “They operate internationally and have spies planted across multiple governments. They’re responsible for every murder pinned to this wall.” He paused before the grisly display, gaze locked with the Janitor’s sketch. “And we’re going to bring them down.”

Tom watched Hermione pace the windows, steps quick and restless, arms crossed in a shield over front. Sunlight glinted off her hair, a shimmering lake of caramel and chestnut, a beckoning temptation causing his hands to twitch at his sides. But he kept his distance, knowing his swooping presence would only put her further on edge. Whatever battle raged in her heart would have to be settled on her own terms. As much as Tom wanted to make the decision for her, he knew pressuring Hermione would only drive her away like a skittish cat.
A knock sounded at the door.

Logically he knew it had to be Bella or Reg, but as he strode to the barrier he withdrew a gun from his waistband, signaling Hermione out of view with his other hand. She shuffled into the corner of the room, eyes wide. He gripped the knob tightly, shoulders squaring as he opened it a sliver.

Dark eyes gleamed from the hall.

“A hand would be lovely,” Bella deadpanned, lifting her bounty to his gaze. He stepped back, tucking the weapon into place and opening the door fully to take the drink tray from her grasp.

“What a gentleman.” The bakery bag swung at her side as she strode inside, heels clicking the hardwood.

“Took you long enough,” Tom clipped, starting for the kitchen.

“I was chin deep in a line of hipsters.” She tossed the bag onto the counter. “The Sistine Chapel was painted in half the time it takes the ironically-clad barista to make a foam flower in a cup of cat piss.” She stepped closer, grabbing a cup from the holder in his hand, its lid already stained red with lipstick. “Speaking of which… their caramel macchiato is especially divine.”

Tom lifted a brow. “Did you get a flower?”

"Naturally. It's our job to blend in.” He shook his head, plopping the tray beside the bag. She took a slow sip, smirking over the rim. "Still sour over this morning? I didn't mean to eavesdrop, darling, I was merely concerned for Hermione's welfare. It sounded like you were smothering the poor thing. A dozen people die a day from Choke and Poke, I wanted to make sure our kitten wasn't counted among them."

Tom rolled his eyes, watching as Hermione turned every shade of red, burrowing deeper into the corner. “How delightful you should know that statistic off the top of your head.”

"Actually," a new voice spoke from the doorway, drawing all their attention like a gunshot. "An average of one thousand people die from erotic asphyxiation a year. And while there are nearly three times as many reported injuries resulting from the act, twelve a day is highly exaggerated."

Bella arched a manicured brow, nails tapping the side of her cup. "Hm. The number must have dropped after I turned celibate."

Regulus scowled. “You aren’t celibate.”

“I haven’t killed a lover in well over a year.”

He stepped fully inside, wheeling a hard-shell suitcase at his back. “That’s not what celibate means.”

“Are you certain?”

Tom rubbed his forehead, temples beginning to throb. “Why do you encourage her?”

The new arrival slammed the door. “I’m here. This better be good.”

"Preening for the ladies, you shameless rake,” Bella tittered, glancing over her shoulder at Hermione. "Reggie loves to show off his large and virile brain at every opportunity."

Regulus’s gaze cut to the corner, narrowing. “Who are you?”

Tom’s pulse skipped, realization propelling him forward before the bottom dropped out. “Hermione,
meet Regulus.” He stepped between them, pinning the man with a meaningful glare. “Reg, meet Hermione.”

Regulus blinked, lips pressed thin. Tom ground his teeth, forcing the rest of his body to remain at ease, knowing Hermione would detect his anxiety in a heartbeat. Regulus continued to stare at her for a long time, eyes unreadable, until at last Hermione shifted forward, awkward energy seeping from her every pore.

“Um… hello. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Regulus.” She held out her hand, a slight tremor running the length of her arm. He gazed upon the polite offering for a long beat before gripping it with his own, posture still rigid.

“Hello, Hermione. What a pleasure to meet someone with actual manners.”

She smiled lightly, standing straighter, confidence widening her shoulders.

Then Regulus continued to run his stupid fucking mouth.

“I take it you and Tom are lovers.”

Tom closed his eyes, shaking his head as Hermione reared back.

“Um…”

Bella’s shrill laughter echoed from the couch. "After this morning's performance, I think lovers is too generous a term.”

"Well, now that introductions are out of the way, let's get to it shall we?" Tom snapped, voice dripping murder. But the man paid him no mind, wheeling his case to the coffee table and sitting gingerly on the edge of the chair.

“What’s the objective?” He asked, tipping his case on its side and pulling the zipper.

“Cracking a phone,” Tom supplied.

Regulus stilled, glancing up sharply. “Excuse me?”

Tom rolled his eyes, removing the officer’s phone from his pocket and setting it on the table between them. Regulus stared at it with such disgust you’d think he was presented with a severed cock.

“I just wasted my entire morning crammed inside economy like a bloody sardine for a phone crack?”

Tom took a steadying breath. “Are you going to do it or not?”

Regulus continued to glare. “I believe I asked for crepes.”

This fucker…

Tom’s swollen knuckles throbbed, desperate to expel the building rage. Hermione shifted from the corner of his eye, drawing his focus. Her gaze was calm, grounding. He set his jaw, backing towards the counter slowly. Bella’s grating laughter followed him there and back as he returned with the bakery bag in hand.

He stopped at the table, throwing it at Regulus’s head. The idiot leaned back, catching it with a scowl. At long last he reached into his case, extracting a laptop. “I’ll do it if Bella agrees to keep a ten-foot distance throughout the duration of my stay.”
The female assassin continued to laugh from her sprawled position on the couch beside him. “Water water everywhere.”

He met her gaze, palms flattening over the top of the computer. She blinked and then scoffed. "Are you seriously going to make me stand? For Christ's sake, I'm not going to rape you in Tommy's living room! There's nowhere decent to string you up."

“Can we get on with it?” Tom snapped, skin prickling.

Regulus rolled his eyes, opening the laptop. “Five feet.”

“She agrees.”

“She’s sitting right here.”

Tom ignored her, edging closer to the chair. “I need a crack and a data mine.”

The laptop chimed as it started to boot. “What are you looking for?”

“The last outgoing call.”

“Outgoing calls aren’t a data mine, idiot.”

Tom rolled his head along his shoulders, tension mounting. “Eat your fucking crepes before I break that shiny computer over your head.”

Reg reached into the bag, lifting a thin roll of pastry from the stack and taking a bite, his other hand typing rapidly all the while.

“After you find the contact, I need you to hack into the Ministry database,” Tom continued.

Regulus arched a brow, face awash in the blue glow of the screen. “Well, at least that’s worth rolling out of bed for. But I could’ve just as easily done all this remotely.”

“I missed your smiling face.”

“Ha-fucking-ha. I asked for espresso as well.”

Tom’s fists clenched. Hermione sprung into action, eager to prevent the impending homicide. “I’ll get it.” She returned a moment later with a cup in hand, setting it before the man. Regulus plugged a small device into the phone’s charging port, not bothering to glance up as he addressed her.

“Thank you, Hermione.”

She nodded shortly, perching on the end of the couch beside Bella’s feet.

The phone lit up, then beeped. “It’s open,” Regulus announced, tone bored.

Hermione blinked, surprise written across the delicate lines in her face. Tom felt his own blood surge, the thrill of the hunt beginning to simmer in his veins. Reg pressed a few buttons, scrolling through text. “The last outgoing call was made yesterday afternoon, lasting thirty-six minutes and fourteen seconds.

Tom leaned forward. “To who?”

“Fuck Face.”
He froze, lifting a brow. Regulus glanced up, amusement dancing in his eyes. “Not you. The contact name.”

“What a delight,” Bella drawled. “Everyone at the Ministry is a certified fuck face, how ever will we narrow it down?”

“You’re certain it’s a Ministry employee?” Reg asked.

“Yes,” Tom supplied.

He set the phone aside. “Give me a minute.”

Hermione glanced between them all, fingers pressing the seam of the cushion. Hacking government systems was no doubt a novel concept to her. Tom had forgotten what it was like to derive any sense of wonderment from his job. She tucked a curl behind her ear, eyeing Regulus closely. “You can just hack the Ministry whenever you want?”

“More or less,” the man supplied, voice indifferent. “Though it’s rarely necessary. They tend to know far less than we do.” He lifted another crepe from the bag, plugging away dutifully on his laptop. “Looks like they still run security sweeps every five minutes, lazy bastards.” The screen changed colors, darkening rapidly. “I’m in.”

Hermione opened and closed her mouth. Bella chewed the lip of her cup, bored and restless as Regulus grabbed the phone, pulling up the outgoing number and typing it into the laptop keypad. Another few clicks and his fingers stilled. “Got him.”

Bella lurched over the arm of the sofa, reaching for the computer.

“Five feet,” Regulus snapped, lifting it out of her reach.

“Don’t flatter yourself, darling.” She grabbed it with deft reflexes, ripping it from his grasping hands and pulling it onto her lap. Tom fell still, studying her closely, heart skipping as she licked her lips, eyes gleaming like a cat as they fixed upon the screen. “It’s him,” she whispered breathlessly, dispelling any doubt in Tom’s mind.

He stepped forward, lifting the device with one hand and sending Regulus into another conniption. He studied the image in turn, a grainy black and white photo of the officer in uniform. “Harry Potter,” he uttered, then smirked. “Nice to meet you.” His eyes flickered to the text beneath the name, highlighted red. “It says he’s been terminated.”

Well, that was unexpected.

Hermione shifted on the couch. “If he doesn’t work for the Ministry, why is he tracking us?”

“I’ll have to ask him that myself.” Tom’s gaze continued lower, reading the address listed beneath the phone number. “I think it’s due time I pay the former agent a visit.”

Bella perched on her knees, gripping the back of the sofa and bouncing in place. “Are we making a house call?”

Tom handed the laptop back to Regulus, ignoring the sneer he received as the man wrenched it from his grip. “There is no we. You’re too close to him already.”

Shadows passed across her face. “I’m not nearly close enough.”
“My point exactly. This budding obsession will only compromise our mission.”

“Like your obsession with Hermione compromised our last one?”

He went rigid. Hermione leaned back, clearly struck by the words. Regulus continued to type, ignoring them all.

“I mean no offense, kitten,” Bella added over her shoulder, eyes fixed on Tom. “It’s not your fault you’re such a tempting little morsel.” She licked her lips, gripping the cushion between gleaming claws. “I’m coming with you.”

His jaw tensed, arguments bubbling in his throat like acid. But he stayed his tongue, having learned years ago he was better off choosing his battles with this particular female adversary.

It wasn’t worth shedding blood over.

“Fine,” he bit out.

She squealed with delight, flipping off the couch like an acrobat. Tom paid her no mind, addressing Regulus once more. "Find out everything you can about him. Employee reviews, psych evals, test scores, write-ups. I want it all."

“It’ll take a while. I didn’t bring all of my equipment, I’ll have to dance around their security walls.”

“Put on your tap shoes.”

Regulus rolled his eyes. Tom glanced to Hermione next. She sat so still and silent she hardly seemed real. Until she squirmed, no doubt sensing his eyes upon her. She peered up, eyes guarded as he spoke.

“Don’t leave the flat. I’ll be home soon.”

He blinked, startled by his own words. He’d never referred to his flat as home before. Never thought of it as anything more than a fortified shelter to lay his head when he was in town. But Hermione was here now. And just like the moment he first laid eyes upon her in the orphanage, his life was forever changed.

He pushed the thought aside, unwilling to dwell on such matters while their very lives hung in the balance. He rounded on Bella, the mischievous expression adorning her face telling him all he needed to know about her upcoming plans.

“We need to get in and out without leaving a trace.”

She nodded like a toy bobblehead. "I’ll be on my very best behavior."

He swallowed back a groan, striding for the door. “Let’s go.”

Harry rubbed his eyes, exhausted and seeing double. He lowered the stack of papers he’d been thumbing through for the last two hours, an ever-growing pile walling him in on either side of the desk. He leaned back, stretching his spine, the chair creaking with the movement.

“Um… Harry,” Neville hedged carefully from behind his screen. “I think I found something.”

Harry blinked, a second-wind overtaking him in a heady rush. He leaped from the chair as though it were spring-loaded, nearly toppling it to the floor as he cut a quick path across the room. “Thank
god, I’m losing my mind over here.” He leaned against the edge of Neville’s desk, gazing at his screen as Luna wheeled her own chair closer.

"I started with this guy,” Neville began, dragging his cursor over a blue folder labeled with random numbers and letters. "It piqued my interest when you first gave me the drive, but I kept my focus on UK businesses. Even so, this one stood out to me."

“Why?” Harry asked, folding his arms, eyes glued to the computer.

“It’s the only highlighted folder on the drive.”

Luna leaned forward, gaze brightened by the screen as Neville double-clicked the folder, a new box popping up, filled with image files.

“It’s loaded with Xerox copies of donation receipts to various charities and foundations based all over the world. They range from a few thousand to a few million.” He double-clicked one of the images, enlarging it. Harry’s eyes immediately fell upon the blacked-out boxes hiding chunks of text, similar to the censoring they saw on the New Beginnings invoice. “Donor names are blacked out on each,” Neville continued. “The only listed account information I could track led to the Caymans.”

“The Knights,” Harry concluded, back drawing tight.

His friend nodded. “So I started looking at the charities themselves, searching for connections or anomalies.”

Luna and Harry drew closer at the same time, flanking Neville on either side.

“They’re based in different countries, Directed by different people, started in different years…” Neville peered up, eyes brimming with excitement. “But they all have the same Founder.”

Harry swallowed heavily, forcing himself to remain seated as Neville clicked something on the screen, enlarging a webpage. “Jasper Carrow,” his friend stated proudly.

Harry blinked, studying the corporate site. “I know that name.”

“He was CEO of Carrow Tech,” Luna supplied.

“Was?”

“He died ten years ago,” Neville said.

Harry deflated, eyes locked on the modern building featured at the center of the website. "Who runs the business now?"

“His son.”

Harry scrubbed a hand over his face and glanced to the murder wall. “Do we know how Carrow Sr. died?”

Neville clicked something else, enlarging a news article. “Heart attack in his house. Maid found him dead in the morning.”

Harry sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. A heart attack. Too boring to fit either of his killers’ M.O.

“There’s something else,” Neville added, drawing Harry’s attention back like a magnet. “Almost half
the charities in the folder were started in the last decade.”

Harry drew back. “Charities are still being founded in Jasper’s name?”

His friend nodded. Harry smirked, clapping the man on the shoulder. “Good work, Nev.”

Neville beamed under the praise, sitting straighter as Harry released him and glanced to the screen. “What do we know about his kid?”

“His name is Amycus,” Neville stated, scrolling further down the article.


Luna wheeled closer, reading over Neville’s shoulder. “Amycus wasn’t much older than Draco Malfoy when he became CEO.”

Neville flushed brilliantly at her close proximity, voice tinged with intrigue. “Do you think that’s the pattern?”

She shook her head, continuing to read. “Something can only be called a pattern if it happens at least three times.”

“A connection then?”

“I don’t care how we label it,” Harry stated firmly. “It’s a lead.” He rubbed his hands together, eager as a child on Christmas morning. “And we’re going to follow it to the very end.”

Hermione shifted awkwardly, eyes fixed upon the window, seeing nothing beyond her own pale reflexion in the glass. Regulus continued to type away in his makeshift office at the center of the living room, seemingly oblivious to her lingering presence at his back.

She shifted from foot to foot, unsure what to do. She didn't want to distract him but felt equally uncomfortable hiding away in the bedroom. Besides, she was much too wound up to do anything as mundane as watch TV. She could barely concentrate on her own thoughts, little less follow an external script. So she rubbed her arms, forcing her eyes down to the street below. Cars and buses and people moved in all directions, overwhelming her senses. She lifted her gaze to the skyline. The sun started its downward descent into late afternoon.

We’re running out of time.

Her stomach clenched, ashamed by her own selfish thoughts.

A man’s life is at stake, what’s the matter with you?  

Innocent or not, it wasn’t up to her to decide whether he should live or die.

She started walking again, desperate to outrun her own mind.

“Please stop doing that.”

She jolted, startled by the voice, stopping in her tracks and facing the couch. “Doing what?”

“Walking aimlessly,” Regulus continued, eyes glued to his screen as he rapidly typed. “It’s highly
distracting.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

He didn't move aside from the dizzying blur of his fingers, the endless tapping of keys swelling all around her until it drowned out the rapid thud of her heart. She edged closer, curious and desperate for a distraction, peering over his shoulder at the laptop centered on his knees. The screen was dark, bright green code filling every corner, dimmed by her reflection.

“Please don’t hover. It’s even more distracting.”

She reared back, embarrassed and fidgeting. “Should I leave the room?”

“That’s not necessary, unless you find you’re unable to cease pacing and hovering.”

She bit her lip, leaning her hip against the couch, rambling beyond her control. “I feel restless. And useless. I wish there was something I could do…” A tense beat. She swallowed. “That isn’t directly related to killing someone.”

He double tapped the enter key, the screen flashing. “You can unpack my case.”

She glanced down at the case in question.

“I left Berlin in a rush and don’t remember what I grabbed,” he continued, as though sensing her shock.

“You don’t mind me handling your equipment?”

His movements paused all at once, eyes darting up. Hermione blinked, replaying the words in her mind before blushing hotly. “That sounded far less suggestive in my head.”

He smirked, peering at the screen once more. “Understood. Happens to me quite often. There’s an ungodly amount of technology innuendos. I detest them all.”

She smiled, tension easing as she rounded the couch, perching on the opposite chair and pulling his case to her feet. “So… you live in Berlin?”

“Hm.”

She pressed her lips thin, biting her tongue to keep from making nervous small talk.

“How long have you known Tom?” He asked abruptly, eyes still averted to his task.

Hermione’s thoughts ground to a halt at the question. "Since we were kids,” she finally responded, squirming anew. "What about you?"

“We met approximately a year after I started working for the organization.”

She nodded, tracing the line of his case with an idle fingertip. “Did they recruit you young?”

“Nineteen.”

Her heart jolted. *Monsters targeting teens.* “How did they find you?”

“I was arrested during a cyber-sting operation. The warehouse I lived and worked in was raided. I faced a twenty-year sentence.”
She leaned back, ensnared by the tale. “For what?”

“Hacking the Pentagon.”

Her eyes flared wide. “Why did you hack the Pentagon?”

“A friend dared me.” He shrugged lightly. “But mostly, I was painfully bored.”

She blinked.

“Needless to say,” he continued, “I lacked quite a bit of direction in my youth. When they approached me in the prison I was more than happy to accept their golden ticket.”

“Did Green recruit you?”

“Green hand selects field operatives only. I met him when I partnered with Tom.”

She took a slow breath, studying his profile closely. “Were you scared?”

His movements stuttered, eyes flickering up. “Of joining?”

She nodded.

"Not especially. I was more frightened of spending the next two decades without a decent internet connection.”

She bit her lip, unsure how to phrase her next question. "Have you ever…” her mind reeled, heart rioting in her chest. She glanced away, shifting awkwardly. "Nevermind."

His fingers never paused. “No.”

Her eyes flickered up, limbs stuck in place like a store mannequin.

“I haven’t killed anyone,” he stated. “Not directly anyway. I’m more skilled with a keyboard than a gun. We’re assigned tasks that play to our strengths. They’ll have you brewing neurotoxins in no time.”

A bolt of electricity surged along her spine. “What?” She whispered, cold sweat seeping from her pores.

“They’ll have you—”

“Why would they have me brewing neurotoxins?”

“Your chemistry background.”

A beat. Then two. Hermione leaned in, fists clenched tight. “How do you know about that?”

He stilled, hands hovering in place, eyes locked ahead, staring blankly at the screen. "I just looked you up." His voice sounded casual enough, but his gaze remained carefully averted.

She swallowed heavily, unease riding her hard. “With only my first name?”

“I hacked the Ministry in two minutes.” He glanced up at last. “I could have found you with your first initial.”

Her shoulders lowered at his words. They made sense. But she couldn’t shake the feeling that
something sinister hung overhead, poised to strike.

“Speaking of which,” he continued abruptly, breaking the glass dome of her paranoia. “I need to concentrate. Tom will brood for hours if I don't have something for him when he returns.”

She nodded, forcing her attention to his case, but as she pulled the zipper she felt a piece of herself coil tight, ready to spring.

Ready to run.

Tom glanced either way down the street before crossing, Bella’s heels clicking alongside as they approached the flat. She bounced eagerly, eyes wide, manic. He shook his head, leading the path forward. “I already regret letting you tag along.”

“You say that as if you had any choice in the matter.” Despite the psychotic gleam in her eyes, her voice remained remarkably steady. “Besides, you need me.”

He slowed to a stop along the edge of the building, casually glancing around for signs of a witness. “And why is that?”

“You can’t fit through the window.”

He blinked, looking at her sharply, then followed her dark gaze upward. A small widow sat ajar on the second story, revealing a shadowed interior. Tom sighed, resuming his street inspection. “Hurry up.”

She laughed shortly, edging closer. “I think you’re mistaking me for the love-stricken genie you keep on the shelf at home. Your every wish is not my command, Master.”

“If only I could be so lucky to stuff you inside a bloody bottle.”

She smirked, folding her hands innocently behind her back. “Say something nice and maybe I’ll consider letting you inside.”

He set his jaw, refusing to meet her all-too-pleased gaze. “I haven’t fantasized about killing you today.” His eyes narrowed on a passing car in the distance. “Yet.”

“You clearly stole that limerick from Hallmark, but I’ll take it.” She started backing away with a wink. “B.R.B., darling.”

He continued to monitor the landscape ahead as she deftly hopped the fence blocking the alley. He listened to her climb the dumpster, her low grunt as she began to scale the metal drainpipe. He pretended to check his phone as a man passed along the opposite side of the street with his dog, oblivious to the assassin climbing the wall ten meters away. A car drove past without pause, everyone preoccupied with their own lives.

Tom glanced up a minute later, the drainpipe empty, the window pushed wide, a sheer curtain swaying in the breeze. He counted the seconds, shaking his head as he reached the two-minute mark.

So much for not having any homicidal fantasies.

And then a loud click sounded, followed by the front door swinging wide. Bella leaned into the frame, smiling obscenely. “Hello, luv. Selling life insurance door-to-door? I’m not interested in a new policy.”
Tom started up the front steps. “That’s too bad. You never know when you might be maimed and
dismembered by a door-to-door salesman.”

She laughed, undeterred as he pushed past, shutting the barrier behind them. “Best we divide and
conquer;” she stated, voice disturbingly professional. “I’ll take the bedroom.”

He rolled his eyes as she bounded for the stairs. “Bella.” She halted on the first step, spinning on her
heel. “Wear your gloves and remember why we’re here.”

“Yes, Dad.”

He awarded her with a hostile smile. “Don’t waste time sniffing his boxers.”

She shook her head and continued up. “Don’t be crass. I intend to sniff his sheets. I’ll take a pair of
boxers for the road.” She emerged onto the landing and disappeared around the corner in a blur of
motion.

Tom reached into his back pocket and extracted his leather gloves, sliding them into place and
entering the living room. The first thing to catch his eyes was the general barrenness of the space. No
photos or mementos in sight, no personal touches to denote this as a home instead of a hotel. He
traced a fingertip along the top of the television, coming away with a thin film of dust. The remote
was centered atop, seemingly untouched in a long time. He tilted his head, the bowed screen
distorting his reflection.

Lives at work.

He turned on his heel, pacing to the wall and opening every drawer and cabinet he came across. The
majority were stuffed with random baubles and junk, spare light bulbs, batteries, pens. The only
written notes he could find were crumpled reminders and half-formed grocery lists, nothing of
intrigue.

He moved to the bathroom next, pulling the curtain aside to confirm his set suspicion. A single bar of
soap and a mostly empty bottle of Old Spice shampoo awaited him.

Bachelor.

Tom opened the medicine cabinet, spotting ibuprofen, toothpaste, bruise cream and floss. No
prescription bottles. His eyes narrowed, agitation steadily growing. In eight years he’d never once
encountered a squeaky clean agent. There was dirt here somewhere. He just had to find it.

He paced into the kitchen, a stack of mail beside an empty fruit basket drawing his gaze immediately.
He lifted the first envelope, relieved to see Potter’s name printed along the front. With so little
personal decor they could have just as easily wandered into a neighbor’s flat.

A blinking red light caught his eye. He turned to the wall, surprised to see a house phone and
answering machine mounted beside a blank calendar. Old school. Potter was just full of surprises.
Tom pressed the play button, a woman’s automated speech filling the galley.

“One new message, today, 1:42 pm...”

A click, followed by a man’s boisterous voice.

“Oi, Harry, meet me at The Hog’s Head at seven. They have the best nachos in the goddamn city. I
know, I know— you can’t stay long, but don’t even think about skipping out. I swear to god, if you
stand me up I’m coming to your flat and kicking the bloody door in.”
Tom arched a brow.

“Alright, see you there, mate.”

Another beep. Tom reached up, pressing the reminder button, the red flash returning.

“Well that settles it,” another voice spoke.

Tom glanced over his shoulder. Bella leaned in the doorframe, gloved fingers tapping her arm, red light reflecting in her gaze.

“Settles what?” he asked, opening the fridge, unsurprised to find it empty but for a few long-expired condiments.

“Our destination for this evening,” she supplied breezily.

Tom reached higher, checking the freezer next, hoping to hit it lucky and find a few severed heads inside. “Hm. They do have the best nachos in the goddamn city.”

“So I’ve heard.” Her smile stretched grotesquely. “And I believe the occasion calls for a bit of shopping.”

He sighed heavily, slamming the door on the painfully empty ice box. “You think everything calls for a bit of shopping.”

“We have to find the perfect dress.”

He blinked, meeting her eye at last. “You aren’t making direct contact with Potter.”

Bella tossed her head back, laughing deeply. “Silly boy.” Only to settle a moment later, licking her lips. “The dress isn’t for me.”

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