Nothing Like the Sun

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Nothing Like the Sun

by orphan_account

Summary

There’s something unnerving about Tom Riddle.

Hermione’s never quite been able to articulate just what it is about him that unsettles her so: after all, Riddle’s popular and charming and adored by Hogwarts staff and students alike. Still, she’d swear that there’s something lurking beneath that warmly polite veneer of his, something that lies in wait like a serpent in the dark.

But it’s not until her sixth year at Hogwarts, when she rashly confronts him over an unprecedented act of violence, that the full force of Riddle’s chilling regard is abruptly and wholly turned on her.

Notes

Hi! You might or might'n't recall a lil fic called Nothing Like the Sun, the abandoned and orphaned version of which you can find at the link. I let it go for personal reasons, but I feel that I owe it to the people who enjoyed it to finish it, and that I owe it to myself to try my hand at writing again. That being said, pls stop leaving kudos on the abandoned version of this fic. Pls.

I will not be reposting this to FFN, however. Because FFN is a Pit.
New updates should start tomorrow, so please look forward to it!

Original author's notes

I lifted this work's title from Billy Shakes's Sonnet 130. You should read it if you haven't already; it's my favorite.

The pairing, I think, ought to function as its own warning, but please heed the tags. This fic doesn’t contain anything that's especially terrible (no non-con or MCD, for example), but Tom is still very much a creep. Also, flagrant abuse of dramatic irony.
“Koschei, Koschei,” she whispered. “What would I have been if I had never seen the birds? I am no one; I am nothing. I am a blank paper on which you and your magic wrote a girl. Just the kind of girl you wanted, all hungry and hurt and needing. A machine for loving you. Nothing in me was not made by you.”

― Catherynne M. Valente, *Deathless*

3 August 1996

“They’re a right couple of bastards, I’m telling you,” Ron declared to Diagon Alley at large, kicking a bit of rubbish out of his path as a means of venting his feelings.

“Uh-uh,” said Harry, clearly not wanting to get into it. Unfortunately, Harry’s lackluster response was all the encouragement Ron needed to carry on with his tirade.

“And when I asked them for a family discount, right, Fred told me to cram it up my—” A stooped little granny coming out of a nearby shop fixed Ron with a beady look, and although Ron met her glare defiantly, his closing remarks were notably free of profanity. “Anyway, you get the general idea, yeah?”

“I’ll bet all of London’s got the idea,” Harry muttered, and Ron gave him a perfunctory shove before turning to appeal to Hermione.

“And what’d you have to do to get complimentary merchandise, huh, Hermione? Did you bewitch Fred and George? Promised them your firstborn, maybe?”
This last suggestion was spoken in tones that Hermione couldn’t help but interpret as hopeful, as though Ron had already calculated how many of his own unborn children he’d have to hand over to his brothers in order to secure a free crate of Weasleys’ Wildfire Whiz-bangs.

“Don’t be absurd, Ron.” Hermione turned the Patented Daydream Charm over in her hands in order to examine the warning label. “All I said was that casting a charm of this complexity and staying power would require an extraordinary bit of spellwork.” She looked up from the garishly painted box, fixed Ron with a beady look of her own, and said, pointedly, “It’s almost as if treating people nicely will prompt them to treat you kindly in return.”

The hopeful expression ran away from Ron’s face. Far from seeming heartened by Hermione’s advice, he appeared to deflate.

“Nah,” he grumbled, scanning the cobblestones on the off chance that another stray bit of garbage would spontaneously appear and give him something to kick. “If I tried complimenting Fred and George, they’d only think I was smarming up to them. They wouldn’t give me a free Daydream Charm for that; in fact, I’d bet you anything they’d charge me twice whatever’s on the price tag, and then maybe jinx me to drive the point home.”

Hermione pinched her bottom lip between her teeth. She wanted to tell Ron that Fred and George weren’t that petty, but—well, they were, was the thing, and Ron knew it. Hermione gave Harry imploring eyes over Ron’s shoulder, but Harry just shrugged and shook his head unhelpfully.

Oh, honestly.

“You can have it, then, if you’d like.” Hermione thrust the colorful box at Ron, who eyed it as if it might grow fangs and bite him (which, it being a Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes product, was not entirely outside the realm of possibility). “No, really. I haven’t got any use for it, so if you want it that badly, take it. Just promise me you won’t use it during your lessons—”

“Nah,” said Ron, straightening his posture. He had the sheer nerve to look insulted, as if he hadn’t been moaning over the scarcity of free joke shop merchandise mere moments ago. “Nah, Hermione, you keep it. I don’t wanna give my money to those two pricks, anyway—”

Hermione shuffled the Daydream Charm into her left hand so as to poke Ron in the side with her right.

“What—you’re not going to lecture me about my language, are you? Honestly, Hermione, you’re as bad as Mum. Anyway, suppose I do take that Daydream Charm. I wouldn’t have to pay for it, sure, but using it’s as good as giving those prats free advertising, isn’t it? What is it with you two?”

Harry had just elbowed Ron in the ribs, and Ron was dividing a look of towering betrayal between him and Hermione.

Wordlessly, Hermione pointed.

With the start of term looming so close, Diagon Alley was evocative of nothing so much as a congested artery. Wizarding Britain’s preferred shopping district was positively clogged with Hogwarts students and their families: everywhere you looked, arms were laden down with neatly wrapped parcels and colorful shopping bags, parents pressing dripping ice cream cones into their children’s hands as a means of keeping them complacent in the afternoon heat.

Two people, however, had broken off from the bustling crowd and were turning down a rather infamous side street, and it was to this pair that Hermione had pointed.
“What do the Malfoys think they’re doing, skulking around Knockturn Alley?” Hermione curled her fingers around the hem of Ron’s t-shirt and gave it an anxious tug. “Don’t they care about keeping up appearances, at least? Never mind that an underage wizard like Draco hasn’t got any business perusing Dark products.”

“Yeah, but it’s not like anyone but us is paying them any attention.” Absently, Ron reached down to unstick Hermione’s fingers from his t-shirt. His eyes had gone narrow and speculative, and so had Harry’s. “What’re they doing down there, d’you reckon?”

“Only one way to find out for sure, isn’t there?” said Harry, and the glint in his eyes had Hermione darting forward to grab him before he could take so much as half a step. “What, Hermione?”

“You mustn’t, Harry!” Harry was clawing at Hermione’s fingers, trying to unhook them from his t-shirt, but Hermione would not budge. However, for all that Harry was a terribly skinny thing, he was also an athlete, and Hermione was not; how long it would take him to shake her off wasn’t a question of minutes, but a question of seconds.

“It’s dangerous down there and you know it,” Hermione pressed, clinging for all she was worth. “I shouldn’t have said anything about Draco being too young to shop there—Lucius Malfoy is an adult, and if he wants to take his underage son shopping in Knockturn Alley, that’s none of our business. At least—at least wait for Sirius and Mrs. Weasley to get back from—”

“Are you mental, Hermione?” Focused though she was on her grappling match with Harry, Hermione would have to’ve been blind to miss Ron’s look of exaggerated disbelief. “Wait, never mind, don’t answer that. Obviously you’re mental, or else you wouldn’t be suggesting that my mum—you know, short, red hair, bit of a temper, maybe you’ve met—would be okay with us traipsing all casual-like into Knockturn Alley—”

“Your mum wouldn’t,” Hermione conceded, “but Sirius might.” She frowned as she said this; Hermione stood with Mrs. Weasley in that she’d never quite approved of Sirius Black’s parenting.

Harry seized the opening provided by Hermione’s wandering attention and successfully untangled her fingers from his t-shirt. He took a giant step out of Hermione’s reach, but he didn’t immediately sprint off to Knockturn Alley, so perhaps Hermione might talk some sense into him yet.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” said Harry, eyeing Hermione’s hands with no small measure of suspicion. “Sirius being all right with us strolling into Knockturn Alley, I mean. He talks big about all the trouble he got into when he was our age, but d’you remember that time I thrashed Malfoy and nearly got banned from playing Quidditch ever again?”

“As if I could forget,” said Hermione. “You’re not helping your case by bringing that up, by the way.”

“That’s not fair, Hermione,” said Ron. “Malfoy provoked Harry, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, tell that to McGonagall,” said Harry, preempting Hermione’s retort. “Anyway, you can’t have forgotten the Howler Sirius sent me, can you? Said Dumbledore needn’t bother banning me from Quidditch, as Sirius’d be Flooing to Hogwarts to snap my Firebolt in half?”

Hermione, who could recall in detail the contents of every Howler that her two best friends had ever received over their time at Hogwarts—fourteen between them, by the way, and they still had two years to go—pursed her lips in silent condemnation of every reckless thing that Harry James Potter had already done and would inevitably do again.
Harry rolled his eyes at Hermione’s spot-on impression of Mrs. Weasley, turned on his heel, and said over his shoulder, “Well, the two of you can come if you want; I really don’t care. I mean, if something awful happens to me while I’m down there, you’re bound to feel lousy for letting me go alone, but—”

Ron, who had gone whiter than usual under his freckles, jogged to catch up with Harry. After all, where Harry went, Ron went, even when he preferred to stay put.

Harry spared a fuming Hermione another glance, grinned, and said, “Still don’t want to come along?”

Hermione badly wanted to stamp her foot, but she controlled herself with some effort. And as she went where Harry and Ron went, even when her good sense told her not to, she hurried to close the distance between them. She glared back when Harry and Ron grinned at her, daring them to comment. They didn’t.

“Wish I’d brought my dad’s Cloak along,” said Harry, leading the way as the three of them hooked the corner into Knockturn Alley. The day seemed to blink immediately into night: Diagon Alley had been bright and glittering with afternoon sunlight, but as Knockturn’s buildings were crammed together cheek-by-jowl, much of the light was blocked out, draping the area in thick, atmosphere-appropriate shadows.

“Yes, well,” said Hermione, blinking as her eyes adjusted to rapid shift in lighting, “our being out in the open like this ought to motivate you to get in and out as quickly as possible, oughtn’t it?” Even to her own ears, she sounded quite snotty, but she didn’t particularly care.

Harry and Ron shushed Hermione, and it was possible that they did so for reasons outside of simply wanting her to shut up in general. Aside from the occasional creak of unoiled hinges or the sporadic scrabbling of unseen vermin, Knockturn Alley was deathly quiet—and whereas Diagon Alley had been packed to the gills, its dodgy neighbor was virtually deserted. As Hermione was proud to say that she had little firsthand experience with this awful place, she had no idea if this was normal, or if Knockturn Alley was experiencing a steep downswing in business.

Perhaps its usual clientele preferred to do their shopping after the sun had set.

“Which shop d’you think they’ve gone in?” Harry asked, hushed, as he and Ron and Hermione paused to survey the immediate area. The criminally narrow street necessitated that they all but stand on top of each other.

“There’s only one way to find out, isn’t there?” said Ron, looking put out by what he was about to suggest. “We keep walking and looking into windows till we spot them. And then we hope that they don’t see us before we see them.”

“Yes, Ron, and what could they do if they spotted us first?” Hermione was hesitant to raise her voice, so she compensated by talking in an especially harsh whisper. “The school term hasn’t started yet, but Draco would still get into loads of trouble for attacking fellow students—and never mind what would happen to Lucius Malfoy if the Ministry found out that he’d harmed underage teenagers. Besides—” Hermione’s lips thinned. “They’re not the sort to dirty their hands.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Ron’s shoulders relaxed a touch. “If they caught us, they’d sooner spin things to make it look like we’re in the wrong than try to hex us.”

“I don’t see how even those two could manage that, though,” said Hermione. “They walked down here first, after all.”
“Yeah.” Ron was now eyeing an empty spider’s web with great trepidation, possibly expecting its tenant to return at any moment and take a flying leap at his face. “But could we prove that?”

“We won’t be able to prove anything if we lose track of them now,” said Harry, who was all but vibrating at the prospect of catching Draco Malfoy in the act of something nefarious. He resumed his stalk down the street, legs eating up great bites of space so that Ron and Hermione had to jog to catch up to him.

The trouble with Knockturn Alley was that it curved like a coiling snake so that you could see only a little ways ahead of you at any given moment. As trying to look too far ahead would be in vain, Hermione concentrated on scanning the grimy window displays as she passed them, hoping to spot a gleam of blond hair. She saw a table crowded with foul-looking candles the color of human waste, dummies that appeared to shift whenever she blinked, and, most revoltingly of all, a collection of shrunken heads strung up in a vulgar parody of an infant’s mobile—but no Malfoys.

“Wouldn’t fancy a trim in that place,” said Ron, nodding at a sign that claimed the building over which it hung was a barbershop. “Bet they’d take your scalp along with your hair.”

“Yeah, or your entire head,” said Harry. “And then sell it to that lot.” He pointed at the display of shrunken heads, the look on his face a match for what Hermione was feeling.

Ron snickered a touch hysterically, as though laughing at the inappropriate was the only means by which he could cope with the situation, but Hermione recoiled.

“Don’t be vile,” she snapped, and then clapped her hands over her mouth when she heard her own voice bounce around the alley in a terrible echo. Harry and Ron were staring at her, alarmed, and their fears were seemingly confirmed when there came a great clattering racket from behind them.

It could have been an especially large rat, whatever was making that noise, but Hermione doubted it, and so, apparently, did Harry.

“Run,” Harry said, prodding at Ron’s and Hermione’s backs to get them moving. “Get going, go—”

Hermione required no further encouragement. She ran.

The awful shopfronts blurred in her periphery as her feet smacked far too noisily off the uneven cobblestones, and she nearly tripped every few paces over debris that she never saw coming but seemed to sprout out of the ground with the deliberate intent of sending her sprawling. Things would have gone a bit more smoothly, at least, if the street had been more uniform so as to allow her a straight shot, but what with all these random twists, Hermione had to slow herself down whenever she started to gain momentum. She was likely to hit a grimy wall nose first before she and the others could find a proper hiding place—and she couldn’t hear a bloody thing over the entwined rhythms of her pounding footsteps and her thrashing heartbeat, so she was bound to run into unsavory persons unknown before she noticed them coming at her—

Hermione flung out a hand, groping for a hold on an overturned wheelbarrow, and stumbled to a halt. There was an awful stitch in her chest and another in her side. She hated running. Loathed it.

Harry, though—Harry could outrun anybody, and Ron’s gangling legs were the longest in their year. Hermione had got a head start, but Harry and Ron ought to have overtaken her by now.

They hadn’t.

Hermione released her death grip on the wheelbarrow, pulling a revolted face at the grime that’d rubbed off on her palm, and reeled around on the spot. Her eyes bounced from the nearest shopfront,
to the bend in the alleyway, to the sliver of sky visible between the crooked, looming rooftops—as if Harry and Ron had summoned their brooms with the magic they were forbidden to use over the holidays and taken to the skies.

They’d been separated. But how? Knockturn Alley was sinuous and gloomy, yes, but there wasn’t a lot to it, not like Diagon Alley. Had they taken shelter in a shop? But they wouldn’t have done, not without Hermione.

Hermione wobbled forward a few steps, clutching her Daydream Charm as if it could somehow anchor her. Running hadn’t done her hair any favors, and she shook it out of her eyes as she squinted around, hoping that she’d somehow missed Harry and Ron and that they would pop up any moment now.

They didn’t.

Well. Well. She’d just have to retrace her steps, now, wouldn’t she? And if she ran into anyone who wasn’t Harry or Ron, what could they say to her? She wasn’t doing anything wrong, exactly; there weren’t any rules barring underage wizards and witches from taking a stroll down Knockturn Alley, for all that it was generally discouraged. And if someone unsavory tried to accost her, she’d give them a good kick—Ginny had taught her where to aim so as to yield the most devastating results—and run for it.

Yes. That was what she would do.

Nodding to herself a little frantically, Hermione began to march back the way she’d come—only to hesitate.

Voices.

Hermione could hear voices coming from around the corner, the corner down which she’d nearly ran before she’d noticed that Harry and Ron were no longer with her. And those voices simply couldn’t belong to Harry and Ron, not if they were coming from that direction. Hermione had been quite sure that they hadn’t overtaken her; blinded though she’d been by panic, she’d have felt them bump her shoulders as they squeezed down the narrow street.

And though the voices in question had been largely incomprehensible when Hermione had first noticed them, they now clarified into snatches of crisp speech.

“—how, exactly, am I supposed to attend school with this thing on my arm? They’re bound to notice eventually, even that idiot—and Pomfrey’s sure to—”

“You’ll just have to keep your sleeves rolled down at all times, then. If anyone asks, tell them you’re prone to catching chills.”

“Yeah, but if I get injured playing Quidditch—”

“Then you’ll do your level best to avoid the necessity of a trip to the hospital wing, won’t you? You said that you’d take this seriously, Draco.”

“I am taking it seriously. But couldn’t you have waited until I’d finished—”

Draco Malfoy’s complaints cut off as abruptly as if he’d been forcefully silenced, and Hermione never found out what he’d wanted the other speaker to wait for. However, she had heard enough to recognize the voice of the person with whom Draco had been arguing.
And it didn’t belong to Lucius Malfoy.

Hermione’s throat was so dry that it audibly clicked when she swallowed. She ought to turn around. Her good sense was screaming at her in a voice oddly similar to Mrs. Weasley’s that she ought to get out of here and find an adult before doubling back to fetch her errant friends.

But it wouldn’t hurt to have a look, would it?

Hermione would just peek around the corner, match the face to the voice, and then leave. She wouldn’t linger. All she wanted to do was confirm her suspicions. She had to make sure.

With apologies to her common sense, Hermione dropped into a crouch and waddled awkwardly around the curve in the alley. Three questionably steady towers of corroded cauldrons offered cover, so she ducked behind those and sat forward on her knees to peer through a gap in the stacks.

She had to bite her tongue to keep from crying out.

Draco Malfoy’s back was flush against a wall papered in gruesome advertisements, and his left arm was being held at a painful-looking angle by—yes, Hermione had been right about the voice, because that was almost certainly Tom Riddle who’d pinned Draco in place like an insect to a corkboard.

Riddle’s pale hand covered most of Draco’s paler forearm, and Hermione couldn’t say what he was doing, but it must have been awful, must have felt awful—the sharp angles that made up Draco’s face had rearranged themselves into crumpled lines of agony. And while Hermione couldn’t see Riddle’s face, his knuckles had bleached white from the force he was exerting on Draco’s arm.

Draco’s lips parted, and a loud, whistling gasp trickled out from between his clenched teeth.

Hermione’s brain kicked into overdrive.

She couldn’t use magic. She was underage. She wouldn’t turn seventeen for another month. She couldn’t Stun Riddle, couldn’t Disarm him, couldn’t knock him off his feet.

Her hands tightened on her Patented Daydream Charm’s colorful box, crumpling the thin cardboard. Hermione glanced down, registered the dent she’d made, dismissed it. She returned her attention to Malfoy and Riddle, grasping for a thread of inspiration, but she kept coming back to what she couldn’t do.

She couldn’t Stun Riddle. Couldn’t Disarm him. Not with magic.

Not with magic.

Hermione dropped her eyes from the scene before her and gave the Daydream Charm a long, considering look.

She was a witch, yes, but she’d been a Muggle first, in practice if not in actuality. Magic was nice, but she didn’t need it. It wasn’t a crutch for her the way it was for people who’d grown up in the Wizarding world.

She weighed the box in her hands, considering.

It would have to do, wouldn’t it?

She reared up from behind the cauldrons, wound back her arm, and hurled the Daydream Charm at
Riddle’s head.

But Hermione was not an athlete, and had little in the way of upper body strength, and the momentum she’d put into her throw was not enough to carry the box very far at all.

The box landed several feet short of where Malfoy and Riddle stood, and the dull thunk it made was, most unfortunately, just loud enough to draw Riddle’s attention.

Riddle dropped Malfoy’s arm—Hermione got a fleeting impression of a dark splotch that might’ve been a bruise before Malfoy’s sleeve slipped back into place—and wheeled around, dark eyes flickering over the tragically squashed box before fixing unerringly on Hermione’s cauldrons.

Hermione could have gone. Riddle might have given chase, and he might not have. The point was, she could have tried to escape.

She didn’t. Feeling rather like a sad excuse for a jack-in-the-box, Hermione popped up from behind the cauldrons, took firm hold of her sense of righteous anger, and said, “Just what do you think you’re doing, Riddle? Unhand him this instant.”

The warbling quality of her voice possibly ruined the intended effect, if the tick of Riddle’s arched eyebrows was any indication. He certainly didn’t look shocked or fearful to see her. He hadn’t even blinked.

“All right, Hermione…Granger, is it?” Riddle asked, as if getting her name right was the real concern here. “Your concern for Draco’s wellbeing is admirable, if misplaced, but I think you’re a bit confused? As you can see”—Riddle raised the hands that were decidedly not touching Malfoy. “—I’ve already unhanded him.”

Hermione’s cheeks stung. Where did Riddle get off, trying to make a fool of her when she’d caught him in the act of—something. Something dreadful, if Malfoy’s drawn, damp face was any indication. “Only because I distracted you.” Hermione’s voice grew gradually steadier as her anger ate at her fear. She stomped around the cauldrons and marched right up to Malfoy to take a closer look at his face. “What on earth were you doing to him? He looks like he’s going to faint.”

Malfoy was, in fact, swaying like a paper ornament in a strong wind, and Hermione suspected that the wall at his back was all that was keeping him on his feet. Still, he marshalled himself enough to croak, “Piss off, Granger.”

“Now, Draco.” Riddle’s pleasant voice was right beside Hermione’s ear, and she all but tripped over herself to put some distance between them. “Is that any way to talk to the girl who thought she was coming to your rescue? It was admirable of her, wasn’t it, to overlook House rivalries in the name of chivalry?”

Hermione bristled. Riddle’s tone had been polite, even kind, but she hadn’t liked the inflection he’d put on chivalry. It was almost as if—well, it was as if he was mocking her.

But Hermione had never had much patience for Tom Riddle, had she? Oh, his marks were the highest in the school—higher, even, than Hermione’s—and most students could vouch for him being the nicest Slytherin they knew, but Hermione had always thought that his polite demeanor came across as rather insincere. How nice could Riddle be, really, when he associated with thugs and bullies and vocal blood supremacists?

And how nice could he be if he cornered his classmates in dodgy alleys and caused them inexplicable pain?
Hermione momentarily shunted that aside, though, in favor of parsing what Riddle had said.

“What do you mean by that?” she asked, turning to look up at Riddle’s politely querying face. “That I thought I was coming to Malfoy’s rescue?”

“Quick on the uptake, this one,” Draco muttered, and then went silent at a flickering glance from Riddle.

And what sort of person could silence their friends with a look?

“I apologize for not explaining myself more clearly.” Riddle offered Hermione a small, warm smile that she did not return. “You took the situation entirely out of context, Hermione—is it all right if I call you Hermione?—not that I can blame you, of course. Now that I think about it, it must have looked quite dodgy to you—but I wasn’t hurting Draco. I was healing him. I was having a look at my handiwork when you turned up, you know, making sure I’d done it properly.”

Hermione gawped up at Riddle, noting vaguely that he seemed quite keen on maintaining unbroken eye contact. It was—it was unnerving, was what it was, far too weighty and far too probing, but Hermione hated to look away. She felt quite strongly that if she looked away, that if she so much as blinked, Riddle would have won.

Won what, exactly, Hermione couldn’t say, but if she was certain of anything just now, it was that she hated to lose.

“And what were you healing him of, exactly?” Hermione’s eyes were starting to sting from the strain of not blinking—and this discomfort so effectively stirred her sense of spite that she tacked on, acidly, “And, no, you may not call me Hermione. Granger will do.”

Riddle’s perfect smile flickered.

“Cut myself,” said Malfoy, grudging and perfunctory, and Hermione at last broke eye contact with Riddle to shoot Malfoy a startled look. She’d all but forgotten he was there. “What’re you looking at me like that for? There was a nail, about this long”—Malfoy held his thumb and forefinger three inches apart.”—sticking out of one of those carts, and I brushed against it, and it cut me.”

Hermione squinted at Malfoy’s pristine sleeve. “It tore through your skin, but not your robes? Or did Riddle mend those as well?”

Malfoy’s thin lips compressed. “My sleeves were rolled up. It’s a bit muggy today, which you ought to have noticed, Granger, seeing as your hair has managed, against all odds, to expand even further.”

Reflexively, Hermione rushed to pat down her hair, and Malfoy outright laughed at her, looking worlds cheerier than he had mere seconds ago.

Hermione’s hands dropped to her sides and fist on her hips.

“I hope Riddle had the foresight to clean that cut before he healed it,” said Hermione, trying and failing to ignore her prickling cheeks. “I expect this place is positively crawling with Clostridium tetani.”

“Clostri”—Malfoy broke off before he could fail to pronounce Clostridium. “And what in Merlin’s good name is that supposed to be? Some sort of imaginary creature? Loony Lovegood’s been rubbing off on you, has she, Granger?”

“Obviously not,” said Hermione, channeling McGonagall at her most scathing. “It’s a bacterium.
You know, the causative agent in tetanus?” Malfoy’s face went blank, and Hermione’s mouth twitched into a superior smile. “Lockjaw, Malfoy. Muggles immunize their children against it, of course, but as the Wizarding world is so technologically stagnated—”

That put some color in Malfoy’s pasty cheeks. “Watch your filthy mouth, you Mud—”

“Draco,” Riddle said quietly, and Malfoy’s teeth clicked as they came together, biting off the foul word he’d been about to call Hermione. “Slytherin has a reputation for fostering blood prejudice as it is—and not unfairly, I’ll admit. I’ll ask you not to tarnish our House’s name any further with your free use of blood slurs.”

The agitated color that’d suffused Malfoy’s cheeks drained away.

Hermione’s eyes bounced wildly to Riddle, but he was still smiling pleasantly. Neutrally.

Hermione’s fingers curled against her palms.

“If you were healing him,” she said, choosing her words for maximum effect, wanting to desperately provoke a proper response, “then why did he look like he was in pain?”

Riddle’s smile didn’t falter. “Draco’s got a low pain tolerance.”

Malfoy let out a little huff, but did not contradict Riddle.

Hermione was not discouraged.

“All right,” she said, allowing her skepticism to come through loud and clear. “What are you two doing in Knockturn Alley, then? It’s not very safe, this place.”

Riddle’s smile broadened.

“I could ask you the same question, Granger.” The way he formed her last name on his tongue was precise. Deliberate. He was following her order not to call her by her given name, but Hermione got the distinct impression that he was making fun of her. “It’s a bit—well, it’s a bit out of character, isn’t it, for a rule-abiding girl like you to come traipsing all alone into a shopping district that boasts a not-underserved reputation for pandering to practitioners of the less—how to put this diplomatically—mainstream magical arts?”

Hermione’s bottom lip trembled. She firmed it, but not, she suspected, in time to stop Riddle seeing it quiver.

“Perhaps I fancied a change of scenery,” she said. As tries went, it was fairly pathetic.

Riddle glanced over her shoulder.

“Ah,” he said, sounding—satisfied? Whatever he was feeling, Hermione didn’t like it. “But you weren’t alone, Granger, were you? I’d forgotten; you never go anywhere without them.”

Hermione jolted, half expecting to see a Dark wizard come skulking down the street with Harry’s and Ron’s mutilated corpses in tow, and she wasn’t—she wasn’t entirely wrong, either.

Lucius Malfoy was striding toward them, lacquered walking stick punching the cobblestones with each step that he took. Flanking him, wearing twin expressions that suggested that the Cruciatuss Curse would be preferable to keeping their present company, were Harry and Ron.

At least one of the anxious knots that’d sprouted in Hermione’s stomach uncoiled; so strong was her
relief at seeing Harry and Ron safe and whole that it didn’t even occur to her to scold them.

“Hermione,” said Ron, the relief Hermione felt reflected in the lines of his face, and he and Harry both made to rush at her, but then Lucius Malfoy spoke, and they froze in their tracks.

“Ah, Miss Granger.” Mr. Malfoy stopped just short of the squashed Daydream Charm; the buffed toes of his shoes grazed the cardboard. “Yes, I expected that I’d be seeing you shortly. After all, where you go, Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley are sure to follow. Such devotion.”

Clearly well enough recovered from—whatever it was that Riddle had done to him—Draco snickered. Mr. Malfoy smiled patiently at his son, and then flickered a glance down his long, aristocratic nose. Hermione followed his gaze, and saw him nudge the Daydream Charm with the toe of his polished shoe.

“Does this bit of rubbish belong to you, then, Miss Granger?” Mr. Malfoy asked this in cultivated tones of polite curiosity, but his mouth was sneering. “Only it seems rather…out of place.”

Mr. Malfoy wasn’t wrong: painted as it was in garish colors, the Daydream Charm’s packaging stood out against Knockturn Alley’s rather monochromatic landscape like a colorful pattern stitched into a set of tatty dark robes. Harry and Ron both rushed forward to pick the Daydream Charm up for Hermione, skulls nearly colliding in the process, only for Mr. Malfoy to draw his wand from his cane and send the box sailing into Hermione’s arms.

“Clearly the three of you have been shopping in Diagon Alley,” Mr. Malfoy went on, perhaps taking advantage of the fact that he had Harry, Ron, and Hermione well and truly cornered, “and so I can’t help but wonder how Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley came to be patronizing Noggin and Bonce?”

Harry and Ron shuffled away from Mr. Malfoy and over to Hermione as though to physically flee from his drawling account of their misadventures. Ron grabbed Hermione’s wrist; his palm was clammy.

“Mr. Bonce was quite vexed with them, you know; they made quite a mess of his window display— I suspect that were it not for my intervention, Mr. Bonce would have pressed these fine young men into indentured servitude—that, or he’d have taken their right hands as fair payment for his damaged goods.”

Harry’s face drained of color. Ron gulped, fingers twitching on Hermione’s wrist.

“Mr. Bonce sets store by some rather—outdated practices,” Mr. Malfoy said delicately.

So, as Hermione had suspected, Harry and Ron had ducked into a shop without realizing that Hermione was no longer on their tail—and Mr. Malfoy had caught them.

Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant. See, this was what Hermione had meant when she’d warned them of the trouble they’d be sure to get themselves into.

“It’s not your business where we shop,” Ron piped up, rallying himself. “You’re not our dad.”

“And thank heavens for that,” said Mr. Malfoy, and this time, Draco’s snicker was more of a cackle. In her periphery, Hermione thought she saw Riddle fix Draco with what might’ve been a scathing look.

“Of course,” Mr. Malfoy said, “as your father figures are not here to do the duty themselves, I suppose it falls to me to see the three of you safely back to Diagon Alley.”
Mr. Malfoy had yet to put his wand away. What exactly would he do to the three of them if they failed to come along quietly?

*He wouldn’t*, she told herself. *He wouldn’t risk a stay in Azkaban.*

At least he hadn’t pressed them; at least he hadn’t asked them what they were doing here. Openly admitting to having deliberately followed the Malfoys would be pushing their luck to its breaking point.

And what about Riddle? He hadn’t been accompanying the Malfoys when they’d turned into Knockturn Alley, which meant he’d already been here.

Why *had* he been here?

“That’s kind of you, Mr. Malfoy,” Hermione said, and she sounded robotic to her own ears. Mr. Malfoy smiled at her wordlessly, so she took two unsteady steps forward, pulling Ron with her and hoping that Harry would follow without a fight. “Let’s get going, then.”

Ron opened his mouth, but Hermione stepped on his foot before he could dig them any deeper. Clamping his teeth together and looking mutinous, Ron shook Hermione off and marched up the street. Harry followed in Ron’s wake, sparing Hermione an unreadable look.

Draco shouldered roughly past Hermione to catch up with his father, whose long strides had put him at the head of their little procession. As Draco went, Hermione glanced at his left arm, but unless there was a spell to give the caster X-ray eyes—Hermione made a note to look that up in Hogwarts’s library—she wouldn’t be getting a closer look at it any time soon.

“As you’re clearly bursting to ask,” Riddle said right in Hermione’s ear, making her start, “Mr. Malfoy brought us to Knockturn Alley with the intent of procuring me a gift.”

Hermione worked her jaw, wanting badly to say that she hadn’t seen Riddle turn down this street in the company of the Malfoys—but she couldn’t admit to having seen anything, could she?

Riddle’s friendly smile grew, showing teeth. Hermione’s fingers twitched, full of pins-and-needles, buzzing with the magic she wasn’t permitted to use.

“A gift?” she parroted. It was the safest response she could think of.

“Yes.” Riddle traced his fingertip across the green and silver badge that was pinned to his chest. His fingernails, Hermione noticed, were cut close to the quick, but clean—most boys tended to let their nails get grubby, but not Tom Riddle. “I—well, you’ll forgive me if I sound like a braggart; I really don’t mean to—I was lucky enough to make Head Boy this year. Mr. Malfoy sees me as a sort of foster son, and he insisted on buying me a congratulatory gift.”

*Your taste in father figures is rather poor*, Hermione thought, and Riddle’s smile grew, almost as if he’d somehow heard her and found her uncharitable thoughts amusing rather than insulting.

Hermione looked away. This street was too cramped. Riddle was too close.

“And I suppose your next question,” said Riddle, “will be ‘why Knockturn Alley’?”

Hermione stuck out her jaw, feeling a bit like Ron at his most mutinous. And speaking of, Ron himself kept craning his neck around to glare blatantly at Riddle, who appeared to be quite unaffected.
“It’s not as bad as it seems, Knockturn Alley.” Riddle gestured at their surroundings, surroundings which did nothing to support Riddle’s argument. “Oh, its reputation is well earned in some respects, but not every product sold on this street is inherently Dark, you know. Take Borgin and Burkes, for example—”

“I’ve heard of it,” said Hermione, cutting Riddle off, and was that a frown marring Riddle’s high, smooth forehead? “One of its more famous items for sale is a cursed necklace, I believe?”

“Kills its wearers instantly, yes,” said Riddle, grimacing apologetically as though he hated to talk of something so vile in polite company. “But there’s more to Borgin and Burkes than a cursed necklace, Granger. Everything in that shop is terribly valuable, of course, but most of its wares are neither Light nor Dark. Some haven’t got any magical properties at all, but are simply valuable on account of the famous names to which they were once attached.”

“And which of these entirely neutral antiques,” said Hermione, the gritty feeling in her eyes telling her that she’d once again refrained from blinking for an inadvisably lengthy period of time, “did Mr. Malfoy select as your congratulatory gift?”

Riddle blinked—Hermione took the opportunity to blink as well—and then exhaled sharp and quick. *He’s laughing,* Hermione realized belatedly. She didn’t like how it sounded: it was too high and cold, too unlike his voice and his looks, and it raised the fine hairs on Hermione’s arms.

“I don’t know, Granger,” said Riddle, still laughing under his breath, “as Mr. Malfoy hasn’t given it to me yet. I expect he’s got it somewhere on him, though.”

Hermione immediately squinted at Mr. Malfoy’s cloak and robes, thinking again of that hypothetical X-ray spell.

“It’s a shame,” said Riddle, as a growing square of buttery light heralded the nearing entrance to Diagon Alley. “You not being in seventh year.”

Hermione frowned at him. Did he enjoy making her work for clarification?

“And why,” she said grudgingly, “is that?”

“If you were in seventh year,” said Riddle, again brushing his fingertips over his new badge as though ascertaining that it was still there, that it hadn’t somehow fallen off, “I’m positive that you’d have made Head Girl.”

Oh. That. *Obviously* she would have done. Who else was there?

“Thank you.” Hermione didn’t really want to thank him, but she also wanted to maintain her modesty. “But I expect I’ll make Head Girl next year, so it’s not really a shame.”

“Quite certain of your chances, are you?” said Riddle, but there was nothing mean about his tone or his expression, so Hermione tried not to bristle. “Yes, I suppose you’re a shoo-in, but what I meant to say was that it’s a shame you’re not Head Girl now.”

The square of sunlight was growing brighter and whiter, and Hermione hastened her steps, thinking of wide, friendly, breathable Diagon Alley. Sirius and Mrs. Weasley would be looking anxiously all around for Harry, Ron, and Hermione, and Hermione would finally have an excuse to part company with Tom Riddle.

“And why,” said Hermione, wishing desperately for Harry and Ron and the Malfoys to budge out of
the way so as to give her a clear, open exit, “is it a shame?”

Riddle wouldn’t stop touching his badge, and Hermione wanted to snap at him that he’d get his grubby fingerprints all over it if he wasn’t careful. But Riddle’s fingernails were clean, and his hair was tidy, and his cloak and robes—secondhand though they clearly were—were obviously well cared for, so Hermione supposed that he could manage the care and keeping of one little badge.

“If you were Head Girl,” said Riddle, his smile gradually shrinking till it had gone, his dark eyes intent on Hermione’s face, “then you and I would be counterparts, wouldn’t we? And I’d love to work more closely with you, Hermione.”

Hermione stumbled a step, then cursed herself. That was what she got for not keeping her eyes front. Riddle made to help her balance herself out, but she waved him off, not wanting him to touch her even fleetingly.

“Sorry,” said Riddle airily. “Slipped up. I meant to call you Granger. Wouldn’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

You already have, she thought, but the cobblestones were sloping sharply upward, and the unbroken sunlight was falling over her face. Diagon Alley was as packed as it had been half an hour ago, but she could finally breathe.

Without offering Riddle so much as a by-your-leave, Hermione jogged over to Harry and Ron, who were waiting for her with anxious looks on their faces.

“All right?” asked Ron. Obviously he’d decided that his concern for Hermione meant more to him than a sore foot.

“Yes.” Hermione reached for Ron’s hand, and he took it. Hermione’s other hand was full of Daydream Charm, so Harry clasped her elbow. “I mean, yes. I’m perfectly fine.”

“You sure?” Ron pressed, squeezing Hermione’s fingers. “Because I’ve seen the family ghoul perkier than you’re looking right now.”

Hermione shook off Ron’s hand, scowling, and glanced over her shoulder. Mr. Malfoy was pressing a square, flat parcel into Riddle’s hands, and Riddle’s lips were forming what were doubtlessly effusive thanks, but his eyes—

Riddle’s eyes were wide and greedy.

Well, of course they were. Riddle was poor, and the Malfoys were obscenely wealthy, so it was only natural that Riddle would be eager to get his hands on a lavish present. Hermione was reading too much into it. She looked away.

“So what d’you suppose,” Ron was saying, only to break off. “Ah, fuck. Mum’s on the warpath.” He went to step behind Harry, but Harry had already stepped behind him.

“And Sirius’s with her. Shit.”

“Think we ought to do a runner?”

At once, Hermione grabbed Harry and Ron by their collars and held them still, determined to face the oncoming lecture with dignity. She had more immediate concerns than Tom Riddle.
“…and if you spot any students attempting to vacate the train, apprehend them yourselves if it’s within your power to do so. If you can’t manage on your own, be sure to contact the trolley witch; she’ll sort them right out. Now. Any questions?”

The gathered prefects all shook their heads mutely—all save for Hermione, whose hand had shot into the air before Tom Riddle could finish talking. Probably having foreseen this, Harry ducked to the side, the better to minimize the chances of an elbow-to-the-nose collision, a potential accident which unfortunately had some precedent.

Riddle fixed the brunt of his attention on Hermione, a tiny smile playing at his mouth. Much as Hermione wanted to squirm under Riddle’s scrutiny—the memory of whatever it was he’d done to Draco Malfoy hadn’t faded over the last month, and had in fact remained as vivid as a wizard’s photograph—she firmed her lip and tilted her chin and kept her hand hovering stubbornly in the air.

“I don’t suppose you’ve got a question, do you, Granger?”

Riddle’s tone was not at all malicious—not on the surface, anyway—and he sounded for all the world like a close friend who knew her well enough to subject her to a bit of gentle teasing, but Draco Malfoy snickered, and Harry sat up a little straighter in his seat as though he were physically preparing himself to jump to Hermione’s defense.

Hermione ignored them both.

“Yes, actually, I do.” Hermione dropped her hand into her lap—careful not to knock Harry’s glasses askew on the way—and laced her fingers. “Suppose the trolley witch—” Someone really ought to tell Hermione what that woman’s name was one of these days; she’d asked several times already and nobody had yet to give a satisfactory answer. “—isn’t anywhere in the vicinity. What are we to do in such a situation?”

Someone groaned—Hermione couldn’t tell who, but that didn’t matter, as everyone in the carriage save for Riddle was eyeing her with mounting exasperation, even Harry.

And if Riddle was exasperated or irked, it didn’t show on his handsome face. If anything, his smile warmed.

“That’s a very good question, Granger—one that the rest of you lot could have stood to ask.” As
admonitions went, it was gentle, but Hermione saw several of the other prefects sink a little lower in their seats as though feeling properly shamed. “But the trolley witch will know when there’s trouble. She’s been at this for a very long time, that woman, and she’s got excellent instincts.”

“But suppose—” Hermione pressed, but Riddle raised his hand, and, grudgingly, she shut her mouth.

“If the trolley witch fails to arrive on the scene in time to be of any use,” said Riddle, exhibiting all the patience of a seasoned professor in the face of a crowd of rowdy first years who never stopped asking why, “and the students in question prove to be—belligerent—you’ve got my blessing to hinder them with spell work. Incarcerous only, please, and then you may go and fetch the trolley witch.”

Malfoy had sat up from his slump at the mention of using spells against fleeing students, but now he scowled and sank back against his seat. Clearly he was disappointed to hear that he hadn’t permission to do lasting damage to his schoolmates.

Hermione was quite dissatisfied as well, but for reasons different than Malfoy’s. She couldn’t find any thread in the weave of Riddle’s logic that was worth picking at, and it set her teeth on edge to admit that he was shaping up to be quite well-suited to the post of Head Boy.

Well. It was only the first of the school year, and term had yet to technically start. There was still time to find something concretely wrong with the way Riddle went about things.

“Any further questions?” Riddle asked the compartment at large, but his eyes were all for Hermione. She shook her head, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of a verbal no, and he went on, “Right, then. Patrol for a bit, and then you’re free to meet up with your friends—just be sure to look in on the corridors every few hours thereafter.”

Hermione’s compartment had been the last in the prefects’ carriage to receive a briefing from the Head Boy or Girl, and it was into a deserted corridor that Hermione and her fellow stragglers filed.

“All right,” said Riddle, sliding the compartment door shut behind him. “Goldstein, Patil, Granger, and Potter—why don’t you patrol the carriages nearest the locomotive? The rest of you lot can come with me—we’ll patrol the carriages at the end of the train.”

Giving a parting nod to the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws, Riddle headed in the direction to which he’d assigned himself, the Hufflepuffs and Slytherins trotting along in his wake.

“Let’s get going, then, shall we?” Harry said to Hermione, one hand coming up to massage his shoulder as soon as the Hufflepuffs and Slytherins were out of sight—Malfoy had deliberately bumped into Harry on his way out of the carriage. “Think I saw Ron and Ginny pick a carriage up toward the front. We could look in on them while we’re patrolling; say hi, maybe.”

Hermione didn’t answer Harry straightaway, but rather stared off in the direction opposite the one she’d been instructed to patrol, gnawing anxiously at her lower lip. Anthony Goldstein and Padma Patil had already gone, so only Harry would know if Hermione chose to—

Harry’s knuckles bumped Hermione’s wrist as he curled his fingers around her sleeve, and she jumped, biting down too hard on her lip and tasting blood.

“Hermione, what’re you—blimey.” Harry ducked down to get a proper look at Hermione’s mangled lip. “You’re bleeding. Did I startle you? Sorry—”

“No, no, it’s nothing.” Harry was fumbling for his wand, but Hermione had already drawn hers, and pointed it at her lower lip with a muttered, “Episkey. See, I’m quite all right. Just—lost in thought,
you know how I can be.”

“Term hasn’t even started,” said Harry, with the longsuffering air of someone who’d been best friends with Hermione Granger for most of their adolescence. “What’s there to get lost in thought about—” Harry’s bright eyes narrowed to slits. “Say, Hermione…”

Hermione waited for Harry to complete his sentence, and when he failed to follow through, she said, a little testily, “Well, what? What have you got to say, then? You can’t just start a sentence and then leave it dangling; that’s really quite irritating. We’ve got patrolling to do, or have you forgotten?”

“Is it Riddle?” Harry asked, a hard, shrewd look molding his face, and Hermione flushed hot and then cold. “It’s Riddle, isn’t it? He’s what’s on your mind, isn’t he? Hermione, what did he do to make you so—”

Hermione held up both hands as though to physically shield herself against Harry’s interrogation, and it actually worked in that Harry snapped his mouth shut. However, going by the way he folded his arms and rocked back on his heels, he’d probably only silenced himself in order to hear out a proper explanation.

Well, he was in for disappointment.

“No,” said Hermione. “No. See, this is precisely what I was afraid of—this is what you and Ron do; you hyper focus on behavior that you perceive as dodgy or malicious and then your grades suffer because you’re too distracted by Malfoy or some other miscellaneous Slytherin to pay attention in class. No,” she repeated when Harry opened his mouth. “I’m not telling you what went on in Knockturn Alley because—because there’s nothing worth telling. Riddle didn’t do anything to me, all right?”

Hermione rather resented the growth spurt Harry had undergone this past year; this telling off would have been far more effective had Harry lacked the ability to stare down his nose at her.

“He didn’t do anything to you, maybe,” said Harry, apparently working it out as he spoke, although Hermione supposed that he’d had loads of time to sort through his suspicions over the past month. “But he had to’ve done something to upset you, or else you wouldn’t be acting so—weird.”

Hermione wanted to pull her hair. She wanted to pull her hair out. Harry was generally oblivious to all but that which outright punched him in the face, and this spurt of selective attentiveness had reared its head at the worst possible time.

“Have you considered that he simply makes me uncomfortable in general?” Hermione could only hope that this partial truth would sound more convincing to Harry’s ears than it did to her own. “He stares quite a lot, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

It was the wrong thing to say; Harry’s hard expression took on an edge that was at once triumphant and despairing, as though Hermione had confirmed something he’d suspected but hadn’t wanted to believe.

“Yeah,” said Harry, talking in a whisper now as though mindful of being overheard. “He stares at you a lot. Lately, anyway. Hermione—”

“No, Harry.” Hermione’s face shifted to match Harry’s hard expression. “I’m done here. Now, you can neglect your duties all you like; I can tell you off, but I really can’t stop you. As for me, I’m off to do my job.”

Tossing her nose in the air in a decent imitation of Draco Malfoy at his most superior, Hermione
darted around Harry and strode off as fast as she could—short of jogging, which wasn’t without its attractions.

Harry caught up with her in no time at all, though. Of course he did.

“We could go the other way instead, couldn’t we? Just for a little bit—have a look at Riddle and Malfoy, see if they’re up to something. I can go and fetch the Cloak—”

“Absolutely not.” Harry needn’t know that Hermione had already considered doing exactly that.

“Fine, then. If you don’t want to have anything to do with it, I’ll just go and have a look at Riddle and Malfoy on my own—”

Hermione came to such an abrupt halt that Harry, who’d been following close at her heels, bashed into her. Harry swore, but Hermione ignored the pain smarting all along her back and hips in favor of wheeling around and hissing into Harry’s face.

“Try it,” said Hermione, pushing the words through her teeth so that they slurred, “and I’ll have that Cloak confiscated.”

Harry blanched, then flushed, and Hermione’s chest stung with a kind of spiteful triumph.

“You wouldn’t,” he said, but he sounded not at all confident, and his eyes darted all around the carriage as though it could yield some sort of solution to his pains.

Feeling at once bolstered by victory and weighed down with guilt—Harry treasured that Invisibility Cloak as much as for its sentimental value as its usefulness—Hermione said, quietly but with feeling, “I think you know that I very well would, should it come to that. I wouldn’t be happy about it, mind you, and I’m sure you’d ignore me for weeks if not months—”

“I would not,” said Harry, but only for form’s sake, as he and Ron had already done as much on one or two prior occasions.

“—but I’m willing to go to great lengths to keep you and Ron away from Tom Riddle and out of trouble.”

But Harry had stopped scowling, and Hermione knew, instinctively, that his brightened expression could mean nothing good even before he opened his mouth and said, “Dumbledore would just return it to me, you know. The Cloak, I mean.”

Hermione clenched her teeth. Professor Dumbledore was a bloody enabler, was what he was.

“But I’ll be sure to pass it into Professor McGonagall’s care; she’s always been quite sensible in most respects, aside from those to do with Quidditch. I still think it was a bit rash of her to allow you to play Seeker in your first year—”

“…did himself in, did you hear?”

Hermione hated to speak ill of teachers, especially the ones that she really liked, so it was with some relief that she broke off her reluctant critique of Professor McGonagall in order to peer down the carriage, ears straining for confirmation of what she thought she’d heard.

“What?” said Harry. His scowl had begun to reform as Hermione had aired her complaints regarding the flouting of age restrictions, but now it dropped. “What’s going—”
Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil had strolled out of the adjacent carriage and into this one, arms linked, talking in the breathless tones that heralded fresh gossip.

“Well, this is going to sound a bit insensitive,” Lavender was saying, “but I’m not that sorry to see him gone. Oh, hello!”

Lavender and Parvati had started at the sight of Harry and Hermione, eyes wide with what might have been guilt, but now Lavender smiled sunnily and shamelessly.

“Have a good summer?” Lavender asked them.

“Yes, it was fine,” Hermione said a touch impatiently. “Sorry, Lavender, we couldn’t help but overhearing—did you say that someone’s—you know—”

Lavender, Parvati, and Harry all goggled at Hermione, possibly stunned to see her show even a passing interest in gossip.

“Oh, that.” Lavender tittered, but it was half wild, and Hermione realized that she was—that she was uncomfortable, either at the subject or at having been caught discussing it. “Well—er—it’s nasty business, really, but as you asked—”

“Evan Rosier killed himself over the summer holidays,” Parvati said, all in a rush, and Hermione’s stomach pitched. Rosier, Rosier, where did she— “You know, that Slytherin in the year ahead of ours, the one who was best mates with Tom Riddle?”

Hermione felt—nothing much at all, and that felt wrong, somehow, that she could be entirely unaffected by the news of someone’s death simply because she hadn’t known him. All she could think, as she exchanged a look with an equally blank-faced Harry, was that it always came back to Tom Riddle.

“He must be cut up something awful, mustn’t he, Riddle?” Lavender said, tucking a spiraling curl of hair behind her ear. “I don’t even want to think about how I’d feel if I—you know—lost someone like that.”

“Nor do I,” said Parvati, shuddering.

“Do either of you know how it happened?” Hermione asked, and felt Harry’s disbelieving stare drilling into the side of her head. “How he did it?”

“Nobody knows for sure. A self-inflicted Killing Curse—” Lavender grimaced. “—seems to be the popular theory, though.”

“I don’t think so,” said Parvati, face alight with a sort of repulsed fascination. “You need real talent to pull off a curse like that, don’t you, and from what I hear, Rosier never was worth much. Though I don’t suppose he’d have had any trouble with intent; he was always—I hate to talk this way about a dead person—but he was always rather hateful.”

“It happened in August, didn’t it?” said Lavender. “Early August, I think, but I’m not sure. His family hasn’t released an official statement to the Prophet, have they?”

“If they haven’t, I wouldn’t blame them; it must be quite painful, all this. Still, they really ought to squash the rumors. I heard Daphne Greengrass saying to Millicent Bulstrode that Rosier swallowed a goblet of poison. But Bulstrode thinks Rosier must’ve had someone else brew it for him, as he was useless at Potions…”
Lavender gave a theatrical little gasp, and Hermione thought she knew why. If Bulstrode was right in her thinking—unlikely—then someone had been complicit in Rosier’s suicide. Even putting that ugly theory aside, this news was entirely disturbing for reasons beyond the awful reality of suicide—

“Correct me if I’m remembering wrong, but I believe I asked the two of you to patrol the corridors? Perhaps I’m misinterpreting things, but what you’re doing here looks rather a lot like **loitering** to me.”

Lavender and Parvati pressed their hands to their mouths, and Harry started, and Hermione felt as rooted to the spot as if she’d been petrified.

And then—

And then wildly, **absurdly**, Hermione could think of nothing but those vintage cartoons, of how the little animated anthropomorphic animals could, on occasion, be so badly frightened that they’d literally leap out of their skins from the shock of it, and that—

That was how Hermione was feeling right now, as though escaping her skin and leaving it behind would be an attractive alternative to turning around and facing the person who’d come up behind her.

Harry was the first to recover: he wheeled around, knocking his elbow against Hermione’s in the process.

“Sorry, Hermione,” Harry muttered perfunctorily, and then demanded of Riddle, “What are you doing down here? You said you were going to patrol the other end of the train.”

Riddle’s sculpted brows jumped toward his hairline, and he said in tones of mild rebuke, “I am Head Boy, Potter—but I can’t blame you for being unused to my change in rank; it is a recent development. I thought I’d double back and see how my prefects are doing on this end of the train.”

Hermione’s fingers twitched.

*My* prefects, he’d said.

Had anyone else said it, Hermione wouldn’t have given it a second thought, and they *did* answer to Riddle, but hearing a possessive pronoun on Riddle’s lips in relation to *them* was terribly off putting.

“What about Cho Chang?” Harry was asking in reference to this year’s Head Girl. “Couldn’t’ve sent her, could you?”

“Chang was already patrolling the back end of the train, Potter.” The corners of Riddle’s mouth curled up in what Hermione couldn’t help but read as amusement at Harry’s expense. “As it turns out, I should have been up here from the start.”

Reflexively, Hermione wet her lips. Beyond the throwaway line about loitering, Riddle had yet to make any explicit references to their partaking in gossip. Had the memory of what’d transpired in Knockturn Alley been less fresh in her mind, it was possible that Hermione wouldn’t’ve picked at Riddle’s motives—as it was, she couldn’t help but fancy that he was deliberately drawing things out, trying to see if he could make them squirm.

Well, *bollocks* on that.

“We were only—” Riddle’s eyes flickered to Hermione and fixed unblinkingly on her face, and she was struck by the itching suspicion that he’d been waiting for her to speak, waiting for an excuse to
stare her down. Stamping out the quiver in her voice, Hermione tried again, “Yes, well, you caught us out, but it’s not as if we were doing anything wrong. We only stopped for a bit to say hello to our friends.”

Possibly in reaction to Hermione’s nerve, either Lavender or Parvati made a breathless little noise.

“Talking of your friends,” said Riddle, looking over Hermione’s shoulder, “I really think they ought to return to their compartment. If the two of you would move along, please?”

With muttered apologies to Harry and Hermione, Lavender and Parvati scurried off at once, probably not keen on receiving detentions before term could start.

For their parts, Harry, Hermione, and Riddle had begun to draw attention; people were pressing their noses against their compartments’ frosted glass windows and inching hopefully toward their shut doors as though wondering how to discreetly crack them open an inch. Hermione’s nape itched, but none of those curious looks could compare to Riddle’s unblinking stare.

“Potter,” said Riddle, not taking his eyes off Hermione, “sorry, I meant to tell you earlier—but Chang’s asking for you. Turns out we split the prefects up unevenly, and they’re one short down there. Why don’t you go on? I’ll keep Granger company for you.”

No, was all Hermione could think. No, thank you.

“I think I’ll stay here, actually.” Harry’s voice was as cool as the first bite of winter, and when Hermione gripped his arm as though to hold him in place, she felt more than saw Riddle’s eyes track the movement.

“Now, really, Potter,” said Riddle, at once exasperated and patient, as though Harry were a recalcitrant first year. “Term’s not even started, and I hate giving out detentions, especially to prefects.”

Hermione’s fingers trembled where they clasped Harry’s arm. If there was anything she was less keen on than being alone with Riddle, it was Harry getting into trouble before term could start. Worse still was the possibility of an altercation between Harry and Riddle; Hermione had seen Harry in a rage, and it wasn’t pretty.

More disturbing still, what had transpired on the third of August rose to the surface of Hermione’s mind in a graphic flash. It had been discomfiting enough to see Malfoy in such obvious pain; the very thought of Riddle putting that look of agony on Harry’s face turned Hermione’s stomach.

“Go on, Harry,” said Hermione, thinking that she’d be perfectly fine, that Riddle couldn’t do anything to her, that they were never truly alone aboard the Hogwarts Express.

“Hermione—”

“If they’re really in need of another prefect at the other end of the train, you ought to go on.” Hermione’s fingers curved into claws that pinched, and Harry jerked out of her grip. “Really,” she insisted, staring him full in the face.

“I don’t—”

“Harry Potter, if you land yourself in detention before term can so much as start, I swear to God that I won’t lift a finger to help you the next time you’re struggling through your Potions homework—and we ought to be getting quite the load of homework this year, oughtn’t we, seeing as we’ll be taking N.E.W.T. level courses?”
Hermione’s words were harsh, but her eyes were pleading. Please, she willed Harry, please don’t do this.

Harry’s eyes softened momentarily before flashing full of fire again, and Hermione knew at once that she had won, if only by an infinitesimal margin. And then Harry scowled—first at Riddle, then at Hermione—and stormed off.

Hermione suspected that Harry had no intention of going very far—that he had no intention at all of joining Cho Chang at the other end of the train—but at least she had put some space between her best friend and Tom Riddle.

Riddle was apparently unaffected by Harry’s ungracious departure, and immediately offered his arm to Hermione as though they were the dramatis personae of some silvery film out of the 1940’s.

“Shall we get going, then?”

Hermione eyed Riddle’s arm as though it were a cobra set to bite her, considered how suspicious it would look if she refused to take it, and finally, reluctantly, set the very tips of her fingers against the inside of Riddle’s forearm.

“Have a good August?” Riddle asked once they’d got going, and Hermione only barely bit back a groan. Small talk? Really?

“Good enough,” said Hermione, hoping against hope that her clipped tone would deter further overtures.

It did not.

“I quite enjoyed my summer, personally—most of it, anyway.” Apparently Riddle was determined to wring this stilted conversation for all it was worth. “But I’m glad to be returning to Hogwarts.”

So they weren’t going to acknowledge what had gone on in Knockturn Alley. Hermione had expected as much, but she’d also considered the possibility that Riddle might want to test the waters, so to speak—to feel around for any inclinations on Hermione’s part to go to an authority figure with what she’d seen.

“So am I,” said Hermione, belated, as she considered what she wanted to say next. Well, truthfully, she didn’t want to say anything, exactly, but—

“I suppose you’ll know about Evan, then.” Riddle had been surveying the packed compartments, but now he smiled at Hermione as though to soften what he’d said. “Don’t look like that; I’m not angry. Besides, from what I could tell, it was Brown and Patil doing the gossiping, wasn’t it?”

Yes. About that.

Hermione stared hard at the floor.

“I’m sorry.” The condolence skipped off her tongue, stilted and awkward. “About—I mean—I’m sorry for your loss. You and Evan Rosier were close, weren’t you?”

And Hermione dragged her gaze away from the carpet in order to look fully into Riddle’s face, trying to convey sincerity with the assistance of eye contact, only to falter at what she saw.

Riddle’s face had gone entirely blank. No grief, no bravely playing off the sadness that he ought to’ve been feeling.
Well—well, there was nothing wrong with that, exactly, was there? Some people reacted to grief with shock. Some people numbed themselves against the flood of feeling. That had to be—surely it __

But Riddle had already rearranged his face, eyes downcast, mouth forming a sorrowful little smile. His expression had shifted so quickly, in fact, that Hermione momentarily doubted that it had gone blank at all.

But, no. Hermione was quite certain of what she’d seen.

“Thank you, Hermione—sorry, Granger—” Riddle pulled an apologetic face, but his lashes continued to droop over his eyes as though to shutter his grief. “That’s very kind of you. Evan was an only child, you know, so I expect I’ll be the primary recipient of condolences once word properly spreads—not that I don’t appreciate them, of course, especially coming from you.”

Riddle patted the fingers that Hermione had reluctantly set on his arm as he said this last bit, and Hermione wanted to snatch her hand away. She nearly did.

What had he meant by that, by saying that he was especially appreciative of her sympathies? They were virtual strangers. She meant nothing to him.

“You’re—you’re welcome,” said Hermione, forcing the platitude through a throat that’d seized tight.

“But, well—I’m sorry, I hope I don’t sound rude when I say this—I’d rather not dwell on what—on what happened to Evan.” Riddle’s voice cracked quite convincingly here, but Hermione could not rid herself of how quickly he’d shifted expressions, of how perfectly he’d conveyed his grief. “Could we talk about something else? I’d like to keep my mind off it while I still can, before, you know—”

“Before word properly spreads,” said Hermione. “Right. Of course.”

The trolley witch came trundling down the corridor now, and Riddle pulled them both out of her path, squishing them against the narrow bit of wall between two compartments. Hermione’s shoulder bumped Riddle’s, and she inhaled reflexively, expecting her nose to get stopped up with whatever cloying cologne that was fashionable amongst boys this year—and got only the clean, sharp smell of whatever soap he’d used to shave that morning.

That made sense, though, didn’t it? Riddle surrounded himself with the sons of well-off pureblood families, but he was too poor himself to waste his scarce funds on imported scents.

“Anything off the trolley, dears?” The little old witch came to a halt, her heavily lined face wreathed in a benevolent smile.

“No, thank you, ma’am,” said Riddle.

It took Hermione a moment to identify the feeling that was clogging her throat as irritation. Riddle had spoken for the both of them without asking Hermione first, and while it was true that Hermione hadn’t wanted any sweets—nothing on that cart was sugar free, and Hermione didn’t trust her sweet tooth not to betray her—she’d have liked the chance to speak for herself.

“All’s well, by the way,” Riddle was saying to the trolley witch. “This year’s lot appears to be free of flight risks—then again, the day’s only just started, hasn’t it? Best not to speak too soon.”

The trolley witch tittered at this, as easily charmed by Riddle as all adults were, and moved on, pushing her cart of sweets. Up and down the carriage, doors were sliding open as students filtered out with coins in their hands and hunger on their faces.
Riddle stepped away from the wall, pulling Hermione with him, and cut through the growing crowd of students with the ease of a knife through hot butter. Not a single shoulder so much as grazed Hermione’s, as though Riddle’s particular affinity for clearing as much space as he wanted or needed had extended to cover Hermione like a charm.

“Granger,” Riddle said once they’d cleared the carriage brimming with hungry students and moved on to a quieter corridor, “I hope you don’t mind my saying this—and I don’t mean to play up my House’s more, ah, negative traits—but that was very Slytherin of you, what you did back there. How you got Potter to cooperate, I mean.”

For the first time that day, Hermione permitted herself to scowl openly at Riddle, who smiled serenely back.

“Are you calling me manipulative, Riddle?”

“Not at all,” said Riddle, eyes widening in picture perfect shock. “I’ve offended you after all, haven’t I? I’m sorry, Granger. No, I’m not accusing you of being a manipulative person, not in general—although I don’t know you well enough to generalize—but everyone’s capable of being manipulative when it suits them, aren’t they?”

Hermione pressed her lips together, determined, for once, to keep her mouth shut for fear of what might come out of it.

“But”—Riddle’s eyes were still quite wide, but his features had shifted around them, so that he looked less shocked and more compelling, as though he was trying to impress upon her something of utmost importance. “But manipulative behavior’s not evil in of itself, is it? It can be employed for the greater good, can’t it? By goading Potter into leaving back there, you saved me the necessity of giving him a detention.”

“Yes,” said Hermione after a beat, because it seemed to be what he wanted to hear, and she’d do just about anything in that moment to stop him looking at her like that. “Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

Riddle nodded, apparently satisfied, and faced front again. Hermione’s shoulders wanted to droop from the sheer relief that the broken eye contact afforded her.

“I’m glad you’re open to new perspectives, Granger,” said Riddle. “But I expected as much from a brilliant girl like you.”

Yes. Brilliant.

The thing was—the thing was, it wouldn’t even take a brilliant person to see something wrong with Riddle’s perfect grief, not if they’d seen him in Knockturn Alley on the third of August.

August. Evan Rosier had died—had committed suicide—in early August. The question was, had he died before or after the third? Because if he’d died on the first or the second, if Riddle had heard the bad news by that point, if the resultant grief had been fresh as a new wound, then why had he behaved as though nothing were wrong? Why had he been in the right frame of mind for accepting celebratory presents?

It was all conjecture, of course. Hermione had only a piece of the whole picture. She didn’t really know anything.

But it’s the not knowing that’s the trouble, Hermione thought as she glanced sidelong at Tom Riddle and then away, as the fingers that grazed his sleeve prickled as though from an electric shock. It was the not knowing that had put her in a state of exquisite, visceral unease.
“Here you are, Dobby,” Hermione said warmly, presenting the excitable little house-elf with a neatly wrapped if rather lumpy parcel. “I knitted them in all sorts of colors and patterns so you could mix them up the way you like to—I’d have made more, but as I couldn’t use magic over the holidays—”

“Oh, no, Miss Granger!” Dobby’s protuberant eyes were bright and damp, but he was smiling wide enough to show teeth, so they had to’ve been happy tears, at least. “Dobby would be honored to receive even a single unwashed sock from a witch as great as Miss Hermione Granger—even if it were twenty years old and smelled of toilet water, Dobby would still—”

“That’s all right, Dobby, really,” said Hermione. As much as she lived for well-earned commendations, hearing Dobby talk that way had her shifting awkwardly on the spot. “You don’t need to lavish me with praise for something like this. Besides—” Hermione gave Dobby’s bony little hands a squeeze where they clutched at the parcel in its pearlescent wrapping. “—you’re one of my favorite people, and friends give each other gifts, don’t they?”

The sheen of tears glossing Dobby’s eyes welled up and spilled over, dribbling down his long nose and giving him the appearance of a leaking tap. Hermione wanted to swear.

“M-Miss Hermione Granger considers Dobby a friend!” Dobby wailed, wiping at his tears with one hand and clutching desperately at his parcel of socks with the other. “Dobby is suh-so honored!”

“Dobby—Dobby, you needn’t cry.” Aware that it might distress him that much further but unable to stop herself offering comfort to someone who needed it, Hermione gathered the little elf up in her arms like she would a small child. Her own eyes had already begun to itch with sympathetic tears. “Please—please stop crying.”

Dobby gave a great, wet sniffle—Hermione winced when she felt her collar grow damp with something that wasn’t tears but had probably come out of Dobby’s nose—and then went quiet, apparently having taken Hermione’s request as an order. Just this once, only this once, Hermione was grateful for Dobby’s ingrained obedience.

“There, now.” Hermione sat back on her heels and shook her sleeve out over her hand, patting Dobby’s face dry. “That’s all right, now, isn’t it?”

Dobby gave Hermione a watery smile, and she smiled back even as she silently prayed that her gestures of comfort wouldn’t set him off again.

“You’ll show your new socks to your friends in the kitchens, won’t you, Dobby?” Hermione asked, hoping that talk of elfish welfare might distract Dobby from his own histrionics. “And could you please tell them that if they’d like some nice warm socks of their own, they should head on up to Gryffindor Tower and ask for Hermione Granger?”

Dobby’s smile lost its wavering quality, but it shrank a bit as well, and his great bat ears seemed to droop.

“Dobby will try, Hermione Granger.” Dobby patted Hermione’s shoulder in an echo of the comforting gestures she’d offered him. “But the other house-elves were still quite uninterested in
wearing proper clothes the last Dobby checked.”

“Oh,” Hermione managed, hoping that the sting of disappointment didn’t show on her face.

“Perhaps Miss Hermione Granger could knit Dobby’s friends some nice tea cozies?” Dobby said as he continued to pat Hermione’s shoulder with the air of a parent calming their distraught child. “They’d be very honored to receive presents—presents that aren’t proper clothes, that is—from a witch as kind and brilliant as Miss Granger.”

Hermione wanted to tell Dobby that he was missing the point entirely—she had, in part, knitted Dobby a new batch of socks because she liked him and wanted to give him something for the sake of it, but gifting him with clothes was an ultimately symbolic gesture. She wanted Dobby to wear those socks as a symbol of the freedom to which he had every right, and she wanted the other Hogwarts house-elves to do the same.

But she said, a little haltingly, “That’s a good idea, Dobby. Perhaps I’ll do that.”

And perhaps she should—perhaps gifts of tea cozies could function as the first rungs on the ladder to elfish freedom. Yes. That was brilliant. She ought to ease the elves into it, was what she ought to do.

“Miss Granger is very kind!” beamed Dobby, and Hermione grinned back—only for the grin to fall off her face when she happened to glance over Dobby’s skinny shoulder and registered the faces of the two boys who’d just turned into the Fat Lady’s corridor.

*Three times.* Three times was a pattern, wasn’t it? If this was some sort of intimidation play, Hermione *wasn’t* having it.

Hermione shot to her feet, in part to appear taller—fat lot of good though it did her; Riddle and Malfoy both towered over her—and in part so she could step in front of Dobby as a sort of living shield. Riddle and Malfoy could try and intimidate Hermione all they liked—she could handle herself—but she’d be damned if she let them upset Dobby or any other house-elf on her watch.

“What are the two of you doing up here?” Hermione asked once Riddle and Malfoy were within earshot, not bothering to feign politeness. “This is the Fat Lady’s corridor, not the dungeons.”

“We haven’t been Confunded, Granger,” drawled Malfoy, and Hermione felt the tug on her robes as Dobby reached out and clutched them. “We know which corridor this is.”

Dobby gave a nigh-inaudible squeak of muted terror, but when Hermione reached back to pat him on the head, his violent tremors eased a bit.

“We’re patrolling, Granger, the same as you,” Riddle said in tones that were worlds politer than Malfoy’s. “It is past curfew for students below fifth year.”

“And again,” said Hermione, strangling the temper out of her voice in a sort of spiteful effort to match Riddle’s for politeness, “I’d like to know why you’re patrolling the seventh floor and not the dungeons. You know, where students in your House ought to be after hours?”

“You make a fair point, Granger.” Riddle clasped his hands behind his back and regarded Hermione with a smile that she’d have called *indulgent* had she seen it on the face of a friend. “But have you considered that students who’ve broken curfew are unlikely to linger near their common rooms?”

Drat. Hermione floundered for five seconds too long before marshalling herself.

“Well—well, you needn’t have bothered, as I’m the only person here. Obviously.” She’d have
counted Dobby as well, but she was reluctant to draw attention to him in Draco Malfoy’s presence. “Now, if you’ll excuse me—”

“Hang on a moment.” Malfoy craned his neck, eyes going wider and wider till they resembled nothing so much as grey marbles. “Granger—is that Dobby cowering behind your skirts? It is, isn’t it?”

Caught, Dobby made a sound like a strangled squeeze toy.

“Dobby,” said Hermione. She hated to give house-elves even the kindest of orders, but desperate times and all that. “Why don’t you return to the kitchens? Your friends must be missing you by now.”

“Thank you, Miss Hermione Granger!” said Dobby, squeaky voice gone wobbly with blatant relief, and Hermione felt more than a little relieved herself when she heard the sharp crack that signaled the elf’s departure.

Malfoy’s sneer grew two sizes. Hermione smiled grimly in return.

“Think you’re clever, don’t you, Granger?” Malfoy swaggered closer, but Hermione planted her feet and refused to shrink away. “You and Potter? First Potter steals my family’s house-elf out from under us, and then you go on a crusade for, what was it, elfish rights? They’re elves, you bleeding heart; they haven’t got any rights.”

Hermione swelled up, all thoughts of keeping her composure fleeing temporarily from her head. How privileged and ignorant could one person be, really?

“House-elves are sapient beings with magic and feelings of their own, and they’ve just as much right to live their lives unshackled as you do, you spoilt, elitist little—”

“That’s enough, the both of you.”

Riddle had spoken softly, but his talent for making himself heard clearly without having to raise his voice worked as well now as ever: Malfoy immediately backed down; and Hermione snapped her mouth shut, more from shame at being chastised like a child than any real compulsion to follow Riddle’s orders.

As Hermione’s eyes skipped away from the silently seething Malfoy to a disappointed-looking Riddle, she thought she saw Malfoy grip his forearm, fingers spasming as if in pain—but when she did a doubletake, both of Malfoy’s arms were hanging loose at his sides.

“As a proponent of inter-House unity,” Riddle was saying, “I’m quite ashamed of you both. Clearly you can’t be expected to behave like reasonable adults whenever you’re within five feet of each other.”

Malfoy flushed a blotchy pink, and Hermione, too, felt color rising in her cheeks. Riddle had an awful lot of nerve, talking down to them as if they were children—

But hadn’t Hermione done the same to her friends and peers as well whenever she’d thought they were carrying themselves with less dignity than they ought to’ve done? If she disparaged Riddle for doing as much as she’d have done, wouldn’t that make her an awful hypocrite?

“I’m sorry.” Hermione had to force the apology out of her throat and onto her tongue, and the end result was that she sounded quite strangled. “If you think that I—that we—deserve detention, then—”
“Detention?” Riddle’s frown flickered. “Who said anything about detention? If I gave out a detention for every row I came across, Mr. Filch would be in a much better mood in general, wouldn’t he? No, Granger. I’m not going to give you a detention. Nor you, Draco.”

Hermione chewed on the corner of her lip, waiting for the other shoe to drop. But when Riddle failed to do anything more than stare placidly at her, she said, “All right, then. I’ll get going, shall I?”

Hermione couldn’t resist sparing another glance at Malfoy’s arm—and he must have caught her look, too, because he wrapped his right hand around his left forearm as though to shield it from her searching look. Mouth twisting to one side, Hermione made to walk around Malfoy and Riddle, her thoughts fixed on what she hadn’t quite seen in Knockturn Alley—

“Actually,” said Riddle, and Hermione’s steps stuttered to an awkward halt. She hadn’t made it all the way around them, the upshot of which being that she now stood far too close to Riddle for her own comfort. “Actually, Granger, I was going to ask you to patrol with me. Draco, you can go and patrol the ground floor.”

Malfoy didn’t argue the point, and it was unclear if his cooperative mood had roots in wanting to please Riddle or wanting to get away from Hermione’s searching looks. Whatever is motives, he offered Riddle a mute nod—quite unlike the Malfoy who could never shut up, that—and strode out of the Fat Lady’s corridor.

And for the first time in Hermione’s life, she was actually quite sorry to see Malfoy go. She was half tempted to call him back, if only to delay the inevitable reality of being alone with Tom Riddle, but her energies were better put to dealing more constructively with her present…quandary.

So.

“Er,” Hermione prevaricated, feeling the corridor’s walls press in on her as acutely as if they’d been enchanted to shrink, “this’ll be the second time in two days, won’t it? That we’ll be. Um. Patrolling together.”

What she didn’t say was: Why’re you suddenly paying me so much attention after five solid years of failing to exchange more than ten words with me? Still. Perhaps the subtext carried through in her tone.

“What can I say?” Riddle half shrugged, positively dripping the sort of innate elegance that his well-off pureblood peers couldn’t hope to effectively replicate. “You’re pleasant company, Granger. I enjoyed our joint patrol of the Hogwarts Express, and I wouldn’t mind repeating the experience.”

Was she coloring every word Riddle spoke with what she’d felt in Knockturn Alley, or had he a talent for weaving double meanings into ostensibly innocuous compliments?

“I thought you were cross with me.” And, truthfully, she’d have preferred Riddle’s disdain to his friendliness. “Weren’t you feeling ashamed of my behavior not five minutes ago? Have you forgiven me already?”

Riddle tilted his head and studied her. He allowed the silence to grow till Hermione felt itchy with it, before finally smiling and saying, “I’m finding it…difficult to stay cross with you. Your friends must feel the same way, I’m sure.”

Hermione goggled at Riddle far longer than was polite, and then blurted, “Actually, even Harry and Ron think that I can be quite difficult to get on with, and they’re my best friends. The general consensus goes that I’m a bit of an unbearable swot, really, or haven’t you heard?”
She’d expected Riddle to—she wasn’t quite sure what she’d expected of him. To laugh at her, maybe, or to delicately sidestep awkward talk of how widely she was disliked by those outside of her immediate social circles. She certainly hadn’t expected that he’d frowned as though affronted on her behalf.

“I don’t like to generalize other Houses, Granger, but if that’s how Gryffindors treat their friends, I’m glad to be a Slytherin.” Riddle ate up the space between them with one neat stride, eyes intent on Hermione’s face. “But I reckon it all comes down to jealousy, really. Everyone wants to be brilliant—to be special—but real brilliance is innate, not learned, and when people realize that, they lash out at the truly brilliant.”

Hermione’s face locked into a frown to match Riddle’s.

“Anyone can excel if they try,” she argued. Riddle had said that he didn’t like to generalize, yet here he was, generalizing about what did and didn’t count as true brilliance. “You shouldn’t dismiss people out of hand like that.”

“Oh, I hadn’t meant to—well, you must think I’m a right prat, mustn’t you? I’m sorry, Granger, I didn’t mean to imply that our schoolmates were a load of idiots.” Riddle ducked his head, charmingly shamefaced, but Hermione wasn’t buying one iota of it. “What I meant to say was that people tend to underestimate their own abilities, and when they meet someone like you—someone to whom brilliance comes easily, naturally—they downplay their own potential in favor of envying yours.”

It was convincing, really, how he backtracked and explained himself, but Hermione had seen his face when he’d talked of innate brilliance. She’d seen his upper lip curl ever so slightly with what she suspected was deep-seated disdain for their peers. She’d seen it. She was certain. Dead certain.

“And you’re not just brilliant, are you, Granger?” Riddle was saying, his hooded eyelids dropping to half mast, his smile going indulgent again. “You’re kind as well, aren’t you? I saw you with that house-elf—Dobby, was it? Yes, I know Dobby—I holidayed at Malfoy Manor the summer before Dobby was freed, did you know that?”

Riddle paused as though to give Hermione a chance to answer, so she said, “No. I didn’t know that.”

“Right, well—I don’t mean to speak ill of Draco’s family, but let’s just say that it’s probably for the best that Potter tricked Mr. Malfoy into freeing that elf. I think it’s admirable, what you’re doing for house-elves like Dobby. Oh, yes.” Riddle’s smile grew wider, flashing teeth perfect enough to make Hermione’s parents sigh. “I’ve heard of your organization. S.P.E.W., was it? You caused quite a stir two years ago, making your rounds with your collecting tin.”

Any gratification Hermione may have felt at Riddle getting S.P.E.W.’s name right on the first try was cancelled out by a vivid image of the Slytherins gathered in their subterranean common room, having a laugh at the expense of Hermione and her tin.

“You needn’t bother telling me how many people look down on S.P.E.W., thanks.” Hermione snapped, cheeks full of agitated color. “I’m quite aware that most of our peers can’t be bothered to care about the exploitation of slave labor.”

Riddle’s handsome face became momentarily pinched. His expression smoothed immediately out again, but before it could, Hermione saw genuine irritation flash through his eyes.

“I need to choose my words a bit more carefully when I’m around you, don’t I?” said Riddle. “I suspect the fault lies with me for making such a poor impression back in August—no, I haven’t
forgotten—but I’ve got to admit, Granger, your misinterpreting every single thing that I say and jumping immediately on the defensive has grown rather tiresome.”

The blood that’d risen in Hermione’s cheeks seemed to drain all at once so that she felt positively dizzy from its exodus. No, not just dizzy—she felt like she’d been slapping.

“I’m sorry,” she said, not feeling sorry at all, “but didn’t you just say that the fault lies with you for scaring me in the first place? Where do you get off, Riddle, making me feel guilty over perfectly justifiable mistrust—”

“I’ve gone out of my way to be civil to you.” Riddle’s voice was silky, but that flash of irritation Hermione had seen was back and brighter than ever. “Kind, even. I feel perfectly awful for having frightened you so badly, and—for God’s sake, Granger, all I was going to say just now was that I admired your devotion to your cause.”

If, a moment ago, Hermione had felt like she’d been slapped, now she felt as if someone had hit her with a Trip Jinx.

“Oh,” she said. Riddle had a particular talent for stealing the words on which she so relied, didn’t he?

“I also meant to ask,” Riddle went on, banking the sparks in his eyes and putting on a kinder expression as though to apologize for upsetting her, “whether you could use another member.”

Hermione blinked at him.

“For S.P.E.W.,” Riddle clarified, as though he suspected that his vague wording was the source of Hermione’s bemused silence. “I’d like to join up. I’m trying to keep busy these days because—well, you know why—and if I’m going to keep busy, I might as well do something constructive.”

And this was what Hermione should have done:

She should have accepted immediately—she should have told Riddle that she’d be right back, that she needed to nip up to her dormitory for her collecting tin—she should have latched on immediately to someone with Riddle’s charisma and influence—for God’s sake, he’d have all of Slytherin House joining up by Hallowe’en. Not just Slytherin—half the student body and several teachers at least.

That was what Hermione should have done, but this was what she said:

“I haven’t got my tin with me. For the—for the membership fee.”

“Well, that’s all right,” said Riddle equably. “Gryffindor Tower’s right along this corridor, isn’t it? I can wait a moment.” He rocked forward and gave Hermione a conspiratorial smile. “Or you could just accept my membership fee right now, couldn’t you? You’re an upright sort; I trust you not to embezzle your organization’s funds.”

Right. Yes. Riddle was being perfectly logical, perfectly reasonable.

Just say yes, you absolute idiot.

“How much was it, the membership fee?” Riddle asked, and Hermione saw, as though from a long distance away, his hand sink into his trousers’ pocket.

Hermione licked her lips. “It’s two Sickles. But I don’t think—”

“This isn’t about me being poor, is it?” Riddle asked, and Hermione braced herself for defensiveness
—she knew how Ron could be when the question of money came up—but Riddle only smiled a little shyly, a little self-deprecatingly. “It’s true that I haven’t got much money to spare, but I’ve got enough for a charitable cause. After all, house-elves have even less than I do, don’t they?”

Yes. Yes, that was true. Hermione’s palms itched with the urge to snatch Riddle’s Sickles and officially indoctrinate him into S.P.E.W. Someone like Riddle fighting for her cause—for the cause—that would be—that would be absolutely excellent, and she should really just—

She should really not give him a solid excuse to spend more time around her, was what she should do.

“I’m sorry,” said Hermione, and Riddle stilled, fingers clutching his coin purse. “But I’d feel awful not doing things properly—and I’d rather not run off to the dorms when I ought to be patrolling—speaking of, I really shouldn’t loiter any longer—”

“All right,” Riddle said, capitulating so easily that it caught Hermione off guard. He tucked his purse back into his pocket. “It’s your organization; I don’t want to undermine you. Let’s get moving, then.”

For the second time, Riddle offered Hermione his arm like some romantic hero out of a black and white film.

And for the second time, Hermione took it.

“Granger,” said Riddle, steering them down the Fat Lady’s corridor to the flight of stairs. “I’ve been meaning to ask—when’s your birthday?”

Her—birthday? He wanted to know the date of her birthday? Don’t tell him, was her first concrete thought, and then, What do you mean, don’t tell him? Don’t be ridiculous.

“The nineteenth of September. I’ll be, er. I’ll be turning seventeen.” She glanced askance at Riddle. “Er—why d’you want to know?”

“Well,” said Riddle, smiling in passing at a portrait of a young witch who was batting her long, curly eyelashes at him, “I’ve been wanting to do something nice for you, actually, to make up for scaring you. And wanting to make things up to you had its part in my motives for joining S.P.E.W.—although I really do believe in your cause, truly—but as I can’t do that quite yet, I’ll settle for giving you a birthday present.”

Hermione faltered to a standstill, fingers snagging in Riddle’s sleeve, but if she’d been hoping to see Riddle stumble, she was disappointed.

“What is it?” Riddle asked her, having come to an infuriatingly smooth stop.

“You can’t just—you really don’t need to—”

“No,” said Riddle. “No, I don’t suppose I need to, but I want to. I’d like to.”

“You really don’t—”

“Granger. You seem like the sort who can’t stand to lose an argument.” Riddle started moving again, and Hermione trotted to keep up. “But you’ll just have to let this one lie, I’m afraid. I’m determined to make your seventeenth birthday one worth remembering.”
Hermione’s stomach rolled into a tight knot.

She was dead certain that she’d have preferred an entirely forgettable birthday to whatever it was that Tom Riddle had in mind.

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19 September 1996

“Hermione, wake up. Hermione.”

Hermione startled awake, displacing Crookshanks, who’d been sleeping on her chest (so that was why she’d dreamt of being crushed to death beneath a very fuzzy boulder). She dug at her eyes with fingers gone thick and clumsy from sleep, scraping out the rheum that’d crusted overnight.

She’d got perhaps four, five hours of sleep, having devoted a great chunk of her night to her ever-rising piles of homework, and when she finally coaxed herself into an upright position, her blood rushed through a skull that felt scooped clean of all real substance.

“What’s the matter?” she rasped at Lavender Brown, who’d sat herself down on the edge of Hermione’s bed and was now bouncing with far too much energy for an overworked N.E.W.T. student. “Have I missed breakfast? Am I late to—”

“No, no, no,” said Lavender, waving her hands as though to physically dispel Hermione’s panic. “I’ve woken you up a bit early, actually—sorry about that—but your birthday presents have arrived, and I didn’t want you to have to wait till later to open them!”

“I told her not to do it.” Parvati Patil emerged from the semi-darkness that smothered their dormitory and perched on Hermione’s bed opposite Lavender. “I said that you’d only panic—”

“You couldn’t’ve been sure of that,” said Hermione, defensive. She wasn’t that prone to panicking. Was she?

“Yes, all right, whatever you say.” Parvati pointed at the small stack of parcels that’d appeared at the foot of Hermione’s four-poster. “Happy birthday. Open your presents.”

Crookshanks was rubbing his cheek against the corner of a parcel that was wider and flatter than the others, and it was this box that Lavender snatched up and presented to Hermione.

“Go on, then,” said Lavender, bouncing where she sat. “That one’s from Parvati and me. Go on, open it.”

“Oh,” said Hermione, at once terribly touched and mildly confused. “I hadn’t thought—I hadn’t expected—”

“Well, of course we got you a present,” Lavender trilled. “We’re friends, aren’t we?”

And Hermione had called them that on the Hogwarts Express, but only to buoy up the excuses she’d been offering to Riddle. In reality, Hermione thought that calling Lavender and Parvati
her friends would be stretching a technicality to its breaking point—they were friendly acquaintances, certainly, or at least they were most of the time—but Parvati fixed Hermione with a cool, challenging look, and Hermione hurriedly busied herself with tearing their present’s gold wrapping paper.

Lavender and Parvati had got Hermione a two-tiered box of Chocolate Cauldrons, the tops of which were iced with pink frosting so as to give them the appearance of bubbling over with sugary potion.

“Thank you,” said Hermione, privately resolving to hand the Chocolate Cauldrons over to Harry and Ron for fear of what her parents would say about all that sugar. Lavender and Parvati grinned, though, clearly pleased with themselves, and Hermione reached for the next parcel. “Let’s have a look at this, then.”

It was from Sirius and Harry, and it turned out to be a delicate rose gold wristwatch with a churning galaxy for a face.

“That’s traditional, giving a witch or wizard a watch when they come of age,” said Parvati, and Hermione nodded along—she’d already known that, of course—as she turned the lovely piece of jewelry over in her hands. “I expect Mr. Black wanted to see to it himself, what with your parents being Muggles.”

Sirius hadn’t been the only one who’d strived to fill what he perceived as a gap in Hermione’s childhood; the next parcel, this one from the Weasley family, also contained a watch, yellow gold and a bit more worn than the one Sirius and Harry had given her, but still heavy with so much meaning that Hermione’s eyes stung to look at it.

“This one’s from your parents, Hermione,” said Parvati, handing over small, square box which resolved to be—another watch. “God—what are you going to do with all these?” Parvati wondered, giggling. “Wear them all at once?”

“That’ll be a Muggle watch, then, won’t it?” asked Lavender, peering at the decidedly unmagical but still beautiful watch face. “I wouldn’t let Mr. Weasley have a look at that if I were you, Hermione. He’s crazy about Muggles, isn’t he? He’d probably never give it back if he got his hands on it.”

“I expect you’re right,” said Hermione, smiling wryly, but the sting in her eyes had bloomed into a persistent burn.

Had her parents asked Sirius or the Weasleys about Wizarding traditions? Hermione’d have to write them a long thank-you letter straightaway—she’d have to write thank-you letters to everyone, and give Harry and Ron hugs as soon as she saw them. She was so lucky to have such a wonderful extended family—

“Oh!” shrieked Lavender. Crookshanks, who’d stretched out across Hermione’s legs to nap, jumped up, hissed, and fled beneath Hermione’s four-poster. “I nearly forgot!”

Lavender bounded off the bed with a great squeal of springs—Hermione and Parvati winced at the racket—and raced over to the nearby window, the sunken ledge of which, Hermione saw, was home to a large vase of flowers.

“This turned up as well,” said Lavender, breathless, as she padded back over to Hermione, handling the vase as though it were the Crown Jewels. “I put it on the windowsill for some sun—hope you don’t mind—but, Hermione, I can’t believe you never told us you had a boyfriend!”

Hermione’s stomach plummeted. It couldn’t be—but of course it was—
Hermione closed trembling fingers around the clear, diamond-bright vase, taking on its surprisingly light weight. It was crystal, real or imitation, and the flowers that sprang from its mouth were as damp and waxy as though they’d been picked only moments ago. The vase was full to brimming with colors both bright and muted, and the viola tricolors in particular stood out if only for their sheer numbers in proportion to the others.

And sticking out of the riot of color was a note on heavy cardstock, addressed to Hermione in script that was neat and slanting and almost delicate, really.

Hermione didn’t want to read it.

Lavender burbled on, as thrilled as Hermione was uneasy.

“I had a little peek at the note—sorry, Hermione—and it looks like a boy’s handwriting, doesn’t it, Parvati? Of course, if it were a girl’s, that’d be perfectly excellent as well—what matters is that it’s absolutely romantic—well, go on! Open it!”

If she didn’t—if she treated the note as if it was a cutting of Venomous Tentacula, that would look strange, wouldn’t it? Lavender and Parvati would ask questions.

Knowing there was nothing for it, Hermione peeled the folded cardstock apart, and Lavender and Parvati leaned in close, their soft sheaves of hair swinging forward to tickle Hermione’s cheeks and neck.

Hermione’s eyesight was still a bit blurry from sleep, so she had to blink several times before the note resolved into legibility.

I’d still like to join S.P.E.W., if only for the chance to get to know you better. In the meantime, I hope these flowers will brighten your day. Have a happy seventeenth.

-T.M.R.

“Oooh!” shrieked Lavender, directly in Hermione’s ear. “They’re interested in joining S.P.E.W., are they? You had better snap them up, Hermione, whoever they are. And what does T.M.R. stand for? Go on, tell us!”

Hermione disregarded the ache in her ear in favor of studying the flowers Tom Riddle had sent her. Something was niggling at the back of her brain, persistent as a bug bite. Hadn’t she read something about one of these types of flowers? But which—?

“All right, Hermione?” Parvati asked, and Hermione was snapped out of her daze.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “Yes, I’m fine. Actually—” Kicking off her blankets, Hermione scrambled out of bed, nearly braining Lavender with the vase as she went, and set the flowers down on her bedside cabinet before opening her trunk. “Actually, there’s something I need to tend to.”

“But you haven’t finished opening your presents!” said Lavender, goggling. “Look, this one here says it’s from Dobby the house-elf. Isn’t he a sweet little thing?”

“Yes, very sweet,” Hermione said shortly, stripping off her pajamas and changing into her uniform and robes at top speed. “I’ll open it later; I’ve got to get to the library.”

“But breakfast!” Lavender called after Hermione, who was already halfway across the circular dormitory.
“I’m not hungry,” Hermione called back, bursting through the dormitory doors and onto the spiraling flight of stairs that fed into the common room. She hadn’t done anything about her hair in her rush to get where she was going, but as her brushed hair looked much the same as her un-brushed hair, she doubted anyone would know the difference.

The journey from Gryffindor Tower to the library was a bit of a blur; the only moments that really stood out were those in which Hermione nearly tripped over her own robes on account of taking the stairs two at a time. By the time she arrived at her destination, she’d developed an awful stitch in her side, which she clutched at as she lingered at the library’s threshold.

Madam Pince, thankfully, was quite occupied with shrieking her head off at a pair of seventh years that’d apparently been snogging in the stacks—Hermione wrinkled her nose; before breakfast, honestly—which meant that Hermione ought to be able to browse the library unmolested for as long as Pince’s attention was otherwise engaged.

Steeling herself for what she might find, Hermione pointed herself toward the library’s rarely browsed Muggle Studies section.

For all that she had the curious feeling that she wasn’t on quite the right path, Hermione pressed her fingers to an eye-level shelf and started scanning the titles of books written on the subject of Muggle botanical practices. Nothing was jumping out at her, though, and she was putting some serious thought into risking a very vague Accio—Madam Pince was still railing at the wayward seventh years that this was a library, not a den of iniquity—when one of the botanical titles at last caught her eye and held it.

The Fertile Crescent: A Brief Nonmagical History.

History. Yes, history. That might be—

Shifting gears, Hermione turned her attention to books written on the subject of historical Muggle Britain, wondering if she’d have to resort to asking Madam Pince for assistance after all, supposing she separated herself from the thwarted seventh years. Edwardian, Victorian, Regency—

Hermione backtracked. Victorian. Yes, that ought to do it.

Floral Feeling: A Dictionary of the Victorian Language of Flowers. The title leapt out at Hermione like a godsend, and she grabbed it by the spine and tugged it into her lap.

Hermione paged to the index, skimming through cramped columns and page numbers, but there wasn’t anything on viola tricolors. Hermione blew out a breath, frowned, and strained to remember the flower’s colloquial names. Johnny jump up, tickle-my-fancy, heart’s delight, heart’s ease—

Hermione skated her fingernail up the page, stopped at the H’s, and found it. Heart’s ease. She flipped to the corresponding page, dead certain that she wouldn’t like what she’d find but unable to bear the not knowing. She read the entry on heart’s ease once, then read it again, slower this time.

Heart’s ease. There was more than one interpretation for heart’s ease, or wild pansy, although one meaning reflected the other.

Heart’s ease could be a declaration, an intimation that the giver could not stop thinking about the receiver. You are in my thoughts, it meant.

But it could also function as a plea, or an order—an order for the receiver to think about the giver. Think of me.
Hermione slammed *Floral Feeling* shut and crammed it back onto its shelf, for once unconcerned with the proper care and handling of books. None of the books in the Muggle Studies section were enchanted, constructed as they were to be as mundane as the subjects on which they were written, so at least Hermione wasn’t subjected to a wailing book on top of everything else.

She hadn’t really felt anything as she’d scanned the index and paged to the entry she’d been seeking, too consumed by purpose to notice her own reactions to what she was reading. But she was feeling something now, and what she felt came over her in inching little waves till she had to draw up her legs and press her face against her knees in order to ground herself.

Had Riddle been aware of what those particular flowers meant? Had he been acting with intent?

Better question: did he ever do anything *without* intent? Hermione suspected not.

Madam Pince had stopped screaming at the seventh years. All was quiet.

Hermione exhaled warm and damp across her kneecaps, taking a steadying breath that did her little good.

*I cannot stop thinking about you. Think of me.*

She felt quite sick.
“No, you two go on ahead,” said Hermione, waving off Harry and Ron. “I’ll catch up.”

As expected, though, Harry and Ron eschewed doing as they were asked in favor of loitering next to the scarred and stained table they’d shared with Hermione during class, having apparently arrived at the erroneous conclusion that Hermione was incapable of navigating the castle’s drafty corridors on her own.

Hermione had no intention of letting them thwart her, though: thinking that her friends’ resolve to wait up for her would wane the longer she took to get her things together, she made a show of sorting through her bag.

“What’s the matter?” Ron peered into Hermione’s satchel as though expecting her to unearth a concrete reason for wanting to stay behind after class. “You’re not going to fuss at Slughorn about the essay, are you? Got an Exceeds Expectations instead of your usual Outstanding, did you? Must be tough.”

Hermione’s fingers stilled on the spines of her books, and she snapped, “Obviously I got an Outstanding.” Really, the only class in which she didn’t receive consistent Outstandings was Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Ron knew that.

Harry and Ron exchanged a look, and Hermione swore internally. She should’ve just allowed them to operate under the false impression that she wanted to talk to Slughorn about her grades. Now they’d start asking questions, and then Slughorn would wander away to his office before Hermione could catch him—

“Hermione,” said Harry, but Hermione interrupted him before he could get whatever it was he meant to say out of his throat and onto his tongue.

“Well, all right, if you absolutely must know, I was going to ask Professor Slughorn if he’d be interested in receiving a short essay on the benefits and drawbacks of Blood-Replenishing Potions versus those of Muggle blood transfusions. You know, for extra points.”

Hermione was a notoriously abysmal liar, and her talk of fabricated essays sounded forced and awkward even to her own ears, but, miraculously, Harry and Ron looked convinced: their eyes had glazed over with disinterest (Ron was mouthing “extra points” as though unable to fathom why a N.E.W.T. student would possibly want more work), and Hermione’s rigid shoulders eased into a more relaxed posture.

“We’ll wait for you in the corridor,” said Harry, shaking himself out of his daze and leading the way out of Slughorn’s dungeon classroom. Hermione’s shoulders immediately tightened up again—waiting in the corridor invariably translated to listening at the door. Perhaps she hadn’t convinced Harry and Ron as well as she’d thought.

An easy enough fix, Hermione thought, drawing her wand. She pointed it at the cracked classroom door, cast a nonverbal Muffliato, and then pocketed it as she approached Slughorn, who was sorting through the contents of his dragon-skin briefcase.
Professor Slughorn glanced up at that very moment, and when he spotted Hermione, his mouth curled into a genial grin beneath his great walrus mustache.

“Miss Granger!” It was just as well that Hermione had mastered nonverbal magic so quickly, or else her Muffliato might have broken under the force of Slughorn’s booming voice. “Why do you linger, dear girl? You can’t be dissatisfied with your essay’s mark, can you? Of course, if anyone warrants a grade higher than an Outstanding, it’s you, my dear girl, but until the Department of Magical Education adjusts the scale, I’m afraid you’ll have to settle for what you’ve got.”

Despite herself, Hermione smiled in reaction to Professor Slughorn’s effusive flattery. Slughorn fawned over his favorites, certainly, but his praise was always sincere, and that, along with his warm personality and fascinating lessons, was chief amongst the reasons why Hermione couldn’t bring herself to dislike him.

“No, sir.” Hermione pinned her smile to her face and clasped her hands demurely in front of her. “Writing it was great fun, by the way. You’re always, er—you always set us the most fascinating topics, Professor.”

Hermione stumbled over the reciprocal flattery—she was laying it on a bit thick, wasn’t she?—but Slughorn’s cheeks flushed with pleased color, and he beamed all the brighter even as he wagged a faux-chiding finger.

“Miss Granger, I’ve already told you that you simply can’t earn a mark higher than an Outstanding, so there’s really no point in wasting your flattery on an old fool like me. Now, then. If it’s not your marks you’re asking after, what is it that you wanted to talk to me about?”

Slughorn laced his fingers together and rested his linked hands on top of his belly, clearly settling in to hear Hermione out. Not quite trusting how smoothly this was going, Hermione sorted hastily through the openers she’d composed over the past few days, wondering which would work most effectively in her favor.

“Well, sir…” Hermione adopted a sheepish expression, and it felt convincing on her face, as she was genuinely embarrassed. “I don’t know if it’s right of me to ask, seeing as how I’ve been turning your invitations down all these years—not that I didn’t want to attend your parties, sir; it’s only, well, I was afraid that I’d feel out of place, you understand—”

“Miss Granger,” Professor Slughorn mercifully cut across Hermione’s awkward overtures, and she subsided, red in the face. If Slughorn couldn’t be bothered to hear her completely out, then surely a polite rejection was on its way—

But Slughorn was smiling, not as though he pitied Hermione, but gleefully, and when he spoke, it was with a gentle kindness that only barely masked poorly restrained excitement.

“Miss Granger,” Slughorn repeated, stepping around his desk to wring Hermione’s hands. “Do my ears deceive me in my old age, or are you consenting to attend one of my little get-togethers?”

“Er,” said Hermione, blinking rapidly. “The second one? I mean, yes, of course I am—that is, if you’ll have me, sir.”

“If I’ll have you! If I’ll have you?” Slughorn released Hermione’s hands, the better to wave off Hermione’s phrasing as though he were batting a fly. “Darling girl, I’m positively honored! You’ve been holding out for so long, you see, I was starting to think that I couldn’t count myself amongst your favorite teachers!”
“I’m sorry I gave you that impression, Professor.” Hermione grimaced in what she hoped was an apologetic sort of way. “It had nothing to do with you, really, my not wanting to join. As I said, I was afraid that I wouldn’t, er, receive a very warm welcome from the other students. I’m not that popular outside of my own House, you see. I’ve got a bit of a reputation as a—as something of a know-it-all, so—”

It wasn’t entirely untrue, what Hermione was saying; she’d always been quite sure that Slughorn’s favorites wouldn’t welcome her intrusion on their special little society, seeing as at least half of them were in Riddle’s gang of seventh year snobs and thugs. Bad enough that she had to see them in the corridors and during mealtimes; she’d really rather not spend time with them in an extracurricular context as well.

“Oh, but Miss Granger, what a rarity this is! No, my dear, for once you are entirely mistaken.” Slughorn reclaimed possession of Hermione’s hand and gave it a grandfatherly pat. “Should you attend my little club’s meetings, you’ll be amongst peers, and they’ll be quite happy to have you, quite happy indeed—brilliance calls to brilliance, after all.”

Uncharitably, but not without reason, Hermione thought that brilliance had only something to do with Slughorn’s selection process; some of his favorites weren’t so much brilliant as they were well connected.

“At any rate—” Slughorn gave Hermione’s hand one last comforting squeeze before relinquishing it. “—I don’t abide by bullying or harassment, so you can be quite sure that the other children will comport themselves appropriately.”

“All right.” Hermione tried to look as if she’d been convinced, but really, as long as Slughorn would have her, nothing would keep her away from the Slug Club. “Thank you, Professor. I feel better now.”

“Not at all, dear, not at all. Now, I expect you’ll be wanting the date of the next meeting?” Slughorn didn’t wait for verbal confirmation, sparing Hermione just enough time to smile and nod. “Excellent! I hope it’s not too soon—ah, but of course you’re quite eager to get started, aren’t you?—our next gathering will be on Friday—the twenty-seventh of September—after dinner, in my office. Nothing formal, no fancy dress code; your school robes will suffice. Have you got all that, my dear?”

“Yes, Professor, thank you.” Hermione adjusted her bag’s strap on her shoulder, eager to clear off. “Thank you for having me along—and I’m sorry for taking up so much of your time, really—”

“It’s no trouble, Miss Granger, no trouble at all.” Slughorn picked up his briefcase and gestured Hermione on ahead of him, face all wreathed in smiles. “But we had better look sharp, now, the both of us. Off we go.”

Wondering if this was how baubles and knick knacks felt when they were locked inside curio cabinets, Hermione crossed to the exit, at once agitated and relieved.

That was one hurdle overcome, but it was nothing, really, to what awaited her on Friday.

27 September 1996
Hermione had come to a decision as she’d sat hunched on the library floor, fists knuckling her eyes and heart pounding at the confines of her throat.

The Sorting Hat had put her in Gryffindor for a reason, and true Gryffindors did not—did not—take anything lying down. They did not allow bloody Slytherins to stamp all over them as they waged their insidious campaigns of mental warfare.

Gryffindors fought back.

Tom Riddle wanted to toy with her head? Fine. He was free to have a go at it—she could hardly stop him doing what he wanted as long as he refrained from breaking school rules, and gifts of bouquets, no matter how disturbing, did not qualify as bullying—but Hermione, in turn, was free to defend herself.

And she was perfectly free to keep an especially close eye on him.

So. She had composed herself, smoothing out her clothes and finger combing her hair. She’d conducted herself with dignity all throughout her morning lessons, and when the lunch bell rang, she’d marched herself down to the Great Hall, walked straight up to Tom Riddle, and thanked him warmly for his gift.

“You liked them? I’m so relieved to hear that, you can’t imagine. I was afraid that I’d overstepped somehow. Sending you flowers—”

Oh, but he was terribly accomplished at playacting bashful, wasn’t he? Hermione wanted to be sick all over his buffed shoes.

“Not at all.” With difficulty, Hermione had bent her mouth into what she hoped was a convincing smile. “They made for a nice break in the parade of watches, actually. Thank you, Riddle, really.”

And Riddle had quirked his mouth, and told her she was quite welcome, but after that—after that, things took a curious turn.

Riddle stopped seeking her out. He was perfectly civil, of course, smiling at her when their eyes met in the corridors, holding doors open for her whenever they happened to be going the same way, docking points from Slytherin whenever Malfoy insulted her in his hearing, but—

But he never asked Hermione to patrol with him during the evenings, never engaged her first, never brought up S.P.E.W. Never spent more than ten, twenty seconds alone with her.

Hermione should’ve felt relieved, really. She should’ve written off the few instances of Tom Riddle paying her special attention as anomalies.

But, no. Hermione was quite certain that the friendly but distant demeanor Riddle had adopted was just another way elaborate of messing about with her head.

She’d show him.

Still.

As she stared warily at the door to Slughorn’s office, stomach weaving itself into more and more intricate knots, Hermione couldn’t help but wonder if she’d acted a little too rashly when she’d asked to join Slughorn’s club. Was the chance to observe Riddle more closely worth all this?
It wasn’t too late to turn back. Slughorn would be terribly disappointed, but Hermione could always lie and say she’d caught something nasty—only, Slughorn might check with Pomfrey, mightn’t he, so—

So, she’d just have to carry on, wouldn’t she? Suck it up and follow through.

Hermione breathed out through her nose and raised her fist to knock—but the door swung inward just as her knuckles grazed the varnished wood, revealing a startled but delighted Professor Slughorn, posed against the backdrop of a sumptuously appointed office.

“Why, if it isn’t our own Miss Granger. I thought I heard footsteps coming up the corridor.”

“Yes.” Hermione smiled rather queasily. “That was me.” Well, obviously. “Sorry—I’m a bit early, aren’t I? I can always come back later—”

“Now, Miss Granger, do I look like the sort to turn away a young lady and tell her to come back later? No, no, you must come in straightaway.” Slughorn shifted to one side and beckoned Hermione into the overlarge room. “I was only having a chat with Tom, but don’t fret, you’re not interrupting anything—you do know Tom, Miss Granger?”

Tom Riddle rose up from one of the two sofas placed before the crackling fireplace, eyes wide and—hungry, almost. Hermione froze on the spot, feeling like nothing so much as a hunted rabbit.

No. No, this wasn’t how it was supposed to go. Hermione had rushed through her dinner so as to make it to Slughorn’s office before any of his other favorites could, not wanting to arrive to a sea of cold, unwelcoming stares on top of everything else.

Hermione darted her eyes all around Slughorn’s office, half hoping that more students would appear from behind the heavy furniture or come in from the balcony—a balcony, really?—but, no, Hermione and Riddle and Slughorn were quite alone. Honestly, Hermione would’ve preferred a horde of judgmental Slytherins to this.

“Ah, but of course you know Tom,” Slughorn was saying. “As a prefect, you must see quite a bit of him, mustn’t you? Head Boy; I couldn’t be more proud—and I was only just telling him earlier this week—was it on Monday or Tuesday, Tom?”

“Monday afternoon, sir,” said Riddle, and his quiet voice somehow startled Hermione more effectively than a shout.

“Monday afternoon, sir,” said Riddle, and his quiet voice somehow startled Hermione more effectively than a shout.

“Yes, yes, Monday afternoon—thank you, Tom—it was on Monday afternoon, Miss Granger, that I told Tom you’d finally consented to join our little club! You were quite pleased to hear it, weren’t you, Tom?”

Hermione’s forced smile went brittle. Pleased, was he?

“Yes, sir, quite pleased,” said Riddle, rounding the sofas. “Sorry for taking so long to greet you properly, Granger,” he went on, holding out a hand for Hermione to shake as though they’d just been introduced for the first time. “I wasn’t expecting to see you so soon. I’m used to being earliest, you understand.”

“No, it’s all right.” Hermione touched her fingertips fleetingly to Riddle’s, then tucked them safely against her sternum. “You don’t need to apologize for something like that.”

She’d nearly forgotten how it felt to be subject to Riddle’s direct attention. It was like he’d wedged her between two glass slides and clamped her under a microscope.
“I hope I’m not being too forward,” said Riddle, ducking his head so that a thick wave of hair fell forward to graze his long eyelashes, “but I’m happy to see you here. You look very pretty.”

Hermione’s jaw nearly dropped. With effort, she clenched it, face burning fever hot.

Oh, but Riddle was absolutely full of it. Slughorn had called this evening’s gathering an informal affair, so Hermione had put only a little more effort than usual into her appearance, checking her socks for runs and wrestling her bushy hair into a thick plait. Overall, though, she looked much the same as ever.

“Now, now, Tom!” Slughorn wagged a reproachful finger, but his face was alight, and Hermione wondered, stomach sinking, if he fancied himself a matchmaker as well as a collector of the influential. “You oughtn’t to flirt in front of your teachers, you know! It’s impolite.”

Flirt. That right there was the label that Hermione had been point blank refusing to apply to Riddle’s overtures, and now Slughorn had gone and dragged it out into the open.

“Sorry, Professor.” Apparently Riddle could blush on command, because his gaunt cheeks filled immediately with bright color. He ducked his head even lower, eyes fixed on Hermione’s through the fan of his lashes. “I was just so pleased to see Hermione. We don’t get to talk much, being in different years.”

Hermione. Hermione. There he went again, and Hermione outright refused to call it a slipup. Riddle didn’t do slipups.

She had to make a retreat. A calculated retreat, and then she’d come right back. She needed to think, and she couldn’t do that properly with Riddle looming over her.

“Excuse me, Professor. I need to, er—” What was it that ladies were always saying in classy films? “—go powder—my nose. Sorry, I’ll be right back.”

And with an awkward bob that might’ve been a curtsy, Hermione turned on her heel and fled through the open door, destination the nearest toilet. She’d splash water on her face. Clear her head. She’d grown complacent in Riddle’s absence, and perhaps that was what he’d wanted all along, perhaps that was why he’d distanced himself—if she never got used to him, she’d never be able to keep her head in his presence.

But it turned out that the rhythmic click of her school shoes against the stone floor served to settle her as adequately as a cool splash of water to the face, and Hermione thought, perhaps, that all she’d needed was a truncated walk. Perhaps she wouldn’t need to retreat to the bathroom at all.

But then her schoolbag—the bag that she’d failed to stow in her dormitory in her rush to get to Slughorn’s office—abruptly split a seam and regurgitated its contents in a cascade that battered Hermione’s knees and feet before hitting the flagstone floor with a series of seismic thuds.

Hermione pressed her lips together, holding in the curses that wanted to skip off her tongue. Poor as the timing was, this had been bound to happen eventually: Hermione had favored this satchel for going on three years, and her practice of indiscriminately stuffing it with what amounted to the full stock of a fairly small bookshop had finally—inevitably—taken its toll on the stitching.

Thinking that now was probably the time to work on her Undetectable Extension Charms, Hermione knelt to retrieve her books, her bruised legs smarting terribly when they hit the unforgiving floor.

This just wasn’t her year, was it?
“Granger? What—are you all right?”

Oh, brilliant.

Hermione groped for her wand, hoping against hope to get her books all sorted and her bag mended before Tom Riddle could come any closer, but she wasn’t a quick enough draw, and Riddle was already circling around the mess she’d made to kneel down across from her.

“Bag split a seam?” Riddle asked, sympathetic, as he pulled his own wand and pointed it at her books, which leapt up and stacked themselves alphabetically by author. “Yes, I know we’re not supposed to use magic in the corridors—don’t tell Filch on me, eh?”

Hermione didn’t respond, mutely fingering the split in question. Was it just her, or did it look almost too neat? Almost as if someone had taken a knife to the stitching—a knife, or a Severing Charm—

“One more spell won’t hurt, then, will it? Excuse me.” Riddle brushed Hermione’s fingers out of the way, pointed his wand at the split, and mended it. “There. That’s all better.”

Hermione sat back on her heels, studying Riddle’s face. Their eyes met, and she saw something—something cold and alien—ripple across his finely sculpted features. Whatever it was, it had her nape and scalp prickling with unease.

“You ran out on us.” Riddle pushed his hair back from his face, which had reverted to its usual politely pleasant expression. “Were you wanting a private word with Professor Slughorn? If you were, you could’ve said so—I’d’ve made myself scarce.”

Hermione licked her lips, and Riddle mirrored her, running a red tongue over his full lower lip. Hermione pressed her knuckles against her knees.

“It’s only,” Riddle said when Hermione made no reply, “and I hope you don’t think that I’m overshar ing when I tell you this—it’s only that Professor Slughorn’s my favorite teacher. I can confide in him. Talk to him about things that I wouldn’t with other people.”

“What were you talking about, then?” It was rude of her to ask. If he’d been anyone else, she wouldn’t’ve asked.

“Evan Rosier was one of my best friends,” said Riddle, eyes downcast, knees pressed to the floor like a penitent. “I know I haven’t really been acting as if I’m in mourning—I’m just not that sort of person—but it’s been—difficult. Professor Slughorn’s always willing to listen, and that was what I needed. For someone to listen.”

Hermione gnawed on her lower lip. Riddle certainly looked mournful enough—paler than usual, mouth grimly set, lashes touching his cheekbones—and he had, she thought, made a decent show of it over the past few weeks, acting a little more withdrawn than usual when she spotted him in the corridors. But that was how some people mourned, wasn’t it? Grief looked different on different people.

But there was something else.

For her part, if Hermione had—she didn’t like to think of this, but—if she had lost Harry or Ron or Ginny, she’d be disconsolate. Devastated. Even if she’d managed to keep herself together in public, her eyes would’ve been red and puffy from all the crying she’d be doing in private.

Riddle’s eyes weren’t circled with red. The whites weren’t veined and ruddy. He hadn’t the look of
someone who’d been crying.

Perhaps he simply wasn’t a crier. Some people were like that.

Perhaps.

“I’m sorry,” said Hermione, choosing her words carefully. “It wasn’t my intention to interrupt a private conversation.”

“No, that’s all right.” Riddle finally moved, scooping up her books—she bristled, not wanting him to touch her things—and tucking them into her bag by hand. “We were just finishing up, anyway.”

Hermione drummed her fingers against her knees, knowing a dismissal when she heard one. Well, if he was going to invite a change of subject, then—

“Do you know anything about the Victorian language of flowers?” she blurted, nails digging half-moons into her thighs.

Riddle’s brows arched.

“Doing some extracurricular research, are you? No, sorry, I’m afraid I’m useless at that sort of thing. I’m surprised that I manage so well in Herbology, honestly. But talking of flowers—you’re quite sure you liked the ones I sent you?”

The flowers in question must’ve been charmed, as it’d been days and they had yet to show any signs of wilting. The petals were still plump and damp and looked not at all inclined to turn crisp and brown. Hermione had sat them on top of her bedside cabinet as a reminder, as a talisman.

“They’re lovely,” she said, because it was true.

Riddle smiled, and then moved so fluidly to his feet it was as though he hadn’t moved at all. He offered Hermione a hand up.

Hitching her mended bag over her shoulder, Hermione took Riddle’s hand, palm meeting palm, and allowed him to tug her to her feet.

“Shall we get back to Professor Slughorn?” Hermione asked, but Riddle had wrapped his other hand around hers, holding her quite still. A heavy ring on his right index finger bumped her knuckles.

“Actually, Hermione—can I call you Hermione just this once, please? Only it feels wrong to call you Granger when I’m trying to—” Riddle broke off, blowing out a breath that stirred the fringe that’d fallen back into his eyes.

Hermione curled her captured hand into a fist, a fist so tight that she could feel her heartbeat in her palm where it was jammed against her fingers.

“Trying to what?” Hermione asked. She didn’t want to know. She couldn’t stand not knowing.

“It’s bad timing, isn’t it?” Riddle’s smile was rueful, self-deprecating. “That’s why I backed off for a little while—it didn’t seem right, you understand, to feel what I was feeling so soon after Evan—” Riddle’s voice cracked, and he cleared his throat. It was all very convincing.

And Hermione had an awful suspicion that she knew precisely what was coming next.

It made sense, really. Given his recent behavior, if he’d been anyone else, she’d have assumed that he—well, boys acted a certain way in those situations, didn’t they, and Riddle had certainly been
playing his part.

Yes. If it had been anybody else—even someone as handsome and charming and as unlikely to pay
the resident swot any attention as Riddle—Hermione would have thought that—

Riddle rubbed his fingers over the back of Hermione’s hand. His cheeks were full of color.

“And it’s abrupt, I know, but—this will sound awfully trite, won’t it?—but it’s the first time I’ve felt
this way about anyone, and I wanted to take initiative. Didn’t want someone else to snatch you up
before I got to say my piece, I suppose.”

Riddle ducked his head, not bashfully, but to put his face closer to Hermione’s, and it was the same
as on the Hogwarts Express: Riddle smelled of nothing stronger than soap, but it clogged
Hermione’s nostrils as effectively as any expensive cologne, dizzying her, making her go all loopy.

He wasn’t looking at her the way boys looked at the girls they liked. He was looking at her the way
Ron looked at his chess pieces.

“I won’t insult your intelligence; I’m sure you’ve caught on to how I feel about you. Still, I’d like to
say it out loud.” This—weren’t confessions meant to be made in whispers? And yet Riddle spoke
clearly, not loudly, but clearly, so that Hermione’s ears rang with it. “I—I fancy you, Hermione. I
want you to be my girlfriend.”

She’d been expecting it, but it still hit her like a physical blow to the solar plexus, and she inhaled
sharply through her nose—a sound that was echoed a dozen times over from somewhere behind her
as what had to’ve been a small crowd of people gasped all at once in a hissing chorus.

It was theatrical, really. It was ridiculous.

It was all happening to her.

Riddle’s gaze went over Hermione’s head. His expression flickered before settling on a frown.

“Well, damn,” he muttered, apparently put out. His fingers were tight around Hermione’s. “I
wasn’t quite ready for the whole school to know about us.”

There is no us, Hermione wanted to shriek, but her voice was lost to her. All she could do was twist
awkwardly on the spot, locked as she was to Riddle, and take in, with a mounting sense of hysteria,
the gathered students who were gaping openly at her and Tom Riddle.

They’d heard. All of them. Of course they’d heard.

Riddle squeezed Hermione’s hand. As if they were in this mess together. As if they were already a
unit.

But Hermione had seen the way Riddle had looked before putting on a consternated mask. She’d
seen that nasty, self-satisfied smile.

She was certain of two things: that Riddle didn’t really fancy her, not at all, and that getting caught in
the act, as it were, had been exactly what he’d wanted.

Her severed bag. Riddle conducting his parody of a confession in a public corridor just as everyone
else was coming up from dinner. How he hadn’t bothered to lower his voice.

He had, undoubtedly, orchestrated this.
Chapter 5

28 September 1996

Hermione had slipped out of Gryffindor Tower before the sun had crested the horizon, hoping that the obscenely early hour would afford her some relative peace while she ate her breakfast. The Great Hall was bound to be empty this early on a Saturday, as Hermione’s schoolmates were universally fond of their weekend lie-ins.

Her eyes felt full of grit, owing to the early hour working in combination with a night that’d yielded very little in the way of restful sleep, but as she sat down at the empty Gryffindor dining table and reached for a plate piled high with thick slices of toast, she decided that exhaustion was a fair price to pay for this blissful solitude.

Hermione slathered a piece of toast in marmalade before biting into it, closing her eyes when the flavor hit her tongue—and nearly choked on her bite of food when she felt two people drop unceremoniously down on either side of her.

_Please don’t be Harry and Ron, please don’t be Harry and Ron, please—_

“Hermione _Granger_! What d’you think you’re doing, sneaking off like this? Why didn’t you wait up for us?”

So, not Harry and Ron. Worse.

Hermione swallowed her bite of toast—it went down her throat like a hunk of lead—and reluctantly opened her eyes to survey the two girls that’d clearly, deliberately boxed her in.

She wasn’t so naïve as to think that Lavender and Parvati had sought her out for the simple pleasure of her company.

“Sorry,” said Hermione, not feeling sorry at all. “I assumed you were having a lie-in, and I didn’t want to disturb you.”

“Well, _obviously_ you can’t be bothered to make time for us, so we took matters into our own hands.” Lavender’s lips were luminous with artificial color—_how_ had she found the time to apply her makeup in her rush to hunt down Hermione?—and they were presently fixed in a pout. “She just flounced right on up to our dormitory last night, didn’t she, Parvati? Didn’t even say hello.”

“That’s right.” Parvati helped herself to a slice of Hermione’s toast, nibbling on the corner as she surveyed Hermione with bright, calculating eyes. “We thought you were ill, actually. You looked rather peaky, you know.”

“From what little we saw of you, anyway,” Lavender said tartly, and nicked a slice of Hermione’s toast for herself.

Tamping down the spiteful impulse to pull the plate of toast closer to her chest and out of their reach, Hermione considered that she’d made the wrong move when she’d come downstairs for an early breakfast. Perhaps she should’ve stayed in bed all day under the pretense of feeling ill.

But, no. That wouldn’t’ve worked out at all. She’d have been sent straight down to Madam Pomfrey,
and then people would’ve visited her and asked her questions, and as strict as Pomfrey was, she couldn’t stand vigil over Hermione every minute of every day.

“If you want to ask me about Tom Riddle,” said Hermione, thinking fatalistically of adhesive bandages and how they needed to be ripped quickly off, “you might as well get to it. I’ve got homework that needs tending.”

Actually, she’d finished the last of her homework during lunch on Friday, but it wouldn’t hurt to give her completed assignments another lookover or two. She could stack her textbooks all around her like a fortress, and that nonverbal message of unwelcome had rarely failed to stop people from pestering her.

“Well,” said Lavender, and she looked across Hermione to exchange an offended look with Parvati. “You don’t need to be so grumpy about it. If anything, we ought to be the miffed ones, oughtn’t we, Parvati?”

Parvati, who was chewing on Hermione’s toast, nodded mutely but vigorously.

“First,” said Lavender, ticking points off on her fingers, “you get a bouquet for your birthday and refuse to tell us who sent it to you. Then we hear from Ernie Macmillan of all people—a Hufflepuff, Hermione, honestly—that Tom Riddle fancies you, and you don’t bother to come to us to confirm or deny?”

“I’m sorry, Lavender.” What little food Hermione had got down sat heavily in her stomach, and she pushed the plate of toast away, deciding that Lavender and Parvati were welcome to it. “But I fail to see how my—er—presumed romantic entanglements are any of your business.”

Lavender’s mouth popped open, then snapped shut. Through her teeth, she said, “Of course it’s our business. We’re your friends, aren’t we? Can’t you confide in us?”

All but boiling with spite, Hermione opened her mouth to shut Lavender down, to say that they weren’t, in fact, friends—but then she happened to glance at Parvati, and something about the hard set of Parvati’s jaw had Hermione clamping her mouth shut.

She was treating Lavender and Parvati like convenient targets, wasn’t she? True, neither one of them had any right to push her on this—and even if she’d been in a better mood, she’d have hesitated to confide in the school gossips—but if she got into a row with her dormmates, that’d be one more unpleasant thing with which she had to cope, wouldn’t it?

Hermione propped one elbow on the table and dropped her forehead into her cupped hand. It was already going all around the school, wasn’t it? What point was there in denying the truth?

Better that Lavender and Parvati heard it from the source, anyway.

“It’s true,” said Hermione, not lifting her face, not looking up at them, “that Tom Riddle—that he asked me out last night. All right? It’s true. Ernie Macmillan wasn’t having you on.”

Lavender and Parvati squealed, and Hermione finally sat up straight, frowning at each of them in turn.

“Whatever you’ve been hearing, it’s not as interesting as it sounds—” Actually, now that they were on the subject, she might as well ask what she’d been dreading to know. “What have you been hearing?”

“Only that Riddle’s been pining for you since your first day at Hogwarts,” said Parvati easily.
“Apparently he’s been in love with you this whole time and no one ever knew.”

“I heard that he cried,” said Lavender, propping her chin in her hands and staring wistfully off into the middle distance. “I wish a boy would cry over me.”

Hermione smiled grimly as she imagined how Riddle would react to that rumor. But then she set her dark amusement aside in favor of taking a pin to Lavender and Parvati’s dreamy bubble.

“I hate to disappoint you, truly, but you’re both wrong on all counts. Riddle’s eyes stayed quite dry throughout the whole—incident—and it seems that his—feelings for me—” Hermione felt again that she might choke. “—are fairly recent. No older than two months, I’d say, so you can imagine that he’d have had little time to pine.”

“But Tom Riddle,” said Parvati, undeterred. She gripped Hermione’s sleeve and gave her a gentle shake as though to physically impress upon her the momentous nature of this occasion. “He’s the best-looking boy in the whole school, Hermione, and he likes you. Aren’t you excited?”

Excited. No, that wasn’t the word for what Hermione was feeling. Uneasy, more like. Distrusting, perhaps. Utterly perplexed as to what Riddle hoped to gain from asking her out, certainly.

But excited? Not hardly.

Hermione settled on, “I’m more…skeptical than anything else, I suppose.”

Lavender broke off her dreamy staring to blink at Hermione. “Skeptical? Why?”

“Well, Parvati said it herself, didn’t she? Riddle’s good looking and sought after, and I’m—not winning any popularity contests, am I?”

“But you’re quite pretty when you can be bothered to fix your hair and do your makeup.” Lavender toyed with a curl of the hair in question, frowning at Hermione’s split ends as though they’d just come to life and insulted her mother. “Boys have fancied you before, haven’t they? I know they have.”

“Right,” Parvati chimed in. “And you’re so brainy; Riddle wouldn’t want to date someone whose marks aren’t as good as his. You’re also—er—quite a nice person once—once—”

“Once you get past my more abrasive qualities?” Hermione cut in wryly, and Parvati had the grace not to deny it. “Admit it, you two: you’re at as much of a loss as I am.”

“We are not,” said Lavender, but Hermione suspected it was only for form’s sake. “It’s only—well —”

“Riddle’s never shown much interest in anyone, has he?” Parvati supplied. “Not in a romantic sense, anyway. People will be badgering you about this for ages, Hermione—”

Because what Parvati and Lavender were doing didn’t qualify as badgering at all.

“—and if you can’t answer their questions as to what brought this on so suddenly—well, people can be awful, you know that, and they’ll start to—to insinuate things, probably.”

“Insinuate what sorts of things, exactly?” Hermione demanded, only to break off when a long shadow fell over the Gryffindor table.

“Er, Hermione? Have I come at a bad time?”
Just as well that Hermione had given up on breakfast, or else she might’ve choked on her food for the second time that morning. Lavender, who’d turned her attention to some rashers of bacon, wasn’t quite as lucky, and Hermione and Parvati both reached over to pat her on her heaving back even as their eyes remained pinned on a mildly alarmed Tom Riddle.

“Are you all right?” he asked Lavender, fingers twitching as though he was considering reaching across the table to check for himself, but Lavender’s coughing fit had subsided, and now she waved him off with fluttering hands.

“Oh!” Lavender was blushing scarlet, and even Hermione couldn’t fault her overmuch. All abject loathing aside, Riddle really was a bit overwhelming to look at. “No, I’m quite—I’m perfectly fine! See? This is me, being fine.” And she dissolved into a fit of the giggles.

“Well…that’s good to hear, then?” said Riddle uncertainly, eyeing Lavender as though he wasn’t quite sure what to do with her—and Hermione, despite absolutely everything, had to bite the inside of her cheek to hold in a bubble of laughter. “Er—good morning, by the way.”

Lavender pressed her hands to her cheeks as though doing so could hold in her giggles—it couldn’t—and Parvati stumbled over her own, “G-good morning.”

“…Morning,” said Hermione. The urge to smile had vanished, and now she found herself fighting the fidgets. Crossing her arms and pressing her fists against her sides to keep herself still, she ventured, “Did you want to—to talk with me, Riddle?”

Hermione’s cheeks felt hot, but she wasn’t flustered for the same reason as Lavender. She was still feeling terribly humiliated from last night, and seeing Riddle’s face brought it all back in stunning Technicolor.

Riddle’s mouth hitched up on a smile—probably on account of Hermione’s flushed face. Well, the smug little bastard could just stick it up his—

“It’s nice out today,” said Riddle, and Hermione’s violent thoughts derailed as she was struck by the hysterical urge to ask him if he thought he was the weatherman. He only cemented this impression as he went on, “Clear skies, moderate temperatures…with October coming up, this might be the last warm day we’ll see for quite some time.”

Hermione glanced up at the enchanted ceiling, which was, as Riddle had described, bright as a painted Easter egg.

“Yes,” said Hermione, feeling even more suffocated by Riddle’s attention than she’d been by Lavender’s and Parvati’s proximity. “Yes, I expect it’s an ideal day for a walk.”

Apparently that was precisely what Riddle wanted to hear from her; his smiled broadened, revealing unfairly straight and well-proportioned teeth.

“I was hoping you’d say that. Actually—I was going to ask you to take a walk around the grounds with me—if you’ve finished your breakfast, of course.”

Lavender and Parvati inhaled sharply, all but vibrating where they sat. Short of last night’s debacle, Hermione had never felt quite so pressured in her entire life. Riddle and Lavender and Parvati were all boring holes in her skull, and sitting her O.W.L.s had been nothing, nothing compared to this.

Under the table and out of Riddle’s line of sight, Parvati prodded Hermione in the side. When Hermione turned her head to look at Parvati, she saw that she was lifting and lowering her eyebrows as though to communicate something of utmost importance, and it couldn’t’ve been clearer if she’d
Hermione pushed back from the table, squeezing out from between the transfixed Lavender and Parvati. She looked Riddle full in the face.

“I’d like that, actually,” Hermione lied through her teeth. “Thank you for asking me.”

“You want to come along, then? Excellent.” Riddle beamed at Hermione as though she’d just given him a gift, and then spared a dimmer smile for Lavender and Parvati. “Have a nice morning, you two.”

“You too!” Lavender and Parvati said together, breathless, and Hermione fought not to roll her eyes as she turned to walk the length of the table, Riddle striding along the opposite side.

As she went, Hermione was struck by conflicting impulses—she wanted to drag her feet. No, she wanted to walk at a fast clip so as to get this over with quickly. Apparently the table was feeling as conflicted as Hermione; it seemed to’ve shrunk to a quarter of its original length, but it also appeared to stretch off into infinity.

Wonky perceptions of time and distance aside, Riddle’s long legs carried him to the end of the table before Hermione could get there, and when she at last caught up with him, he took her hand without asking—her fingers spasmed—and drew her out of the Great Hall.

From the Great Hall to the entrance hall and out through the open oak front doors, Hermione could feel dozens of pairs of eyes raking along the back of her neck and down to where Riddle clasped her hand. Students, ghosts, the bloody portraits, probably the suits of armor if they’d had any eyes—

they were all staring at Hermione and Riddle.

Hadn’t they anything better to do?

“I reckon this year’s shaping up to be a boring one,” Riddle said to her as they descended the front steps, “if they’re this concerned with who fancies whom.”

Hermione glanced at him sharply. This wasn’t the first time he’d uncannily echoed her thoughts, was it?

“You’re quite popular, though, aren’t you?” she said, staring so hard at Riddle’s face that she nearly missed the bottom step. “I’m honestly not surprised that so many people are concerned with your—” She didn’t want to say love life because there was nothing romantic about this at all. “—dating habits.”

“Are we dating, then?” Riddle asked, pulling them to a halt at the base of the steps, and when Hermione stared at him, he clarified, “You never gave me an answer.”

That—that was true. As soon as she’d finished processing what had happened to her, she’d essentially fled the scene, barring herself in an out-of-order girls’ toilet. Once she’d pulled herself together, she’d dragged her feet all the way to Slughorn’s office and found it far fuller than it’d been twenty minutes prior—and had found Riddle behaving as though nothing especially interesting had happened to either of them.

And Hermione had wondered, as she’d dragged a spoon around a dish of melting ice cream and listlessly explained how braces worked to Daphne Greengrass, if she’d badly humiliated Riddle when she’d tacitly rejected him. She hoped she had. A little rejection ought to do him a bit of good.

But apparently he hadn’t interpreted Hermione’s flight as a rejection, if he was still pushing the
“I—” Hermione darted her eyes to the ground, toed a pebble in the gravel drive. “I’m not—”

Riddle squeezed her hand.

“Walk with me around the lake?” he asked, and, dumbly, she nodded.

It was a lovely morning, but the grounds were scarcely populated—owing, no doubt, to those Saturday lie-ins in which Hermione had so naively placed her faith. Early morning sunlight was sparkling off the lake in bright white fractals, and Hermione had to tilt her head to spare her eyes as she and Riddle turned left at the shoreline.

“I’ll admit,” said Riddle, rubbing his thumb over the rise of Hermione’s knuckles, “that I didn’t ask you out for a walk for the pleasure of your company—or, well, that wasn’t my only reason. I wanted to explain myself, actually.”


“About last night?” she guessed, and hated the intimacy of that phrasing, hated that it sounded as if they were creating a history together.

“Yes. I think I—I reckon I threw you off a bit, telling you how I felt out of the blue like that. I should’ve worked up to it, I think, but you’re always so skittish around me, and I wanted to explain why I’ve been acting the way I have. I wanted to—to clear things up.”

“Skittish. As if she were a unicorn foal and not a girl, not a person.”

“You’re right,” she said at length. A light breeze picked her hair up and threw it into her eyes, and, impatiently, she raked it back. “You did throw me off. I wasn’t—I’m sorry, but up until this year, you’ve never given me reason to believe that you were interested in making friends with me, let alone—”

“I haven’t, have I?” said Riddle easily. “It’s true that I wasn’t interested in you until this year—that’s my fault, though, isn’t it, for not noticing how appealing you are.”

Hermione’s mouth twisted to the other side. Oh, this was just too much.

“But now that you know how I feel—even if you’re not ready to call yourself my girlfriend—”

He was certainly confident, wasn’t he, supposing that this relationship he was angling for was inevitable, that it was the default, that Hermione was bound to say yes because he was just so irresistible.

“I’d still like to spend more time with you. It’s wonderful that you’ve joined the Slug Club, by the way; I was so happy when Slughorn gave me the good news—but I’ve got to admit, Hermione, that only seeing you every few weeks outside of meals and patrol isn’t enough for me.”

Hermione tugged on his hand, bidding him to stop, and swung around to face him. She made to extricate her hand from his, but his fingers tightened imperceptibly.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “If this is about S.P.E.W.—”

“It’s not, although I haven’t given up on that, either.” Now that she was facing him, Riddle took her other hand. If he really wanted, he could keep her from going for her wand. “You’re not in any
extracurricular clubs, are you, Hermione? Aside from Slughorn’s, I mean.”

“They interfere with my studies.”

“But can’t a bright girl like you manage one more obligation?” Riddle scratched lightly at the backs of Hermione’s hands, raising goose flesh. “The Dueling Club’s been reinstated this year, did you know, and it’s great fun. You’re studying nonverbal spells, aren’t you? The Dueling Club would afford you plenty of opportunities to practice silent magic.”

Hermione lifted her chin. “I’m the best at nonverbal spells in my year, actually. I’m not in urgent need of practice.”

“Yes,” said Riddle, laughing that high, cold, awful laugh. “Yes, I expect you are the best, aren’t you?”

That breeze from earlier returned with a vengeance, twisting through Hermione’s hair—and Riddle relinquished one of Hermione’s hands in order to brush the tangled strands out of her face. The heel of his palm grazed her cheek.

“But everyone can stand to improve, can’t they?” Riddle asked, coaxing. “Even you, Hermione.”

Hermione felt pinned, cornered. He hadn’t removed his hand from her face, and she couldn’t help but linger on its proximity to her neck.

“When’s the next meeting?” she asked.

Riddle dropped his hand. Linked it with hers again.

“Today, three o’clock, in the Great Hall,” he said. “Just to clarify, though—I take it that this means you’re willing to give me—to give us—a shot?”

There was a weight. There was a weight pressing down on Hermione’s chest, as though Muggles had put her on trial for witchcraft, as if an inquisitor were piling stone after stone onto her sternum and would not stop until she confessed to consorting with the Devil.

But.

Who had a better chance of keeping a close eye on Riddle than his own girlfriend? Who better to poke and prod and drag those snatches of his true personality into the light?

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, Riddle, I suppose I am.”

Riddle’s eyes creased on a smile. His thumbnail scraped the inside of Hermione’s wrist.

“Excellent,” he said. “You’ve made me terribly happy, Hermione—but if we’re going to give this a try, I’d like you to call me Tom.”

Hermione looked him dead in the eye.

“All right, Tom.”
Harry and Ron had only just forgiven Hermione for joining the Slug Club without consulting them when word of her nascent arrangement with Riddle broke. Ron, especially, was shocked and appalled to the point that he could hardly bring himself to look at Hermione—and when he bothered to speak to her, it was to rant about her poor life choices.

“I don’t get it, Hermione! You’ve never liked Riddle, and now all of a sudden you want to snog him?”

“Did I say anything about snogging? No? At any rate, Ron, it’s really not your business; these aren’t the forties and I don’t need your permission to date a boy—”

“It’s not about getting permission to date. It’s about who you’re dating—effing Tom Riddle, Hermione, honestly. D’you think I’d be this worked up over a decent bloke? Sure, I’d probably tell him to mind his manners with you unless he wanted me to hex off his bits, but I wouldn’t try and stop you from dating him.”

“Rubbish,” snapped Hermione, because on the rare occasions that boys showed even a passing interest in her, Ron inevitably sulked for weeks on end. Male entitlement, honestly.

Harry, who could be downright pathological in his avoidance of taking sides whenever Ron and Hermione found themselves at odds—yes, even when Hermione was clearly in the right, which was nine times out of ten—shouldered roughly past the both of them in his haste to get inside the Great Hall, as if he hoped that they might hesitate to argue in front of witnesses.

Really, after nearly six years of this, one would think he’d have known better.

“And we’re not even dating, really,” Hermione persisted, although she had the good sense to lower her voice as she and Ron crossed the Great Hall’s threshold. “We’re only—considering one another. It’s a—a trial run.”

“Yeah,” said Ron, who was, in turn, only talking louder to combat the swell of several dozen students chattering all at once. “But it’s not a platonic trial run either, is it?”

Hermione flushed. If only Harry and Ron were the reasonable sort—the sort who hesitated to break upwards of fifty school rules in the span of one night, for example—she’d’ve considered confiding in them. They were her best friends, after all, and tackling Riddle all alone promised to overwhelm even her, but—but if Harry and Ron were wholly aware of just how badly Riddle had unsettled her, they were likely to forgo hexes in favor of physically hitting Riddle round the face and possibly getting themselves expelled in the process.

Not to mention that she was beginning to feel rather foolish. If she hadn’t seen Riddle pinning Draco Malfoy to that wall in Knockturn Alley with her own two eyes, she’d have convinced herself that she was reading too much into things. And perhaps she was. Perhaps she’d acted too hastily—

“There you are.”

Tom Riddle melted so suddenly out of the milling crowd that he might’ve been incorporeal, but the fingers he wrapped around Hermione’s were as solid as ever.

Ron made a noise that might’ve accompanied a dry heave, and Hermione shot him a censorious look before glancing around for Harry, wondering where he’d gone—but then Riddle gave Hermione’s hand a squeeze, pulling her wandering attention back to him.
“Er.” Hermione’s fingers were limp and clammy, and she wondered what appeal Riddle found in holding her hand in this state. “Sorry I’m late. Harry and Ron asked to tag along at the last minute.”

*Asked.* She was putting it diplomatically; what they’d really done was *hounded.*

“That’s all right,” said Riddle, looking so earnest that Hermione was put immediately on the defensive. “We’re happy to have them. Ron Weasley, isn’t it? Hermione hasn’t talked about you much, so I’m happy to get to know you in person.”

Hermione’s fingernails bit into the back of Riddle’s hand, but he didn’t so much as flinch—although he *did* look at her askance before holding his free hand out to Ron as though wanting to shake.

Ron, who’d turned puce, gaped at Riddle’s hand as though it were a deadly poisonous spider.

And who could fault Ron for being at a loss, really? Riddle had just levelled an exquisitely constructed insult at him, implying under the guise of friendly interest that Hermione didn’t care enough about Ron to mention him to her new boyfriend, and he’d done it in such a way that Ron couldn’t accuse him of being a prat without making himself look bad.

“What Tom *meant* to say,” Hermione ground out, feeling as though she was scrambling to salvage something that’d been blasted into many tiny pieces, “was that we haven’t had the time to discuss our respective social circles with one another. Our—*relationship*—well, it’s all very new, isn’t it, Tom?”

“No,” said Riddle, smiling to show teeth, “we haven’t done much *talking,* Hermione, have we?”

Ron’s face drained of all color, and Hermione considered, as distantly as an impartial third party, that she was in the perfect position to aim a good hard kick at Riddle’s shin. She’d do it. She’d do it and call it an accident. It was awfully crowded in here—was the Dueling Club really so popular?—and she could claim that she’d been pushed, that she hadn’t *meant* to give Riddle a bruise the size of a dinner plate.

But Hermione’s intent to do violence was derailed by Harry’s reappearance. He spared a look of open dislike for Riddle before saying to Ron and Hermione, “I was looking for Professor Lupin, but Flitwick said he’s feeling ill and couldn’t come.”

That was right. The moon had gone full on Friday, hadn’t it?

“I forgot,” said Ron, who’d regained some of his color, although he was still looking a bit white around the eyes. “Lupin helps Flitwick supervise the Dueling Club, doesn’t he? Too bad he’s not here today—ah, fuck.”

Hermione frowned at Ron, but one glance to the left revealed the reason for his vulgar outburst: Draco Malfoy had swaggered into sight.

“Look alive, Tom,” Malfoy drawled, “I’m in need of a second—ah! If it isn’t the Idiots Two. Excellent; I was wanting a set of practice dummies.”

“Pound it up your arse, Malfoy,” snapped Ron. Harry went immediately for his wand.

“Eloquent as ever, Weasley,” said Malfoy, but he’d pulled his wand as well, and was tapping it agitatedly against his thigh.

“Now, boys,” Riddle interjected, the pitch of his voice so convincingly soothing that even Hermione relaxed a bit despite herself. “If it’s a duel you’re wanting, you’ll have to follow the set rules. Professor Flitwick told us that we’re only to practice Disarming each other today.”
All around them, people were pairing off, and Hermione could just barely pick up the thread of Professor Flitwick’s squeaky voice as he offered instructions as well as the occasional telling off. She badly wished that he’d turn this way, but suspected that she wasn’t that lucky.

“All right,” said Ron, beady eyed. “Fine. I’ll follow your rules, so long as I can knock the stuffing out of this ferrety little bastard while I’m at it.”

“Settle down, Ron,” Hermione said sharply, and Ron subsided, but not before scowling at Hermione, who scowled back, and harder.

“Actually,” said Riddle, holding Hermione’s hand out as though in offer, “I was thinking that Hermione should give Draco a try. Draco—have you and Hermione ever dueled against each other during your Defense Against the Dark Arts lessons?”

“And why on earth would I have wanted to do that?” said Malfoy, scathing, and Hermione bristled.

“Scared, are you?” Harry asked, eyes narrow behind his glasses.

If Harry had meant to goad Malfoy into capitulating—and he probably had; he’d like nothing more than to see Hermione knock Malfoy flat—he got his wish. Malfoy drew himself to his full height, knuckles white on his wand.

“Seeing as Granger’s about as intimidating as a Pygmy Puff, no, I’m really not. Well, then, Granger? Fancy a duel?”

Riddle had finally loosened his grip on Hermione, so it was easy enough for her to extricate her hand and pull her own wand.

“If you think you’re up for it, Malfoy,” said Hermione, laying her superior tone on thick, and smiled when Malfoy’s eyes twitched.

Harry, Ron, and Riddle all stepped aside to make room for Hermione and Malfoy. Harry and Ron were looking bloodthirsty, and Riddle—he was politely attentive, but his eyes were slitted. Calculating?

Was this a test, then?

Having moved the recommended distance apart, Hermione and Malfoy bowed to one another—well, Hermione bowed, and Malfoy’s head twitched on his neck—and Hermione had hardly risen from her bow when a spark of red light shot from Malfoy’s wand and came straight at her chest.

He’s improved at nonverbal spells, Hermione thought wildly, and on the heels of that thought, cast a silent Shield Charm. The Stunning Spell bounced off the solid wall of air Hermione had conjured and careened off one of the great dining tables that’d been pushed against the wall to make room for the Dueling Club’s activities.

“Was I not clear enough, Draco?” Riddle said as Hermione and Malfoy waited for the Shield Charm to dissipate, Hermione sorting rapidly through potential strategies. “You’re to Disarm each other only—if I see another Stunning Spell, I’ll start docking points.”

Malfoy’s pale cheeks flushed pink, fingers slipping on his wand. He was so agitated, in fact, that he forgot to track the state of Hermione’s Shield Charm, and when it dissolved, she fired off a nonverbal Expelliarmus that caught him so off guard it sent him falling over backward onto his bum.

Harry and Ron roared with laughter as Hermione stepped daintily forward, Malfoy’s wand in hand.
She offered it to him, and with a look that might’ve killed more effectively than any Unforgivable Curse, Malfoy grabbed at it, the sleeves of his robes sliding back from his forearms.

Hermione had a fleeting impression of a scaled, coiled line—a reptile, maybe—or perhaps it was a very long, blackened tongue that was unfurling from something like a face—before Malfoy yanked his sleeve back into place and clambered to his feet, eyes pinwheeling in their sockets.

“Malfoy,” said Hermione, but Malfoy wasn’t listening—or pretending not to listen.

“Right, well, I think I’ll go and help Flitwick with the first years,” said Malfoy, and Hermione exchanged disbelieving looks with Harry and Ron. It wasn’t in Malfoy’s nature to help anyone where it didn’t benefit him. “Coming, Tom?”

“No, you go on ahead,” said Riddle. “I’d rather stay here with Hermione.”

Malfoy shot Riddle a look of undisguised disbelief, but he didn’t linger, instead darting around a pair of clumsily dueling fourth years and snapping at them when he trod on their feet.

Warm, dry fingers curled around Hermione’s.

“Something the matter, Hermione?” Riddle asked, casual.

“No,” Hermione managed, staring after Malfoy. “No. It’s nothing.”

Only it wasn’t nothing, not at all. Because right there—right on Malfoy’s inner left forearm, exactly where Riddle had grabbed him last August—had been some sort of ugly black tattoo.
“Well? Have you got a signed note from a teacher, or do you fancy yourself an exception to the rules?”

Hermione jolted so violently that she nearly bit through her tongue, eyes flashing away from the roped-off Restricted Section and coming to rest, not without trepidation, on a looming Madam Pince.

“No note, then,” said Madam Pince, breathing hard through her thin nostrils. She sounded strangely satisfied, likely pleased with the prospect of throwing one more grubby-fingered student out of her jealously guarded domain. “Well. Thought you’d just duck under that rope, did you? And in broad daylight! Really, this is no way for a prefect to behave—”

“No!” Hermione’s exclamation came out louder than she’d intended, so that her voice echoed alarmingly off the library’s cathedral-like ceiling. Madam Pince’s nostrils flared wider, and Hermione hastened to carry on with her explanation in a quieter voice, “Er, no, sorry, Madam Pince. I was only—I was on my way to the Arithmancy section, you know, for—for a bit of supplementary reading, and I got—I got—lost in thought?”

Madam Pince pursed her lips so hard they bleached an awful shade of white. She hefted her tatty feather duster in a threatening sort of way, and Hermione wisely stepped out of walloping range.

“A likely excuse,” hissed Madam Pince, and Hermione put on a terribly genuine set of pleading eyes, breath short and panicky at the thought of being slapped with a library ban. But then Pince lowered her feather dusty and said, grudgingly, “However. The unfortunate company you keep aside, it’s not like you to so flagrantly violate school rules, Miss Granger.”

Hermione held her breath, not quite daring to believe that things might actually go her way, and also mildly surprised to hear that Madam Pince had bothered to learn her name, seeing as she approached the unfortunate existence of students as an infestation comparable to that of the silverfish that wedged themselves between the pages of her precious books.

“Which Arithmancy text were you after, then?” Madam Pince barked, beady eyes going wide and searching, studying Hermione’s face for signs of a clumsily constructed lie.

_Well, damn_, Hermione thought, even as she stuttered, “*New Theory of Numerology*. Ma’am.” Harry had got her that very book last Christmas, but Pince wasn’t to know that.

Apparently convinced, if still blatantly suspicious, Madam Pince marched off to the Arithmancy section. She returned before Hermione could cast the Restricted Section one last longing look, clutching _New Theory of Numerology_ to her thin chest.

“Will you be wanting anything else?” Something in Madam Pince’s tone dared Hermione to say yes.

Deciding that she’d pushed her luck as far as it was likely to go for today, Hermione mutely shook her head, and, tucking the book for which she had no need under her arm, hurried back to the isolated table over which she’d spread her morning’s finds.

Setting _New Theory of Numerology_ down with a particular reverence that was extreme even for her
—best not to tempt Pince into seeing that library ban through—Hermione turned her attention to the
book that’d led her into eyeing the Restricted Section in the first place.

The trouble was, for all that Hogwarts’s vast library had rarely failed Hermione entirely, the authors
preserved within its millions of pages had a bad collective habit of making obscure and uncited
references to unnamed spells and ambiguously described magical objects.

Take the lushly illuminated volume through which Hermione was currently riffling. *Indelible Ink* was
perfectly happy to provide Hermione with a detailed history of magical body art and its myriad
purposes—it described tattoos that sang with the voices of sirens, tattoos that burned at the approach
of hidden treasure, tattoos that functioned as self-updating maps, tattoos that were imbued with pure
gold—but it was also content to limit its descriptions of Dark tattoos to cramped, badly worded
footnotes that functioned as warnings more than anything else.

Frustrating though it was, it was also understandable. Justifiable, even. Most respectable wizards
hesitated to name Dark spells and objects, let alone describe them in loving written detail for
impressionable young schoolchildren to stumble across, and the headmasters of Hogwarts’s past had
been quite meticulous in culling anything and everything that reeked of dubious content from the
library’s unrestricted shelves.

Hermione drummed her fingers once against the tabletop, compulsive, then flattened them out and
forced them still, wary of drawing Madam Pince’s attention. Which of her teachers, then, would be
the most receptive to signing the note that Pince had wanted? Hermione was closest with Professor
Lupin, but he was too clever and knew her too well, and he’d ask *questions*—ditto for Professor
McGonagall. Professor Slughorn, though—he was shrewd enough, but he had something of a blind
spot where his favorites were concerned, so—perhaps—

Gnawing on her lip as she considered how best to approach Slughorn, Hermione glanced idly up
from *Indelible Ink*—and almost swore aloud when she spotted the tall, dark-haired figure that was
heading this way.

Hermione’s nerves twisted into a panicked tangle, but Riddle hadn’t seen her yet, and, what was
more, she’d been prepared for this eventuality. Hermione clapped *Indelible Ink* shut and stuffed it
into her bag along with *New Theory of Numerology*, filling the empty spaces they’d left on the table
with *The Essential Defense Against the Dark Arts* and a sheet of parchment. By the time Riddle had
spotted her and come striding over, Hermione was, apparently, looking through her finished essay on
the subject of silent spells being less potent than their spoken counterparts.

“I thought I’d find you here.” Hermione was quite determinedly *not* looking up, trying to give off the
impression of being totally immersed in her studies, and when Riddle spoke, she gave a little jolt that
wasn’t entirely disingenuous. “Finishing up the week’s homework, are you?”

“Oh, Tom. You startled me.” Hermione glanced up at Riddle’s face, trying to look pleasantly
surprised to see him but probably appearing to have stomach pains. “And, no, I’m not—I finished it
ages ago, actually. I’m only doing some final edits. That’s all.” And, though it pained her, Hermione
made a show of crossing out the first sentence she saw, which happened to be one that she’d rather
liked.

“Can I sit?” Riddle asked, and Hermione tried to look pleased as she nodded—only for the pleased
expression to freeze on her face when Riddle circled the table to sit directly beside her. Hermione’s
hands were busy with the essay that didn’t need editing, so Riddle didn’t try to hold them, but his
knee bumped her thigh as he shifted in his seat. Nodding at her essay, he said, “Would you like me
to give it a lookover? It might benefit from another pair of eyes.”
“What are you implying?” Hermione snapped, then wished she hadn’t. She was supposed to be playing the enamored girlfriend, wasn’t she? In her experience, newly infatuated couples tried their level best not to row; the incessant bickering came after the shine had worn off.

“I’m not implying anything,” said Riddle, whose eyebrows had climbed his forehead at Hermione’s snappish response. “I’m dead certain your work’s superlative, and I’d never hint otherwise. But reviewing our own work—well, we can miss things, can’t we, especially after the third or fourth reread? It all starts to blur together after a while, doesn’t it?”

“I—I suppose you’re right.” And perversely, Hermione suddenly wanted Riddle to take a look at her essay, if only for the chance to show him up. “But aren’t you—er—haven’t you got enough of your own work to look over? I mean, being in your final year—”

“It’s really no trouble,” said Riddle kindly. He tugged on the corner of Hermione’s essay, sliding it out from under the hands she hadn’t thought to unclench. “If I can maintain top marks in my own courses, I can give one little essay a quick lookover.”

Little was not an accurate descriptor; as Riddle pulled Hermione’s essay closer, the three feet of it that spilled over the edge of the table flopped into his lap, every inch crammed with Hermione’s neat, miniscule handwriting. Riddle traced the length of the parchment with his eyes, mouth twitching before his expression shifted into one of preoccupied neutrality.

“Huh,” he said after what felt like several hours, though a glance at her galaxy-faced wristwatch informed Hermione that it’d only been a little more than ten minutes. “This is brilliantly worded and thoroughly researched. Well done, Hermione.”

Despite herself—despite who was complimenting her—Hermione couldn’t help but perk up a bit, and she even started to say, “Thank you—”

“But it’s also a bit—how to put this constructively? Some of this information’s a bit—extraneous. It’s almost as if you prioritized proving your knowledgeable over answering Professor Lupin’s prompt.”

Hermione clamped her mouth shut, and then, with some difficulty, prised it open again.

“And what’s wrong with proving my knowledgeable, exactly?” Hermione curled her fingers around one corner of her essay, too angry to risk yanking it back for fear of accidentally rending the parchment. “We’re supposed to know the subject; that’s the point of learning—”

“There’s knowing the subject, Hermione, and there’s sounding as if you ate the textbook.” Riddle’s face was earnestly apologetic as he pressed his hand to Hermione’s knee, making her flinch. “I’m sorry, Hermione; I don’t want to sound harsh. I only want to help you bring out your best academic performance, and I think you could benefit from prioritizing quality over quantity. You really don’t need—” He glanced at Hermione’s essay. “—four feet of parchment to prove you’re the best in your class.”

But—but Hermione wasn’t the best in Defense Against the Dark Arts, was the thing; oh, her grades were consistently excellent, of course, but she hadn’t Harry’s natural affinity for the subject. She never had.

But what she did have was the ability to read and write circles around Harry and everyone else, and now Riddle was telling her that the strategy that’d served her so well for so long was wrong?

“Your argument’s flawed, Riddle,” said Hermione. “It’s not as if I sacrificed quality for word count,
and as I’ve never received a failing grade on an essay in my entire academic life, you’ll forgive me if I don’t jump to take your well-intentioned advice.”

Riddle pulled his hand off Hermione’s knee and sat back in his chair. There was something curiously birdlike about the way he titled his head.

“I’ve upset you again, haven’t I?” he said. “I only wanted to help you, Hermione.”

Had he been anyone else—had he been anyone else at all, Hermione would have felt ashamed of herself for lashing out at someone who’d only meant to help her.

But Riddle.

Riddle—

Riddle braced his hands on his thighs, leaned forward, and put his face so close to Hermione’s that the tips of their noses grazed.

“And I told you to call me Tom.”

Hermione inhaled sharp and quick, eyes darting away from Riddle’s. Something gold was gleaming at his throat, tucked behind his starched collar.

She licked her lips.

“What do you know,” she said, slow as dripping treacle, “about magical tattoos? Tom?”

Riddle pulled out of Hermione’s space. He shifted his long legs, propping his left ankle on his right knee.

“They’re against the dress code,” he said lightly, “aren’t they? Why? You’re not hoping to get one, are you?”

Hermione frowned.

“No,” she said. And what she said next wasn’t exactly a lie, so it spilled easily enough off her tongue. “No, I’ve been doing a bit of extracurricular research. You know. For the fun of it.”

Riddle tilted his head the other way, and this time, Hermione wasn’t reminded of a bird, but of an automaton.

“N.E.W.T. level courses aren’t enough for you, then?”

“Aren’t you the one who told me I could stand to participate in more extracurricular activities? If I can fit the Dueling Club and Professor Slughorn’s parties into my schedule, then I can make time for this.”

“I expect you’re right,” said Riddle. “But that’s an oddly specific topic, isn’t it, magical tattoos? I can’t help but wonder what brought it on. What—inspired you.”

It wasn’t a direct question, so Hermione neatly sidestepped a direct answer, saying, “Yes, well, our professors tell us that the best essays are built on specifics, don’t they? The narrower your topic, the better, isn’t that right?”

“Still,” Riddle pressed, “I’d like to know what planted this idea in your head. It’s only—sorry, I don’t like to make assumptions, you know that, but—it never occurred to me that you’d be interested
in this sort of thing.”

“I’m a Muggle-born, Tom. I’m interested in every aspect of the Wizarding world—I want to know everything about it.” Hermione exhaled slowly, and her breath stirred a lock of hair that’d got stuck to her cheek. “But if you’re really that curious—”

It was a gamble. Who even knew how Riddle would react to hearing it? But he was dead clever—cleverer even than Hermione—and he had to’ve cottoned on to her motives.

They were in a library. They were in public. He couldn’t do anything to her.

“Yesterday—” Hermione met Riddle’s dark, dark eyes, searching, searching. “Yesterday, during Dueling Club, when I Disarmed Malfoy, I—saw something. I saw something on his arm, his left arm. It looked a bit like—well, it looked like a tattoo, and as I doubted that a pureblood like Malfoy would go out and get a Muggle tattoo—”

“I shouldn’t be jealous, should I?” said Riddle, looking politely bemused. “Only I hadn’t realized you were so invested in Draco’s, er, life choices—”

Hermione pulled a revolted face, and it was genuine. “You absolutely should not be jealous, as there’s nothing to be jealous of.” Disclaimer made, she went on, carefully, “I don’t suppose you know what I’m talking about, then, do you, Tom? You haven’t seen it? Malfoy’s tattoo?”

“Let me think. The last time I saw Draco’s arm…” Riddle cast his eyes upwards, deep in thought, as he scratched idly at his throat. “No, I’m dead certain it was entirely tattoo-free. The left, you said? No, there wasn’t anything there.”

He was lying. He was lying so well and so convincingly that Hermione might’ve believed him if not for what she’d seen in Knockturn Alley. There’d been a dark smudge on Draco’s arm back then as well. She was sure of it.

“I see,” said Hermione. Riddle shifted, and the line of gold around his throat flashed in the sunlight streaming through a nearby window, bright as a Snitch. “Then—”

“Curious, are you?”

Hermione gave a guilty little start. Riddle had caught the direction of her gaze, and now he was tugging on that bright line, pulling it out from under his collar to reveal it for what it was—a thick golden chain.

“I don’t suppose you remember asking me what it was that Mr. Malfoy had bought for me at Borgin and Burkes? You do? Would you like to see it, then?”

Hermione knew she was being derailed. She knew it. But Riddle had played her natural curiosity expertly, and, thinking stubbornly that she wasn’t going to let the subject of Draco Malfoy’s tattoo die here, she nodded.

Tucking his fingers more firmly around the chain, Riddle drew from the neck of his shirt a heavy golden locket.

“Go on, then,” said Riddle, coaxing, when Hermione failed to do anything more proactive than frown. “Have a closer look. It won’t bite.”

“Well, you can never be sure, can you?” Hermione mumbled. Riddle laughed his cold laugh, but Hermione was too preoccupied with what was in front of her to feel the usual spurt of unease at the
Leaning forward in her chair but keeping her hands clamped around the edges of her seat so as to stave off the temptation to touch the locket, Hermione did as Riddle bade and took a closer look.

It was—well, putting it diplomatically, it certainly wasn’t to Hermione’s taste. Glancing at the ring Riddle wore on his right hand, Hermione couldn’t help but wonder if he had a special predilection for old, ugly jewelry.

In addition to being terribly ugly, the locket was big—big enough to fill Hermione’s palm. A curving line of fat emeralds was embedded in its surface, forming a serpentine $S$.

Wondering what use Riddle would have for a locket, wondering what it could have contained—a photo of a loved one? Not likely—Hermione lifted one of her hands impulsively, automatically, itching to prise open the locket’s clasp—

Riddle curled his long fingers around the locket, covering the emerald $S$, and tucked it away again. Hermione blinked, feeling rather as if she’d been shaken out of a trance.

Fanciful though the notion was, it wasn’t without basis. If Mr. Malfoy had bought that thing in Borgin and Burkes, strong was the chance that it’d been imbued with powerful magic—Dark magic, even.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Riddle said, and Hermione only realized that she’d been staring at the chain around his throat when she finally glanced up, startled, into his face. “If it came from Borgin and Burkes, then it must be full of Dark magic, mustn’t it? The truth’s far less interesting, I’m afraid—Mr. Borgin bought it off a rich old gentlewoman with a liking for priceless antiques. There’s no magic in this locket, Hermione, Light or Dark. It’s not even goblin made. Perfectly inoffensive, you see?”

“I see,” Hermione said slowly, tucking her hands into her lap. “Sorry for assuming the worst, then. It really is just a bit of jewelry, isn’t it? But—but it must be of some significance, mustn’t it, if it’s so valuable?”

“Well,” said Riddle. “You could say that it’s of some historical significance to my House. To Slytherin,” he clarified, as if that weren’t apparent and Hermione was an idiot.

“Oh,” said Hermione. Her hands were still buzzing to pull on that chain and take a closer look at the locket. “That explains the $S$, then, doesn’t it? I’ll bet your Housemates are terribly envious.”

“No, I don’t expect they are, as I haven’t shown it to them. You and Draco are the only ones who’ve seen it, come to that.”

Smiling fondly, Riddle slid his fingers over Hermione’s cheekbone, tucking that forgotten bit of hair behind her ear. Hermione held herself very still, face going numb wherever Riddle touched it.

“Tom! You promised Malfoy that we’d come and pick him up from Quidditch practice, and if I’ve got to suffer through that, so do you.”

Talking of Riddle’s Housemates, one of them had just shuffled out from behind a bookcase, glaring sulkily at Riddle and unashamedly ignoring Hermione. He had a long, pallid face, and Hermione thought his name was Dolohov.

“Sorry, Antonin,” said Riddle, already scooping up his bag. “Hermione—you won’t mind terribly if I go, will you? You can always come along—”
“No, thank you,” Hermione said, as politely as she could. Antonin Dolohov was looking at her now, and a stolen glance proved his expression to be that of the carefully blank variety.

“Yes, I expect you’ll want to carry on with your—er—extracurricular research, won’t you? That’s fine.” Riddle got up, but then leaned back down, and Hermione flinched back against her chair—only to go very, very still when she felt Riddle’s cool, dry lips bump her cheek.

What? What—

Dolohov made an impatient sound.

“Sorry, Antonin, just a minute.” Riddle’s breath—clean and fresh and smelling faintly of mint toothpaste—puffed across Hermione’s lips as he spoke. “Hermione—I’ve been meaning to ask—there’s a Hogsmeade weekend coming up. You’ll come with me, won’t you? I’ll buy you a butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks.”

“Yes,” Hermione said distractedly, not really listening, eager to see him gone. “Sounds lovely.”

Riddle smiled to show teeth. “I’m glad you think so. See you later, then.”

Hermione waited for Riddle and Dolohov to disappear from view, and then—only then—did she take a deep, relieved breath.

5 October 1996

Hermione had had the dormitory to herself for all of five blissful minutes when Lavender and Parvati came bursting back in, breathless and giggly.

As Lavender and Parvati seemed to exist in a near-constant state of synchronized giddiness, Hermione couldn’t be bothered to spare their paroxysms of excitement so much as a second thought—until they made a beeline for her four-poster and all but physically accosted her.

“Hermione!” Lavender clambered onto the mattress, her additional weight tipping Hermione’s thankfully sealed inkwell onto its side. “Your boyfriend’s waiting for you outside of the portrait hole!”

Hermione, whose head was swimming with the facts and figures of her Potions homework, said rather doubtfully, “My what?”

Lavender’s face went blank, and Parvati frowned and said, “Your boyfriend? Hermione, are you—er—are you feeling all right?”

Boyfriend? Hermione thought, poking mental fingers all around her usually quick mind. I haven’t got a—

Hermione’s fingers went slack around her quill.
Oh.

Right.

That.

“Sorry,” Hermione stuttered, scrambling to save face. “Sorry, it’s just—it’s all so new, what I have with Tom. It’s been a while since I’ve been in a proper relationship, so—”

And although it wasn’t her relationship’s nascence that’d thrown Hermione off so much as the fact that it was an absolute farce, apparently her explanation had been good enough for Lavender and Parvati. They visibly relaxed, putting on twin expressions that were almost condescending in their kindness.

“Oh, that’s understandable,” said Lavender, patting Hermione’s hand as though she were comforting a maiden aunt. “If I were dating Tom Riddle—sorry, Hermione—well, I don’t think I’d really believe it, either.”

“It’s almost like a fairy tale, isn’t it?” said Parvati, grinning conspiratorially at Hermione.

“Um.” Hermione scooped up her quill and tapped the dried nib against the corner of her parchment. “Yes. Of course. Absolutely.”

But now that Parvati had brought it up, Hermione couldn’t help but linger on all of the fairy tales that’d ended gruesome and bloody (Rumpelstiltskin tearing himself in half in a fit of pique came to mind, because presently, Hermione could empathize).

“Er,” said Hermione, as Lavender and Parvati hadn’t departed and were in fact looking at her expectantly. “Did he say what he wanted? Tom?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten?” Lavender breathed, eyes wide as saucers. “Tom—d’you think he’d mind if I called him Tom?—he said the two of you’d made plans to go into Hogsmeade together.”

“Merlin,” said Parvati, taking in the look on Hermione’s face. “You have forgotten, haven’t you? Really, Hermione, I know it’s been a while since you’ve had a proper boyfriend, but you can’t’ve forgotten that relationships take effort? You can’t go around taking Tom for granted, you know.”

“He’ll ditch you if you do,” said Lavender, nodding sagely. “Boys’re terribly insecure; they want you to show that you care.”

Chewing on her tongue so as to not inform Lavender that being ditched by Riddle would actually be the ideal outcome to all this, Hermione grudgingly put her school things aside and climbed out of bed to search for her shoes.

“Wait, wait, wait!” said Lavender, and there followed a great amount of stamping and clattering. “At least do something with your hair first!”

Hermione looked up from lacing her trainers, and immediately wished she hadn’t: Lavender had about half a dozen ribbons in a rainbow of colors wrapped around her fists, and Parvati was clutching several glittering hairclips stylized to look like butterflies.

Hermione drew a fortifying breath.

Five minutes and one smarting scalp later, Lavender and Parvati linked their arms with Hermione’s
and marched her down the spiraling staircase to the common room. Neither of them had been keen to take no for an answer, and as those butterfly clips had been absolutely intolerable, Hermione had allowed Lavender to plait her hair and crown it with the simplest red ribbon she owned.

The common room, when they reached it, was scarcely populated, but Hermione still cast a rather desperate look around for her friends—but of course, Harry and Ron had left for Hogsmeade more than half an hour ago, secure in the knowledge that Riddle couldn’t get to Hermione as long as she remained cooped up inside of Gryffindor Tower.

And as hard as Hermione tried to convince herself that this was what she’d wanted—that one more chance to watch and possibly question Riddle could only work in her favor—her churning stomach and jangling nerves sang another tune.

As foretold by Lavender and Parvati, Tom Riddle was, indeed, waiting for Hermione outside of the portrait hole, looking the picture of patience with his hands in his pockets and his eyes turned thoughtfully downwards. Those eyes darted upwards as Hermione and her escorts came clambering through the portrait hole, creasing into half-moons as he smiled.

“There you are,” he said, strolling over. “Thanks for fetching her, girls.”

Lavender and Parvati giggled as Hermione struggled not to scowl openly. "Thanks for fetching her, he’d said. Something in that phrasing made Hermione feel like a parcel that’d been flown to Riddle via owl post.

“Sorry,” said Hermione, so abruptly that Riddle looked curiously down at her, and Lavender and Parvati broke off giggling to listen in. “For, er, forgetting about our—our—our date. When you asked me to go into Hogsmeade with you, I was still quite preoccupied with my—with my research, so—”

“Oh, that? Don’t worry about it; I’m not fussed.” With a magnanimous sort of air about him, Riddle held out a hand to Hermione—only to pull up short when Lavender and Parvati carried on with clinging to both of her arms. “Er—Parvati, Lavender? D’you mind if I—?”

“Oh!” Two flickering aside glances proved what Hermione suspected—both Parvati and Lavender had flushed to the roots of their hair, probably at Riddle’s use of their first names. Parvati was the first to recover, though, and the first to let Hermione go. “Sorry! Of course you want to hold hands with Hermione, Tom, don’t you? C’mon, Lav, let Tom have Hermione’s hand.”

Blinking rather dazedly, Lavender relinquished Hermione’s arm and stepped aside to absently link her fingers with Parvati’s. Riddle immediately stepped into the space vacated by Lavender and wrapped his hand around Hermione’s, thumb brushing her knuckles in a hair-raising parody of tenderness.

“Would you like to walk down to Hogsmeade with us?” Riddle asked Lavender and Parvati. They exchanged wide-eyed looks, apparently unable to believe their ears.

“If—if the two of you don’t mind,” Parvati rushed out, gleaming eyes belying her reluctance. “We wouldn’t want to intrude—”

I’ll just bet you wouldn’t, Hermione thought.

“Oh, it’s not an intrusion, is it, Hermione?” Riddle looked to Hermione, who shook her head stiffly. “See? Neither of us mind. You’re Hermione’s friends, and I’d love to get to know you, so you’re doing me a favor, really.”
For a moment, Hermione thought that Lavender, at least, might faint. But then she gathered herself, and she and Parvati both breathed out thank-yous, and the four of them headed for the staircase. Riddle let go of Hermione’s hand only to run his fingers down the bumps in her plait, and then rested them lightly at the small of her back.

“You’re wearing your hair in a plait again,” he said, quiet but carrying, and Hermione gave him a questioning look. Smiling, he said, “You wore it like this when I asked you out, remember? You look as pretty now as you did then—that ribbon really suits you.”

Lavender and Parvati inhaled sharply, and then immediately started whispering fiercely to one another. Hermione wanted to tear the ribbon from her hair and fling it in Riddle’s face.

All in all, though, Hermione was actually happy to have Lavender and Parvati along: with their giddy exchanges serving to fill the silence, Hermione didn’t feel compelled to try and make halting conversation with Riddle. In fact, the walk out of the castle and into Hogsmeade seemed to pass quick as a blink, and they were coming to a halt outside of the Three Broomsticks before Hermione knew it.

Lavender and Parvati went abruptly silent, and they hovered awkwardly. Hermione opened her mouth to invite them inside for a butterbeer, her treat, but Riddle beat her to the punch.

“Would you like to join us?” he asked, and Hermione hastily pinned on her most welcoming smile. “It wouldn’t be an intrusion at all, would it, Hermione?”

That was what he said, but—

Riddle’s words might’ve meant one thing, but his tone—rueful, a little embarrassed, maybe—conveyed quite another, and it was that other thing that Lavender and Parvati picked up on, because they both shook their heads, Parvati saying kindly, “Oh, no, we couldn’t. This’ll be your first proper date, won’t it? You two deserve some privacy.”

Lavender nodded her support of Parvati’s sentiment, looking only a little disappointed.

Riddle smiled in a way that was at once bashful and apologetic, and Hermione wanted to scream at Lavender and Parvati not to be taken in by him.

“If you’re sure?” said Riddle. “Only I feel a bit bad—”

“No, no, you shouldn’t,” Parvati insisted. “We’ve been meaning to drop by Honeydukes, anyway; they’ve got a new stock of Sugar Quills that’re supposed to last four whole hours. C’mon, Lav. Bye, you two.”

“It was nice talking to you, Tom!” Lavender called over her shoulder as Parvati linked their arms and pulled her off toward Honeydukes.

“You too,” said Riddle, lifting a hand in parting. Then he dropped his eyes to Hermione, a curious little smile playing at his mouth. “Come on, Hermione. I’ll buy you that butterbeer.”

“Right,” said Hermione faintly.

Satisfied. That was it. His smile had looked…satisfied.

He’d wanted to get rid of Lavender and Parvati. And he’d had the perfect excuse for ditching them, hadn’t he, playing the besotted boyfriend who wanted time alone with the girl he fancied.
With effort, Hermione tamped down on the violent surge of hatred that promised to curdle her tongue and lay waste to her own clumsy playacting.

They’d been late getting down to Hogsmeade, and that was especially evident inside of the Three Broomsticks, which was so packed to bursting that Hermione and Riddle only barely managed to squeeze their way inside. Hermione was actually briefly glad that she’d worn her hair in a plait; the combined body heat of dozens of students and adults was bad enough without the heavy weight of her hair clinging to the nape of her neck.

“There’s an open table over there, in the corner,” said Riddle, who was tall enough to see over most everyone’s heads. “It’ll be a bit cramped—sorry—but it’s better than standing, isn’t it? Can you get there on your own, or d’you need me to—?”

“No,” said Hermione sharply, not in the mood to put much effort into pretending. “No, I’ll manage.”

“I’ll go and get our butterbeers, then,” said Riddle, apparently unaffected by Hermione’s tone, and ran his fingers down her plait in parting before squeezing through a wall of overexcited third years.

Taking a breath as though preparing for a deep dive into the lake, Hermione tucked in her elbows and started battling toward the spot Riddle had indicated, muttering apologies whenever she accidentally trod on someone’s foot—but when the crowd finally spat her back out, she saw that her efforts to get to the open table in a timely fashion had been in vain.

Because if there’d been an empty table when Riddle had looked this way, it had filled in the meantime. There were several larger tables, all full, and one smaller table paired with two chairs. One of those chairs was empty, but the other—

The second chair was occupied by someone with pale blond hair and a natural sneer to his mouth. Someone who was for once quite alone, unaccompanied by his usual sycophantic bookends.

Hermione hesitated. She considered turning around and telling Riddle that they were out of luck, that they were better off stopping somewhere else for a drink—she’d like to see him keep his practiced composure when she brought him to the grime-laden Hog’s Head—but, no, this was actually perfect. Hermione stepped into Draco Malfoy’s line of sight, pulled out the free chair opposite him, and dropped onto the seat. Lacing her fingers together and resting her joined hands on the tabletop, she smiled a little grimly into Malfoy’s face, which was crumpled with open dislike.

Odd, though. She’d expected a look of unpleasant surprise as well, and—and his eyes hadn’t gone all wide. He’d hardly flinched at the sight of her. Weird, that, seeing as he’d been doing something rather a lot like avoiding her ever since she’d caught a glimpse of that—that thing on his arm.

“Granger,” Malfoy drawled, expression smoothing out into one of indolence. “Now, it’s not as if I expected any better from the likes of you, but for all you know, I could’ve been saving that seat for someone else.”

“Were you?” Hermione countered, leaning forward as Malfoy leaned back, elbows bumping the rim of the table. “Because both of these seats were unoccupied when Riddle spotted them.”

“Here with Tom, then, are you?” Malfoy pressed a hand to his cheek, feigning wonder. “And what of the Idiots Two? Ditched them for your new boyfriend, eh? My, my. The fickle nature of Gryffindor loyalty.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Do save the theatrics for someone who’s interested, Malfoy. Harry and Ron don’t care if I want to make new friends.” No, they only cared that she wanted to make friends
with Tom Riddle specifically.

“*Have* you got any friends aside from those morons, though?” Contrary to Hermione’s advice that he try for more subtlety, Malfoy twisted his expression into one of overexaggerated thoughtfulness. “Offense entirely intended, Granger, but you’re not exactly winning any popularity contests, here.”

She hadn’t the time for this; crowded bar aside, it’d only be so long before Riddle returned with those butterbeers in hand. She leaned farther forward still, until uninformed bystanders could be forgiven for thinking that she was trying to kiss Malfoy.

“I’ve seen that tattoo on your arm, Malfoy, and you know it.” She spoke very, very quietly and watched Malfoy’s face very, very closely. “What does it mean? And don’t tell me you got it for the fun of it—I suspect your parents wouldn’t approve of any deviation from upright conformity.”

To Hermione’s frustration, Malfoy wasn’t quite as expressive in his wariness as he was in his disdain. His eyes darted to one side, and the skin around them tightened and blanched even whiter than usual, but he didn’t gasp, didn’t flinch, didn’t upend his chair in his haste to escape Hermione’s questions.

But then Malfoy met Hermione’s eyes again, and he bent his mouth into a particularly nasty smile as he said, quietly, “Ask your boyfriend.”

Hermione’s stomach pitched. Was this an acknowledgement, then? A confession? Was Malfoy admitting that Riddle had something to do with his tattoo?

“I already have,” said Hermione, fighting to speak normally, to not let her excitement and unease show in her voice, on her face. “He said he didn’t know what I was talking about. He said that your arm was unblemished the last he saw it.”

“I take it,” said Malfoy, nasty smile blooming till it reached his eyes, “that you didn’t believe him?” When Hermione’s frown only grew more pronounced, Malfoy cackled. “You didn’t, did you? Merlin, Granger, where’s the trust?”

Hermione drummed her fingers on the tabletop, eyes darting from Malfoy’s face to his crossed arms. His sleeves were long and dark and pulled firmly over his forearms.

“Oh course,” said Malfoy, and the relish in his voice drew Hermione’s eyes back to his face, “I really can’t blame you. Not trusting Tom. Why should you? I mean, you can’t actually believe that he’s with you because he, what, likes you as a person, can you?”

Malfoy was smirking outright now, and Hermione’s mind was so busy that she didn’t even think longingly of smacking that look off his face. Was Malfoy going to tell her what Riddle wanted with her? No. Surely not. He was only lording it up, rubbing the fact that he knew more than she did in her face.

“What’re you playing at, Malfoy?” Hermione tried to imitate his bored tone, tried to sound as uninterested as possible, to sound as if she was only humoring him. “Tom’ll be back any second now, so if you’ve got something to say, you had better—”

“C’mon, Granger, use that busy little brain of yours.” Malfoy’s drawl was fading, giving way to something more snappish; evidently he was peeved that she wasn’t lapping up his every word. “Why the sudden interest from Tom, eh? Surely you’ve been wondering. I mean, d’you honestly think he’s ever given a genuine *fuck* about you? D’you think he *meant* what he said about Muggleborns—sorry, Muggle-borns—deserving a safe space to, what was it, *learn and grow*?”
Hermione’s fingers curled convulsively, nails scratching the tabletop with an awful little screech that would’ve made her cringe if she hadn’t been so transfixed.

“What’re you talking about—?”

“Come on, Granger, you’ve got loads of flaws, but stupidity isn’t one of them—or so I thought.” Malfoy’s pale face was flushed pink, and he was talking faster and faster, though still in an undertone that compelled Hermione to lean closer and closer. “Fourth year, Granger. Tom gave loads of lip service when Slytherin’s heir was on the loose, threatening Mudbloods, but if you think he was genuinely, personally invested in your safety, you’re madder than Weasley’s scum-sucking father. If Tom didn’t care about you then, why should he care about you now?”

_Fourth year_, he’d said. Fourth year.

It’d been an awful year, the worst of Hermione’s life, one that she’d spent peering around corners for some monster that might or mightn’t’ve been real—a monster that, according to legend, had been bred to kill people like her. They’d all been jumpy and snappish that year, even the purebloods and half-bloods, because monsters didn’t think rationally, and who was to say that Slytherin’s beast would discriminate when it came to a convenient meal?

The tension had built and built, but nobody had actually been hurt till June, when a third year Ravenclaw turned up dead in a girls’ bathroom—but there’d been no marks on her body, no rent flesh, no signs of poisoning, and the Ministry authorities had eventually decided that it hadn’t been a monster that’d got her, but a Killing Curse.

The culprit hadn’t ever been apprehended—surely it couldn’t’ve been a student, and each member of the staff had submitted themselves one by one for questioning until they were all declared innocent—but Hermione had never forgotten that the person who’d killed that Muggle-born might yet be roaming free within Hogwarts’s walls.

But why was Malfoy bringing that up now? The obvious answer, of course, was that he was taunting her.

Unless. Unless there was something else he was trying to convey—

Sharp pain knifed through Hermione’s lungs—she’d stopped breathing. She inhaled hard now, through her nose.

“Has he shown you the locket yet?” Malfoy asked, eyes hungry as they studied Hermione’s face, searching for something, _something_.

Hermione blinked. She’d filled her lungs, but they felt—shriveled, somehow.

“If you mean the gold locket with the emeralds,” she said, “yes. Why?”

Malfoy surveyed her. She was struck by a very Ron-like impulse to leap across the table, seize him by the collar, and _shake_ clear answers out of him.

“Homework, Granger,” he said. “Put that brain of yours to use and have a good, hard think on that locket and what it could _possibly_ have to do with Tom’s, er—_utter indifference_ toward Mudblood welfare, yeah?”

Malfoy pushed back from the table, and Hermione unfroze, grabbing for his left sleeve, but he’d snatched his arm out of her reach, sneering.
“Do me a personal favor and keep your grubby little fingers off my clothes, won’t you? I only just got these robes; I’d hate to have to burn them.”

“Malfoy—”

But Malfoy had successfully squeezed into the crowd before Hermione could completely rise from her chair, and she sat back in a slump, stomach tight and jittery, brain whirling in circles.

Malfoy had gone, but Hermione could hear his voice drifting over the din, hailing Riddle. Riddle was finally on his way back with the butterbeers, then. And Hermione—

Hermione decided that she would benefit from another readthrough of *Hogwarts: A History*, with special attention paid to any mention of Salazar Slytherin’s name.
Whether by luck or by providence, Hermione managed to detach herself from Harry and Ron without incident, although she wasn’t so arrogant as to think that her smooth escape had a great deal to do with her advanced powers of stealth; the crowd thronging toward the Great Hall was dense as brick, and Harry and Ron were so caught up in debating the Chudley Cannons’ chances for the season that they wouldn’t’ve paid Hermione any attention if she’d hauled off and kicked them in their shins.

As her legs were much shorter than theirs, it was easy enough for Hermione to slow her stride and allow Harry and Ron to carry on ahead of her, their argument growing more heated as Harry expressed his uncharitable opinion of the Cannons’ Seeker. She didn’t retreat to the staircase straightaway, though, waiting until enough people had squeezed between her and her friends to effectively mask her departure in the event that Harry or Ron should break off quarreling long enough to turn around and look for her.

Hermione’s faith in this strategy wavered, though, when she spotted Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil walking a little ways ahead and to the left of her. If Harry and Ron saw her darting up the stairs, they’d assume she was retreating to the ladies’, or that she’d gone to fetch something or other from her dormitory, but Lavender and Parvati would not be so easily shaken off. They were like giggly little barnacles, the both of them, and Hermione’s chances of peeling them off her person in time to get anything done were as good as the Cannons’ chances of finishing first in the league this year; that was to say, dismal.

Thinking fast, Hermione ducked behind a tall, burly seventh year, and then turned quickly round to fight against the current pouring down the stairs and toward the Great Hall with its tempting promise of a lavish Hallowe’en feast. Her stomach gave a gurgling little squeal as her mind turned toward food, but then she thought resolutely of the task she’d set for herself, and immediately lost her appetite.

She’d have run all the way to her destination had she not feared drawing the unpleasant attentions of Mr. Filch—or worse, that dratted Peeves. Keeping her ears pricked for Mr. Filch’s flat-footed shuffle as well as Peeve’s grating cackle, Hermione managed to make good time with the aid of several shortcuts, and when she eventually came to the empty first floor corridor that’d been her aim, her heart gave an agitated little leap—only to sink into her stomach.

The corridor was flooded.

*She’s having one of her bad days, then,* Hermione thought, and seriously considered turning round and joining her friends at the feast, even going so far as to halfway construct a flimsy excuse for her tardiness—but, no. Few were the days of the year that promised Hermione this degree of privacy, and she was entirely unwilling to wait for the Christmas holidays and the largely vacant castle they promised.

It had to be today.
With the terribly grim determination of one who would have preferred disembowelment to what lay before her, Hermione set to navigating the length of the corridor, dodging deep puddles that were just as likely to be the products of a sink as a toilet. Unfortunately, the patch of floor nearest to the girls’ bathroom was nothing but puddle, and Hermione had no choice but to hike up her robes and go splashing through it. There was no recourse for her shoes, though, which promptly soaked up the dirty water leaking out from under the bathroom door.

Still holding up her robes with one hand, Hermione lifted the other to push open the door, snorting derisively at the out-of-order sign that forbade her from entering upon pain of docked points. Really, if Hogwarts’s staff truly wanted to prevent students from walking in and out of this bathroom as they pleased, then they should have put enchantments on the door.

If the corridor outside resembled a half-drained swimming pool, then the bathroom itself was evocative of a very shallow lake. All of the taps were running at thunderous full blast, and murky toilet water was leaking out from under every stall.

No, there was no question about it. Moaning Myrtle was very out of sorts today.

Hermione couldn’t hardly hear herself think over the sound of all the taps running at once, so she approached the wall of sinks and set to twisting them off one by one. As Hermione shut off each tap in its turn, the sound of violent crying grew louder and clearer.

Myrtle had to’ve noticed that someone had invaded her bathroom, between the abrupt silencing of the running taps and the splashing of feet through ankle-deep puddles, but she seemed reluctant to greet her guest. Hermione had expected as much; Myrtle had always been what might be generously described as difficult.

Bending her mouth into a decidedly awkward smile, Hermione pressed her palm against the door of Myrtle’s stall—it wasn’t locked—and pushed, so that it swung slowly open and bumped against the adjoining wall. And there, squatting on the leaking toilet, was the ghost of the girl who’d died in Hermione’s fourth year.

“Er, hullo, Myrtle,” Hermione said in the excessively kind voice she tended to use with first years and house-elves. “Having a nice Hallowe’en?”

Myrtle squinted at Hermione, wet little hiccups ceasing momentarily as she took her measure—and then, possibly because she wanted to prove to her company that she’d properly earned the nickname she’d had since before she’d died, she screwed up her face and stared to sob still more loudly than before.

So. Not having a good Hallowe’en, then.

“Um, Myrtle?” said Hermione, forging on. “Why aren’t you down at the feast, if you don’t mind my asking? The ghosts are welcome to join in—all except for Peeves, anyway.”

“Well, of course not!” Myrtle said abruptly, voice scraped raw from all that crying, though still carrying the peculiar hollow echo characteristic of all ghosts. “That awful Bloody Baron put his foot down, didn’t he? And that nasty poltergeist’s not really a ghost, is he? Why should he be invited with the rest of us?”

In her indignation, Myrtle had forgotten to carry on sobbing, but Hermione doubted the reprieve would last. If Hermione wanted to get anything of value out of her, she’d have to act quickly.

“Well, as Peeves won’t be there, why don’t you come and join us? I’m—er—everyone’ll be pleased
“Don’t lie!” snapped Myrtle, rearing up off her toilet to hover over Hermione. “When has anyone ever been pleased to see awful, ugly, moaning, moping Myrtle? The last time I attended a Hallowe’en feast, I was still alive, and Olive Hornby threw treacle tart in my face!”

Hermione’s smile froze in place. She might’ve felt a bit sorrier for Myrtle had she not know that she’d spent a great deal of last year haunting Olive Hornby’s every step till Olive, understandably at the end of her tether, had gone to the Ministry with a formal complaint, consigning Myrtle to her bathroom.

“O-oh, but no one’ll throw anything at you this time, I promise—and even if they tried, you wouldn’t be able to f—” Myrtle swelled dangerously, and Hermione swiftly changed tack. “You know, I think it’s rather tactless of them, but the other students like to celebrate Hallowe’en by asking the school ghosts how they died. And I think they like the attention, the ghosts. They like to be remembered.”

Hermione half expected to be doused in toilet water for her troubles, and as Myrtle’s lips wobbled dangerously, she feared she’d overstepped. Myrtle had been terribly uncooperative when the Ministry officials had tried to quiz her about her death, and they’d eventually given up, squelching in their shoes as they’d filed out of the bathroom and into the corridor. After all, it wasn’t as if they could detain a ghost.

So Hermione was quite shocked when Myrtle floated back down to her toilet and said, in a remarkably sedate voice, “I don’t know about going down to the feast—I’ve never liked crowds of people—but if you’re really that interested in hearing how I died—”

“I am,” said Hermione, all in a rush, and then backpedaled, trying to sound less keen and more sympathetic. “I mean to say—that is, if you’re all right with—er—reliving something that traumatic. I wouldn’t want to upset you.”

Myrtle gave a derisive little sniff at that but carried on in a hushed voice. “Those Ministry officials wanted to hear all about it too, you know, but I wouldn’t’ve been of much use to them. I was all woolly headed, those first few days. I could barely remember my own name. I was coming back in bits and pieces, not all at once.”

Hermione chewed on her tongue to stop herself saying something she’d regret. She couldn’t rush Myrtle through this, not if she wanted to hear what she’d come for.

“I don’t remember much about it,” Myrtle went on, still hushed, still dreamy. “Dying. I expect what happened to me won’t make for as exciting a story as Sir Nicholas’s botched beheading.”

“I’m sure it’s very exciting,” Hermione told her, and Myrtle actually smiled at this. It wasn’t an especially pleasant smile.

“Do you think so? But you haven’t heard it yet.” Myrtle drew her knees against her chest and nestled her chin between them. “Only a couple of things really stand out. Something I heard, and then—something I saw.”

Hermione’s empty stomach gave a giddy little leap. “Something you heard?”

“Yes,” said Myrtle, eyes rolling upward and glazing over as though she’d fallen into a trance. “I was crying, you know, in this very stall—” She gestured at the stall’s moldy walls, and Hermione tried to project patience. “—because Olive Hornby had teased me about my acne and my glasses. That awful, awful girl; if the Ministry hadn’t told me to leave her be—”
Trying not to think of Ron’s toweringly insensitive habit of saying that Myrtle should’ve waited a few more years to bite the dust if she hadn’t wanted to be afflicted with bad skin for all eternity, Hermione gave a restrained little nod that tried to be sympathetic.

But then Myrtle said, with uncharacteristic self-awareness, “I’ve gone off on a tangent, haven’t I? The point is, I locked myself in this stall, and I was crying very loudly, but I could still hear the lavatory door open and shut, and at first, I thought it was Olive, come to tease me some more—but then I heard—well, it sounded like a snake had got in. I could hear it hissing.”

Feeling at once excited and queasy, Hermione said, “Is—is that right? A snake? Did it—did it get loose from Care of Magical Creatures, d’you think?”

Myrtle’s pearly little pigtails bobbed as she shook her head. “It wasn’t a snake, though—it only sounded like one. Actually, I was dead certain that it was a person who was talking. Not just a person—” Myrtle leaned forward, and with the air of someone imparting a massive scandal, she said, “It was a boy.”

When Myrtle failed to elaborate, and simply allowed the silence to hang there, Hermione said, a touch impatiently, “And?”

“And?” Myrtle’s mouth popped open, forming a little O. “And it was a boy, wasn’t it? In the girls’ toilet. Well, of course I wasn’t having that, so I unlocked the stall door to tell him to clear off unless he wanted me to call for a teacher, but then I saw—”

Hermione gripped a corner of the stall, white knuckled. “Saw what? What did you see, Myrtle?”

“I don’t remember what it looked like,” Myrtle breathed. “Not really. I think I died too quickly for that. What I do remember are its eyes—a great ugly pair of these awful yellow eyes. I’ll never forget that. And then—well, I died.” Myrtle sank back onto the toilet seat, looking terribly pleased with herself—or with the look on Hermione’s face.

Upon returning to the castle from the year’s first Hogsmeade weekend, Hermione had temporarily set aside her dive into the lore of magical tattoos in favor of reading up on the life of Salazar Slytherin and, as she would have with any other project, she’d set herself a series of questions to guide her research.

Question: what sort of monster could kill without leaving a mark?

Better question: what sort of monster could be held in check by a human?

Even better question: what sort of human could hold a monster in check?

To this day, Salazar Slytherin was best known for three things: helping to found Hogwarts, deeply distrusting Muggle-borns, and being born a Parselmouth. Hermione had lived and learned in the Wizarding world long enough to know that a Parselmouth was a witch or wizard with the power to speak to and control serpents both magical and mundane. The ability to speak Parseltongue was terribly rare as well as hereditary, so it stood to reason, didn’t it, that a descendant of Slytherin would have inherited their progenitor’s rare talent?

But Hermione hadn’t stopped at Hogwarts: A History. No, if she was to identify which serpentine magical beasts were best suited to murder, a history of Europe’s foremost school of magic would not provide her with the answers she sought.

Deciding that it was best to start with the basics, Hermione had proceeded to crack open her copy of Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them. Fantastic Beasts had described to her all manner of
serpentine beasts, but only one of them—the greatest, the most terrible—was possessed of the dreadful ability to kill without a touch, but with a look. Just a look.

A look from a pair of what Mr. Scamander described as bulbous yellow eyes.

“What’s the matter?” said Myrtle, staring curiously at Hermione. And then, with a wavering voice and a trembling lip, she said, “You didn’t like my story, did you? I knew it—I knew it would bore you—no one ever wants to talk to miserable, moaning—”

“No,” said Hermione sharply. “No, Myrtle, sorry, I only—I got lost in thought.” Her nails were biting into the corner of the stall she’d grabbed, scraping off paint that hadn’t been touched up in over a year. “Please, Myrtle—you’re certain you can’t remember anything else? You didn’t—you said all you saw were the yellow eyes? You didn’t see its body, or—or the boy who came in here, the boy who was hissing?”

“I told you what I saw,” said Myrtle crossly, and, oh, no, her eyes were welling up. “You could stand to be a trifle more sensitive, you know—you’re just like those awful Ministry people, pressing me for answers I haven’t got, asking me questions I don’t want to answer—”

“You were perfectly happy to answer them a moment ago,” Hermione snapped, temper overtaking her tongue. “In fact, I suspect you were rather enjoying the attention, weren’t you?”

The tears that’d been hovering at the rims of Myrtle’s eyes spilled over, and Hermione reached out for her as though she could actually hold her in place, starting at the icy shock that leached into her fingertips as she stammered, “Oh—no, Myrtle, I’m sorry, I’m really—”

But Myrtle didn’t care to listen to Hermione’s apologies. With an ear-splitting wail, she rose up several feet, flipped herself upside down, and dived into the toilet bowl, where she proceeded to gurgle morosely, deaf to Hermione’s pleas that she come back out.

Biting off another I’m sorry, Hermione stood in the stall’s open doorway, fuming. It’d been awful of her to say something like that, yes, but Myrtle could stand to tone down the dramatics. It was Myrtle’s delight in her own misery that’d prevented Hermione from ever feeling truly sorry for her back when she was alive; it hadn’t been Myrtle’s fault that she’d been bullied, but she’d always seemed to rather like being upset, to the point that, if someone else wasn’t visiting misery upon her, she’d create a bit of misery for herself.

Myrtle’s uncooperative nature aside, not all was lost. Hermione had got what she’d come for, hadn’t she?

Myrtle Warren had been murdered, all right, but not at the point of a wand. No, she’d run afoul of the lethal stare of the King of Serpents.

Hermione gave a nervous little hiccup. A basilisk. A bloody basilisk was lurking somewhere in this castle, possibly hibernating—did basilisks hibernate? Fantastic Beasts hadn’t been very clear on that point, but it had stated that basilisks could live for hundreds of years, and that would certainly explain why a monster hatched in Salazar Slytherin’s time could have survived to see the twentieth century.

And what was Hermione to do with this information, now that she had it? Go to Professor Dumbledore? But Dumbledore was the cleverest person alive; surely he already had his suspicions regarding Slytherin’s monster, and if he hadn’t gone to the Ministry with his thoughts—possibly ruling his theory as useless so long as the Chamber of Secrets remained inaccessible to all but Slytherin’s heir—then what was Hermione to do?
And what *was* that wretched noise? It wasn’t the drip of water. It sounded a bit like a gas leak, going by that particular hissing quality, but this was a magical castle, not a Muggle home, so that couldn’t —

**Hissing.** Someone, something, was hissing. But where was it coming from?

Hermione stumbled in her haste to turn around, and had to clutch at the sides of the stall so as to not slip in a puddle and land on her face. She blinked, stunned, as the hissing died, and as the grind of stone on stone took its place.

And she knew, at least, where *this* noise was coming from, because, right in front of her, one of the sinks slid into the floor as though pulled by some unseen mechanism. It disappeared from sight, leaving a gaping hole in its place.

Hermione stared at it.

Was that—? No. Surely not. In a girls’ *bathroom*?

But then—but then, it made sense, didn’t it? The thing that had got Myrtle had been inside the girls’ bathroom, and someone would’ve noticed a massive snake slithering through the corridors. And if the thing had used pipes to get around the school—yes, of course that made sense. The evidence was right in front of her nose, wasn’t it?

Hermione took a cautious step forward, water lapping at her ankles and drenching her already damp socks. She peered sharply around, demanding, in a voice that echoed off the ceiling, “Who’s there?”

Nothing. Nothing but Myrtle’s gurgling, anyway.

“Myrtle,” said Hermione. “Did you hear something?”

Myrtle sobbed that much harder by way of reply. And Hermione—

Hermione got moving, pushing into every stall, wand drawn and held aloft before her, eyes narrowed in case—in case something came crawling out of that gaping hole—but—

But she swept the bathroom, once, twice, and saw nothing. Heard nothing, save for the intermittent drip of water and Myrtle’s choked crying.

Hermione gave the exposed hole in the floor a long, wary look, and started to edge toward it. Every fiber of her being strained against getting closer, but her feet seemed to move of their own accord, until her toes were brushing the hole’s ledge. She lit her wand tip, and peered inside of it.

It was a chute. No, not a chute. A pipe. It was a wide pipe, big enough for a person—or, God, a massive snake—to fit inside of.

Hermione’s fingers trembled around her wand.

She was going to fetch a teacher. That was the thing to do. What other choice did she have? She’d be lucky if her punishment was restricted to a hundred docked points, lucky if she didn’t get *expelled*, but this—this *thing* was gaping open, and she knew of no way to shut it, and a *basilisk* could come slithering out of it at any moment—this was an emergency—

She had just begun to shuffle away from the exposed pipe when she felt something collide with her back, stealing her breath and pushing her forward with enough force to send her stumbling, tripping. Her heels bumped the ledge of the exposed pipe, and then the floor was falling completely out from
under her, and then gravity took hold of her ankles and gave a great yank—

She shrieked, and fell. Fell into the pipe.

Her back and bum collided with the pipe, and she knew, somewhere under the hysteria that had taken hold of her senses, that everything from her shoulder blades to her thighs would be nothing but one massive bruise tomorrow—if there was a tomorrow. The shriek she’d let out as she’d fallen was stuck in her throat, silenced, strangled, and the pipe that’d looked huge from an outsider’s perspective was actually far too tight, what if it got narrower as it went farther down, what if she got stuck inside of it, what if what if what if—

But then, the pipe that went on forever, the pipe that would not end—ended. Hermione was ejected from it without ceremony, landing with another bruising thump on a stretch of slimy, curiously textured floor.

Lifting her hand from where she’d instinctively braced it on the floor, Hermione registered the white, brittle flecks that were clinging to her palm.

Bone fragments.

Choking on a noise that was far too like a whimper, Hermione frantically shook her hand clean, and then swept her still-lit wand—thank God she hadn’t dropped it on the way down—around the chamber—no, the tunnel—into which she’d fallen. She immediately understood why the floor was so strangely textured.

It was littered with a carpet of skeletons—tiny, quadrupedal skeletons. Animals. Rodents, from the looks of them. Mice and rats.

Hermione’s gorge rose.

Swallowing convulsively, Hermione sat forward on her knees, and then scrambled onto her shaking legs, amazed that they were functioning well enough to support her weight. She turned on the spot, and hunched, peering up the length of the pipe that’d brought her here, wand just managing to illuminate the first five feet of it.

She squinted. Was that possibly—? Hermione put her wand out and then gave the pipe another look, willing her eyes to adjust quicker—yes, that was the barest suggestion of light pouring down the pipe. It hadn’t closed up. If she could only—

Tucking her wand up her sleeve, Hermione hiked her knees up onto the lip of the pipe and tried to scramble up its length. She made it all of two feet before the pipe became too steep to climb, the fact that it was positively coated in slime helping not at all, and Hermione, sweating and crying, slid slowly backward till her heels hit the tunnel floor.

She couldn’t despair. She mustn’t. There had to be a way to get out of here, or else Slytherin and his heir would’ve been trapped here, and no one would have got killed in the first place. Perhaps—Hermione bit her tongue, hard, to restrain an unhinged giggle—perhaps Slytherin and his exalted heir would have simply put a saddle on the basilisk and ridden it out.

Perhaps—perhaps a Summoning Charm would do it? She could—she could Summon one of the school brooms. It might take a while for it to get here, but as long as there was the barest chance—

Hermione’s ears pricked, straining to pick up a distant sound that had startled her out of her thoughts. She groped for her wand and narrowed her eyes to slits, praying, praying—but, no. It wasn’t the slither of a great serpentine body that she’d heard, but the grind of—God, shit, no, the sink was
closing up, and as Hermione ducked to peer up the pipe’s length, she saw that barest sliver of light blink out.

Straightening up and clutching her wand the same way she would a severed lifeline, Hermione repressed the scream that stirred in her chest. She wasn’t getting up that pipe, and nothing was getting down that pipe, and—

And there was nothing else for it, was there?

She could only go forward.

Hermione faced the tunnel again, cursing herself for not being the sort to carry around hand mirrors; she could’ve used one to peer round corners. It was the direct gaze of the basilisk that killed you, wasn’t it? Perhaps an indirect look would only hurt you badly, possibly paralyze you—

Yes, and then the basilisk could tear into your petrified body at its leisure, couldn’t it? Comforting thought, that.

Well, someone had pushed her down here, hadn’t they? Perhaps they would come down here after her, and then she could—she could force them to let her back out.

Right.

Lighting up her wand again, Hermione moved cautiously forward, eyes only just open enough to see what was directly in front of her, ready to be slammed safely shut at any moment. She tried very hard not to think of how the basilisk, with its poisonous fangs, wouldn’t need to meet her eyes to kill her.

The tunnel, like the pipe that preceded it, seemed to go on forever, twisting and turning at random intervals so that Hermione, half blinded, nearly walked into a wall once or twice. But, like the pipe, the tunnel was not without end, and in what could’ve been an hour or half an hour, bruised legs aching with strain, Hermione reached a dead stop, and dared to open her eyes wider, if only for a moment.

The wall before her wasn’t blank, as she’d thought before she’d opened her eyes and focused her vision, but carved with a pair of emerald-eyed snakes that seemed to flicker and waver as though not quite bound by concrete reality. But when Hermione slapped at the snakes with her open palm, they proved to be quite solid indeed, and Hermione doubted that they’d open for anyone but Parselmouths.

The scream that Hermione had leashed earlier fought free and burbled out of her mouth. It had weakened in the interim, and wasn’t as loud as she’d expected it to be, but it wasn’t an entirely sane sound, either. What was she going to do? She was bruised and trapped and as likely to die from starvation as a basilisk’s stare, and to add insult to injury, she was grimy down to her socks.

Hermione’s brain stalled. Skipped. Socks. Her socks were dirty. Her socks—

Dobby.

What if—?

But Dobby was free, and at any rate, Hermione wouldn’t’ve been his master if he had been enslaved. No, the Hogwarts house-elves answered to the headmaster, and were bound by their strange, extraordinarily versatile magic to follow his commands.

But what harm was there in trying? Perhaps Dobby would come when Hermione called, not out of
duty, but out of friendship. Hermione squeezed the first syllable of Dobby’s name between her teeth, only to swallow the second half of it when she heard someone calling her name.

“Hermione? Hermione!”

Hermione stumbled in her haste to turn around, holding her lit wand high. Could it—could Harry and Ron have found her on the Marauder’s Map? No. No, they’d never seen the Chamber of Secrets on that Map, and Harry and Ron had certainly looked. Still, perhaps, out of sheer luck—

But the person who came hurrying round a bend in the tunnel, looking as grimy as Hermione felt, was neither Harry nor Ron.

It was Tom Riddle.

Every muscle in Hermione’s body locked up, fastening her to the spot, but Riddle, under no such paralysis, sped up his steps at the sight of her, a look of abject relief softening his face.

“God,” he said, choked, arms coming up as he approached her. “Thank God.”

And he pulled her into a hug.

One of his hands came up to cup her shoulder, and the other clasped her hip. He tucked his face against the bend of her neck, breathing quick and damp against her skin. It was intimate, this hug, nothing at all like the careful hugs you shared with friends and family, the chaste sort of thing that kept your hips and thighs apart.

Hermione stood stiff as a plank in Riddle’s arms, staring over his shoulder. Staring off into the twisting tunnel that’d led him to her.

Curious.

“Tom,” Hermione said in a terribly steady voice. “How did you find me?”

His arms constricted around her, squeezing, as though he were shaken at the reminder of just where he’d found her, as though reassuring himself that she was here with him and whole.

“I—God, I’m not sure.” His voice was trembling. So were his fingers where they bit at her skin through her clothes. “Luck, I suppose—you weren’t at the feast, and I wanted to ask you to come and sit with me at the Slytherin table, so I asked your friends—Lavender and Parvati?—where you had gone. They said they saw you going up the stairs, so I came up here and started looking into every room I passed—and I know it wasn’t appropriate to look in on a girls’ bathroom, but I was starting to get worried, and—”

He exhaled shakily against Hermione’s neck, and then drew back, not to let her go, but to press his forehead hard against hers.

“—God, there was water everywhere, and I hadn’t taken two steps inside when I heard this—this awful hissing noise, and then the sink—the fucking sink just retracted into the bloody floor, and there was this pipe, and something—someone pushed me down here, Hermione. Is that—is that what happened to you?”

“Yes,” Hermione said mechanically as she thought, distantly, that she’d never heard him swear before. “Yes, that’s what happened to me.”

His face was too close to hers, close enough that his features blurred together, close enough that she
couldn’t read him—but she doubted that she’d be able to decode them even if she pulled far enough away to try.

He was a terribly accomplished actor.

Hermione shifted her arms, wedged them between their torsos, and pushed—gently—at Riddle until he got the hint and stepped back, although he kept himself anchored to Hermione with one hand on her shoulder and the other on her hip.

She looked him in the eye.

“Lavender and Parvati didn’t see me leaving,” she said, clear and precise. “If they had, they would’ve come after me. We’re too clever for this, you and I. Now, Tom, the truth this time, if you please. How did you find me?”

To Riddle’s credit, he didn’t immediately concede defeat. “I—sorry? I don’t know what you—”

“But it’s not that you found me, is it?” she pressed, voice losing its measured quality, going a bit shrill. “Is it? No, Tom, I think you followed me. I think you were there in the bathroom the whole time I was talking to Myrtle, or at least standing outside of it. I think you put on an Invisibility Cloak, or, or cast a Disillusionment Charm, and then I think you spoke Parseltongue and opened the Chamber of Secrets, the same as you did over a year ago, and I think you came up behind me and pushed me down that chute.”

Riddle blinked, and within the span of that blink, his face, still clearly and remarkably handsome under all that grime, underwent an unnerving transformation.

Everything that made him human, that made him normal, seemed to drop away bit by bit. The careful scrunch of his brow, the warmth in his eyes, the quirk of his mouth all melted away, till his face was wiped clean of all expression, till Hermione saw, unmasked, that which she’d been catching glimpses of since the third of August.

And what she saw—was Tom Riddle at his purest, at his truest, unburdened by the façade he wore for everyone else’s benefit. Without the weight of it bearing him down, without the need to extend careful attention to every detail, to every word or look or action, he seemed to hold himself differently. He looked, somehow, taller. Gaunter.

And now he was tilting his head, just as he had when they’d met in the library. Hermione had thought that he’d looked like an automaton then, and she thought it again now.

He slid his hand along Hermione’s shoulder, palm grazing her neck—she flinched; she couldn’t help it—and then he flicked his fingers against her cheek.

“You must think you’re terribly clever, mustn’t you?” he said, voice devoid of any human warmth, so that it, along with his transformed face, finally suited his laugh—cold and unfeeling and fit to raise every fine hair on Hermione’s body. “And you wouldn’t be wrong.”

Hermione swallowed. Her throat clicked.

“I want to ask you something,” she said.

“What? Not going to raise your hand first?” Riddle’s mouth curled, but his amusement lacked warmth. “Go on, then. Ask.”

Hermione wet her lips.
“Do you practice acting like a normal person in the mirror every morning, or does it come to you naturally?”

Riddle stared at her, and the cant of his mouth might’ve been incredulous, might have finally shown genuine emotion—

But then he was barking a cold laugh, lips spreading to show teeth. Straight, perfect teeth, brilliantly white in his grimey face. Odd, how the grime failed to diminish his looks. With a face like that, was it any wonder scores of people had been taken in by him? All he had to do was smile, and the world would fall at his feet.

“It comes naturally,” he said, “although I very rarely bothered before coming to Hogwarts—Muggles aren’t worth charming, on the whole, not when fear works just as well as adoration. I suppose I’m lucky. Some people are charming but ugly, and others are good looking but a chore to talk to. As for me, I’m—”

“Not nearly as charming as you think you are, or else I’d’ve been taken in by you along with the rest of your sycophants.” If she made him angry—if she finally chipped away at his control and made him really very angry—perhaps his guard would go down, and she’d be able to—

Riddle’s smile disappeared, there and gone, easy as flipping off a light switch.

He hadn’t drawn his wand. He didn’t need to, not when he could speak Parseltongue. Not when he had a basilisk at his command.

“Ohmione,” he said. “Sweetheart. There’s something I’ve been wanting to show you. I know you’re impatient to get out of here, but if you could humor me for just a little while longer?”

“Do I have a choice?” she asked, not bothering to hide the revulsion she felt at the sound of an endearment on Tom Riddle’s lips.

Riddle tugged his mouth back into a smile, a smile that didn’t fit his face. He didn’t answer her, but instead used his hold on her to turn her on the spot, so that she was facing the wall and its carved snakes.

Riddle stepped in close behind her, fingers biting sharp as fangs into her hips, and hissed.

It sounded—well, it sounded like nonsense, at least to Hermione’s ears, but she thought it might’ve sounded rather like the noise she’d heard in the girls’ bathroom—the noise that had opened up the Chamber—

Then the wall, the dead end that’d kindled Hermione’s hysteria, split down the middle and opened up, and Hermione’s wand sputtered and went out from the shock of what she was seeing.

“Go on, Hermione,” said Riddle, reverting to English. His nose was pressed to Hermione’s cheekbone, his lips were grazing her jaw. “Say hello.”

Chapter End Notes

As I said in the opening notes, I'll be updating this tomorrow, so I hope that goes some
way towards convincing you guys not to hate me for going on a long and unannounced hiatus.
Hi! I promised I'd start updating again today, didn't I? Thank you for your patience, and thank you for welcoming me back so sweetly xx

BUT ALSO

[car salesman's voice] Have you ever wanted to kick Tom Riddle directly in the gonads? Then this might be the chapter for you!!

31 October 1996

If Hermione had been terrified when she’d first been pushed into this dank, disgusting place—if she’d found herself trembling on the cliff’s edge of hysterics when she’d found herself trapped, no, buried alive with no discernable way out—if, until that moment, she’d never been so frightened as that in her entire life, then how she’d felt then was nothing, that was a bloody Sunday stroll in the park, compared to this.

Because, as it turned out, when a person was just frightened enough, it really did feel as if their blood was running cold with terror, felt as though their innards had flooded with ice water. And the terror Hermione felt in that moment, stranded in the Chamber of Secrets with a monster at her front and another at her back, went so far beyond icy that it left her entirely, exquisitely numb to her core.

Not so numb, of course, that she hadn’t the sense to slam her eyes immediately shut.

Well. Not quite immediately.

She’d shut them quickly, that was true, but not so soon that she hadn’t caught the briefest glimpse of —something. A great mass. A coiled shape in the dark that rose and fell as it inhaled and exhaled deep, steady breaths.

There went Hermione’s last, tentative hope that Slytherin’s monster had somehow wasted away and died between the tail end of fourth year and today.

“Come now, Hermione.” The hands on her hips gave a terribly gentle squeeze. Riddle’s cheek was pressed flush to hers, a parody of intimacy. “I told you to say hello. Where have your manners gone?”

That was surely intended as a taunt, insult to injury, a visceral reminder that Hermione was utterly and entirely at his mercy, but she had a curious reaction to hearing it.

The thing was.

Gryffindors, all of them, even the most well behaved and logic driven, tended to react a certain set way to mockery, even in situations as dire as this. Especially in situations as dire as this.
It tended to piss them off.

For once in her comparatively short life, Hermione didn’t think. Feeling the hot flush of true rage sear away the numbing cold of fear, she allowed her brain to shut off, seized good old-fashioned instinct between her teeth, and drove the rather sharp point of her elbow into Riddle’s abdomen where it was at its softest, its most vulnerable.

Riddle made a noise like a crushed balloon, hunched in on himself, and reflexively loosened his hold on Hermione’s hips.

It was enough.

Hermione wrenched herself away from him and out of his reach, tripping over her own feet as she went, but she didn’t fall. She didn’t fall, and she turned on her heel, putting her back to the open Chamber and the thing it harbored—God, what was she doing, what was she doing—and for all that her fingers were slick with sweat, her grip on her wand was miraculously steady as she pointed it at Riddle’s heart.

Riddle straightened up, apparently without any concern for the wand that was trained like a naked gun on his chest. It was too dark to tell if his eyes were watering from the impact of Hermione’s elbow against his stomach.

It wasn’t, however, so dark that Hermione couldn’t catch the way Riddle’s lips twisted with clear disdain.

Hermione white knuckled her wand. “Expelliarmus,” she said, or started to say. She’d only just clipped out the first syllable when Riddle rolled his eyes and flicked his fingers at her, as unconcerned as if he was flicking a persistent fly that had alighted on his dinner plate, and Hermione’s wand leapt out of her hand and into his.

Hermione’s fingers, still holding the shape of her wand, squeezed thin air. Wandless magic. God, he could do wandless magic—she’d already been aware of his skill with nonverbal spells, but to use nonverbal and wandless at the same bloody time—a seventeen-year-old boy who hadn’t even sat his N.E.W.T. exams yet—

“No, no,” Riddle drawled, and Hermione followed his movements with disbelieving eyes as he tucked her wand into his pocket with such easy entitlement that it may as well’ve been his. “Darling, you’re not in any position to go about making demands. Even if you had managed to Disarm me, well. You didn’t even try, Hermione. You were supposed to be the clever Gryffindor. You were supposed to be the clever Gryffindor, and yet here you are, fumbling as stupidly as any common Weasley. I’m terribly disappointed in you.”

Stupid. He’d called her and her friends stupid. Somehow, that was what truly got to her.

Her empty fingers clenched into a fist that shook. She didn’t hit people. She found physical violence deplorable; she’d even felt rather ashamed of herself after hitting Draco Malfoy on the nose that one time, for all that the little rat had deserved that and worse.

And yet, and yet, in that moment, she wanted nothing more than to strike Riddle across his pretty face and hit him till he bled, even though she knew damn well that she’d be dead before she could as much as finish the thought, let alone get within striking distance.

She didn’t hit him. She said, hoarse and reckless and so very, very done with this entire day, “You shut your mouth.”

Riddle’s perfectly neat eyebrows arched in a show of mild shock. “Darling, you’re not in any position to go about making demands. Even if you had managed to Disarm me, well.” He lifted his
empty hands, spread his fingers, and gave a little shrug. “As you can see, the absence of a wand wouldn’t trouble me overmuch, now, would it?”

He was right, of course.

He was the brightest student Hogwarts had seen in a generation—and, God, how that had always stuck in Hermione’s craw, a petty sort of envy that still rankled her here and now, for all that she had greater concerns—so of course it stood to reason that he’d have mastered wandless magic before the age of twenty. Wandless magic, perfect marks, bringing a great evil snake monster to heel; all of that was only par for course for Slytherin’s bloody heir, now, wasn’t it?

Riddle dropped his hands and pushed them deep in his pockets. Hermione could still see the outline of her own wand, and, beside it, what was probably Riddle’s. Perhaps if she physically threw herself at him and bit him on the nose, the shock of it would be enough to—

“It’s sleeping, by the way,” said Riddle, apropos of absolutely nothing.

“What?” Hermione blurted. “What d’you—” She shut her mouth as fast as she’d opened it. Of course, of course, he meant the—

“The basilisk,” said Riddle, finishing Hermione’s pinwheeling thoughts for her. “It’s asleep, and it won’t wake until I call for it.”

The fine hairs on Hermione’s body hadn’t stood down throughout this mostly one sided and entirely insane conversation, and the gooseflesh all along her arms only seemed to pull tighter at the reminder of just how much control Riddle exerted over her present situation. Of how easily he could end her without anyone ever knowing, as he had ended Myrtle Warren.

Myrtle.

“That’s how it’s stayed alive for nearly a thousand years,” Riddle was saying, possibly because he enjoyed the sound of his own voice. “Parseltongues can speak it into a deep sleep, you see, a sort of magical hibernation, thus extending its lifespan far beyond its natural—”

“You killed Myrtle,” Hermione said, tongue working one step ahead of her brain. Stalling. This was stalling, wasn’t it? And God knew you only stalled when you were flat out of better options. “You and that creature of yours.”

Riddle didn’t flinch. Didn’t even pretend to contort his face into a mask of remorse, of human feeling. He was allowing Hermione to see the coldness in his eyes, allowing her to see how deep it went. Down to the marrow, down to the soul.

He must really mean to kill me, Hermione thought distantly, as though this was happening to someone else and not her. Had she finally disassociated?

“It’s not as if I meant to,” Riddle said, in the same way that a naughty child might tell their teacher that they hadn’t meant to trip their classmate, that it had only been an accident. “Myrtle was in the wrong place at the wrong time. It wasn’t premeditated.”

He was admitting to it, bold as you please. God, he really, truly meant to kill her.

Even Hermione was surprised by how indignant she sounded when she said, ‘Wrong place at the— it was the girls’ bathroom, you snake! Myrtle had every right to be there—you, on the other hand—and, you know, it’s rather curious that the one student you killed with your pet monster just happened to be Muggle-born—”
“Of course,” Riddle carried on, cutting through Hermione’s tirade like a hot knife through melting butter, “I’d have got rid of her regardless. She saw the basilisk, you understand. She heard me speaking Parseltongue. It was unfortunate, Hermione, but she had to go.”

She had to go, he said, as though speaking of an especially ugly piece of furniture that was taking up valuable parlor space. She had to go, he said, as if it was a regrettable but necessary measure he’d had to take.

She had to go.

Such was Hermione’s rage at hearing Riddle talk so lightly of taking a human life that she felt a painful tingle in her fingertips, as though the magic inherent in her veins was reacting to the strength of her emotions and struggling to funnel them into something productive. For a moment, she swore she could have Disarmed or Stunned Riddle without her wand, but when she thought Stupefy as hard as she could, nothing happened. Riddle didn’t even twitch.

“You feel perfectly justified in what you did, don’t you?” Hermione asked him, even as she thought Stupefy, Stupefy, Stupefy over and over and over again. Nothing, nothing, nothing. “You don’t—are you even capable of feeling even a crumb of remorse, you absolute raving lunatic?”

Riddle’s jaw twinged every so slightly when Hermione called him a lunatic. Was what genuine human emotion she’d spotted?

But his face smoothed quickly back into cold impassivity, so perhaps Hermione had imagined it. And it was with that same blank expression fixed firmly to his face that he said, slow and silky, “Certainly I’m capable of remorse, or regret, at least. For example, I might regret it very badly if you continue on as you are and leave me with no choice but to kill you.”

Kill you. He said it so easily, as easily as he’d talked of killing Myrtle—on accident, right, because that made all the difference.

Then something about what he’d said struck Hermione.

“What d’you mean by that?” she wanted to know. She almost sounded composed, which was certainly something, wasn’t it, all things considered. “What, aren’t you quite committed to murdering me where I stand?”

Of course he was going to murder her. The only question was, would he do her in with a Killing Curse, or would he wake the basilisk still breathing steadily away inside the Chamber proper and give it leave to eat her?

“I’m not, actually,” said Riddle. “Committed, that is. I was planning on it—up until I pushed you down that chute, I was ready to give you to the basilisk. But I’m having—second thoughts. You see, Hermione, I really have come to like you.”

Hermione’s stomach pitched like a boat on rocky waters. If she’d had the chance to attend the feast and actually put some food in her stomach, surely she would’ve thrown it all up right then.

“Like me?” Was that the suggestion of a hysterical laugh bubbling up her constricted throat? “I don’t know how you were raised, but my parents never taught me to express affection by way of premeditated murder, you—”

“Lunatic?” Riddle guessed, impatience edging his voice like he thought Hermione was being deliberately tiresome. “Psychopath? Yes, darling, I heard you the first time—”
“Don’t you dare.” Her voice was curiously loud. Had she progressed to shouting? “Don’t you dare call me that—you don’t get to call me anything—”

“It’s my Chamber, Hermione. My basilisk. I can call you whatever I wish.”

She was going to scratch his bloody eyes out. She’d die trying, but it would be so very worth it, at least in the moment. Her fingers had even curled into the suggestion of cat’s claws.

“So,” she said, all but panting through her nose. She probably looked and sounded like a madwoman, but if she did, she was in good company, wasn’t she? “You’ve only been thinking about murdering me in cold blood, but you’re not quite sure yet. Have you been thinking on it all this time? Since I saw you and Draco in Knockturn Alley, have you—” Quieter, but with no less heat, she asked him, “You sent Draco after me in Hogsmeade, didn’t you? All his talk of fourth year and your not caring if the Muggle-borns lived or died. Did you tell him to say all that to me?”

She couldn’t quite believe it. Draco Malfoy was a terrible person, but was he the sort of person who could be complicit in murder? Had Riddle told him the full truth of what he’d planned, or had only fed Draco his lines without explanation?

Riddle, meanwhile, didn’t look particularly impressed with Hermione’s deductive reasoning.

“Clever,” he allowed, “but not clever enough, I’m afraid. If you were only a bit cleverer, you’d have caught on ages before you waltzed into that bathroom—hell, you’d have nosed out of my business.”

“Nosed out of your—” She couldn’t believe this. “You were the one who was stalking me.”

Riddle shook his head like a horse shaking off a gnat. “I had to find out, you understand. How much you suspected. How much you’d seen in Knockturn Alley.” He pursed his lips, feigning—surely feigning—regret. “I was thinking hard on letting it all go, actually, until you started asking after the mark on Draco’s arm.”

She’d been right—she’d known she was right—and now she was in no position to take any satisfaction in it. She’d been right about everything, and look where it had got her.

God, she thought, if I live through this, I swear I’ll mind my own business from here on out.

“If it’s any consolation,” said Riddle, and Hermione’s stomach sank into her shoes before he’d even finished his sentence, “I really do think this is a great pity. You could have been great, you know, if you’d lived just a little bit longer.”

Riddle’s foot scraped the filthy floor as he took a step forward. A step closer to Hermione.

His hand tightened in his pocket.

Gold gleamed on his finger, at his throat, conspicuous against the grime coating his skin.

A premature scream catching in her throat, Hermione flung herself forward, fingers scrambling for that thick golden chain and giving it a great yank. Riddle choked, strangled on his own necklace; that stupid, stupid necklace that had got Hermione into this mess.

She didn’t stop there, though. No, she squirmed away from Riddle’s grasping hands, shifted her feet, and brought her knee up hard between his legs, thinking of schoolyard bullies and how best to deal with them.

Riddle wheezed. It would’ve been funny, had Hermione not been fighting her for her life.
I’ve got to silence him, she thought, fingers digging at his pocket. She had to silence him so he couldn’t speak Parseltongue and wake up that awful—

Before she could shove her hand into his pocket, though, pain—stinging, eye-watering pain—shot through her scalp, loosened her fingers, had her crying out—was he actually pulling her hair—

Riddle caught Hermione’s wrists in his hands and pinned them to her sides. She’d somehow come to kneel on the floor with Riddle half crouched over her. Those cold, alien eyes of his were almost feral, and there was a snarl on his lips. Had she finally managed to break that inhuman composure? There was a sort of satisfaction to be had in that, despite her situation. Perhaps because of her situation.

The half wild light in Riddle’s eyes was quick to flicker and go out, however.

“You forget, Hermione,” he said, voice hoarse with lingering pain. Had she hurt him badly? Good. “I grew up around Muggles as well. I’m not Draco fucking Malfoy, and I know bloody well how to fight without magic.”

Hermione turned her face away from his so he wouldn’t see the wellspring of tears in her eyes. Much as she tried to convince herself that her eyes were simply watering from the pain of having her hair pulled, she knew that wasn’t entirely true.

“How many?” she croaked, still looking firmly away. When he didn’t answer immediately, she half shouted at him, “How many others have you killed? What about—what about Evan Rosier? You killed him too, didn’t you? Didn’t you?”

Riddle didn’t answer her question. Rather, he posed one of his own.

“What does it matter to you?” he wanted to know. “You might as well be dead, yourself. Will knowing the full truth allow you to go peacefully? Will it give you some measure of satisfaction?”

Of course it wouldn’t. She was seventeen, and seventeen-year-olds weren’t meant to die. She wanted to live. She wanted to live. She was alone in this. No one knew where she was. She couldn’t call Dobby, if he’d even come, for fear of Riddle striking him down. She had to find some way to—

“You can’t kill me,” she blurted, and at the arch of his brows, she snapped, “Yes, yes, I know that you very well can, but what happens after? Everyone knows that you’re my—God—that you’re my boyfriend. Statistically speaking, the majority of murder victims are killed by the people closest to them. You’ll be on the short list of suspects and you bloody well know it. Who’s stupid now?”

Riddle tipped his head to one side, and God help her, he actually looked as if he was considering her argument.

“But we’ve only been seeing each other for a very little while,” he offered neutrally, as though they were having a polite debate and Hermione wasn’t scrambling for her life. “I’d hardly call that close—and, as no one else can open the Chamber, the authorities will chalk you up to a missing person’s case, at least at first. Still, you make a fair point.”

Hermione’s numb fingers twitched. Was this how the heroes of myth felt when it came time to bargain with capricious gods and monsters for their lives?

“A-and,” she said, “if you kill me, I could come back as a ghost. Myrtle didn’t see her killer, but I will. Would.”

“True enough,” Riddle said, nodding along as though Hermione had pleased him somehow, the sick
bastard. “I could always Obliviate you before I kill you, though. Come to that, I could Obliviate you and let you live. Wouldn’t that be better than dying?”

No, Hermione thought with a fresh wash of horror. No, it would not.

“But that might damage that bright mind of yours,” said Riddle, “and we wouldn’t want that, now, would we?” He sighed, looking put out. “What to do, Hermione? You’ve left me with very few choices, and none of them good.”

“You could always take a third option,” she said, channeling Ron, “and piss off.”

Riddle’s eyes narrowed, but a smile curled his lips, and it looked nothing like the smiles he’d worn up till now. God help her, was this how he looked when he was genuinely amused?

“Your friends,” he said. “They mean a great deal to you, don’t they? You’d do almost anything for them, wouldn’t you?”

Hermione didn’t answer him. Perhaps if she kept her mouth firmly shut for once in her life, she’d make it out of this alive.

“I want to keep you alive, Hermione,” Riddle said, leaning in close, and Hermione hoped that this cramped, crouched position was half as painful on his knees a sit was on hers. “I’ll let you out of the Chamber. You and I shall carry on with our—relationship—”

Hermione couldn’t help herself; she scoffed. What? She hadn’t said anything.

Riddle’s lips tightened, but he went on as though Hermione hadn’t made a single peep.

“—but you’ve got to promise me—you must swear to it, and because I’m so very magnanimous, I won’t even ask that you make an Unbreakable Vow—” Hermione’s breath caught. “—but you must promise to keep your precious mouth shut regarding Myrtle Warren, the Chamber, and my association with either.”

He seemed to expect an answer. “And Evan Rosier?”


“Oh, I’m sure he did,” Hermione said. Her mouth was so full of venom it was a wonder she didn’t choke on it. “And what if I don’t cooperate? What will you do?” But she knew. She knew exactly what he’d do.

“You know very well what I’d do,” said Riddle, curiously gentle. “That’s the trouble with caring, Hermione; it gets you into all sorts of trouble.” Hermione opened her mouth, and Riddle rolled his eyes. “And don’t bet that you’ll be able to get to the authorities before I can kill you or your friends. I’ll know what you intend to do before you can do it. If you believe nothing else that I say, believe that.”

Hermione swallowed. Convulsively.

Her anger hadn’t abated—she suspected that she’d be angry for the rest of her life, the span of which was still in question—but the heat that’d come with her rage had banked, leaving her cold in Riddle’s grip. She doubted she’d ever be warm again.

Riddle leaned in close—Hermione recoiled—and there was that charm, the sweet smile that’d taken in so many others but had never quite managed to convince her.
“If you do as I ask, Hermione,” he said, “then I won’t harm a hair on your friends’ heads. I swear to it.”

She didn’t believe him, but what choice did she have?

“All right,” she said. All right. Her tongue felt heavier than lead in her mouth, but still she managed to force the words out.

Was this how it felt to sell one’s soul to the Devil?

Riddle’s smile deepened. He used his grip on her wrists to lever them both to their feet. When Hermione snatched for her wand, he stepped neatly out of her reach.

“I’ll return it to you later,” he said. “I doubt you’ve the capacity to cast an Unforgivable Curse, but at this very moment, I suspect you’d mean it enough to make it work.”

Oh.

An Unforgivable Curse. He thought she’d try and cast an Unforgivable Curse on him.

Could she? She could be ruthless when the situation called for it, but did she have it in her to make someone suffer, to rob them of their will?

To kill them?

Hermione was startled out of her thoughts by the sound of hissing, and she stopped herself from looking reflexively over her shoulder at the very last possible second. He hadn’t reneged, had he? He wasn’t calling the basilisk at this very moment, was he?

No, he wasn’t. She still refused to look, but she could hear the grind of stone on stone as entrance to the Chamber proper sealed itself shut.

“Come on, then.” Riddle gestured that Hermione should go on ahead of him. “We’ll be missed.”

“I’m not putting my back to you,” she said, stiffly.

Riddle gave a little huff—of amusement?—before turning to head down the serpentine tunnel, Hermione struggling to keep up on her shorter legs.

The trek back felt at once longer and shorter than the journey forwards. Shorter, because Hermione knew, or hoped, that a sure exit would be waiting for her. Longer, because every breath, every shift from Riddle put her teeth on edge.

She felt filthy in ways that had nothing to do with the grime coating her from head to foot.

In the small, circular antechamber, there hovered a broom—one of the school’s shuddery old Shooting Stars, actually. Hermione eyed it, then Riddle.

“I can’t abide by flying,” she said, sounding perfectly ridiculous. It was a bit like complaining that the cart carrying you to the guillotine had a squeaky wheel.

Riddle looked bored. “It’s the broom or the basilisk, Hermione.”

“And I can’t abide by you touching me,” she snapped, but stamped forward and threw her leg over the waiting broom. A moment later, she felt Riddle’s chest graze her back, felt his breath against the top of her head, and gripped the broom between her hands to keep from bodily flinging herself off it.
Riddle hissed again, and Hermione thought she was starting to recognize the words for *open*, although it was still more like gibberish than an actual language. Distantly, she could hear the groan of the sink pulling back from the hole in the bathroom floor.

What would happen if someone was already in the bathroom? What awful thing would Riddle do to them?

She hadn’t much time to think on it, however, because the broom was already hurtling forward, Riddle giving her a cursory warning to, “Keep your head ducked if you don’t want it taken off,” and they were hurtling up the pipe at a speed that seemed too ambitious for the old Shooting Star.

Of course, to most wizards and witches, this speed was probably quite tame. As Hermione had said, she couldn’t abide by flying.

In a matter of seconds, the broom had shot through the hole in the floor and skidded to a juddering halt at a click of Riddle’s tongue. Hermione wasted no time in dismounting, though her legs felt like jelly.

Twisting her fingers in the pleats of her skirt, Hermione watched with wary eyes as Riddle cast a silent Disillusionment Charm on the broom and stowed it in a stall. Over the sound of her heartbeat thundering in her ears, Hermione thought she could hear Myrtle gurgling away in her toilet. She’d probably never left it all throughout Hermione’s ordeal.

As the sink ground back into place over the entrance to the Chamber, Riddle turned to Hermione with a critical look on his face. Hermione stuck out her jaw, silent and stubborn.

“It’ll be the cold shoulder, then, will it?” Riddle asked. “I don’t suppose I can fault you for it. If I were you, I’d be rather cross, myself.”

“Rather cross?” Hermione squawked. The nerve of him.

“Please stop doing that,” Riddle sighed, sliding his wand out of his pocket and between his fingers. “You sound like an especially shrill parrot.”

Hermione’s mouth snapped shut with a click. With some effort, she opened it again to say, “I rather think I prefer your company when you’re pretending to be nice.”

“Oh, but, Hermione, I don’t want to pretend,” he said earnestly. “Not with you. You’re one of the few people who know what I’m actually like. It’s—refreshing.”

Riddle pointed his wand at her, and Hermione’s hands flew to cover her heart, as if she could somehow deflect and Unforgivable Curse through sheer will alone.

“Do calm down,” Riddle said, sighing again. *Tiresome Hermione.* “I’m only going to clean you up.”

*Clean me up?* she nearly echoed, but bit her tongue at the last second. A *parrot*, was it?

When Riddle was finished scourging the grime off their clothes until their shoes positively shined, Hermione held her hand out, palm up.

“My wand, please,” she clipped out.

“I’ll give it back,” he said, combing his fingers through his hair to neaten it. “Once we’re out in the corridor.”
“I can Stun you in the corridor as easily as in the bathroom,” she snapped, but he only gestured her forward with a look of infinite patience on his angelic face.

In the end, Hermione went, and Riddle with her. And who should Hermione so happen to spot in the flooded corridor but Harry, Ron, and Ginny?

Was that Crookshanks with them?

Ron spotted her first and gave a little shout. Galvanized, Crookshanks put on a burst of speed, stumpy legs a blur, dodging puddles like magic to launch himself into her arms, claws digging in painfully. Hermione squeezed him close and inhaled the scent of his fur, not even caring that he’d just poked holes in her new robes.

Smoothly, out of sight from the others, Hermione felt Riddle transfer her wand from his pocket to hers.

“Hermione,” Ron said, jogging to a halt, Harry and Ginny nearly tripping over each other and into one of the great puddles in their haste not to run into him. “Where the hell’ve you been—”

“Oh, if only they knew.

“With me,” Riddle said easily, and all three of Hermione’s friends fixed him with matching distrusting looks. Even Crookshanks turned his squashed face towards Riddle, bulbous eyes narrowing into slits.

Oh, no. Was coming up with convincing excuses on Riddle’s behalf part of their bargain as well? Hermione was too abysmal a liar to make up a story on the spot.

“We fought,” Riddle said easily. “Had a rather nasty row last night, didn’t we, Hermione? She wouldn’t speak to me all day today, so I finally went looking for her.” Riddle smiled softly at Hermione and brushed a stray bit of hair back from her face. “Poor thing was holed up in the bathroom.”

Hermione’s skin crawled.

“Yeah,” said Ron, defiant. His face had gone an awful purplish red, as good an indication as any that he was working himself up into a temper. “Where’d the two of you get off to, anyway—”

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“We fought,” Riddle said easily. “Had a rather nasty row last night, didn’t we, Hermione? She wouldn’t speak to me all day today, so I finally went looking for her.” Riddle smiled softly at Hermione and brushed a stray bit of hair back from her face. “Poor thing was holed up in the bathroom.”

Hermione cleared her throat to catch everyone’s attention before saying, “R—Tom’s right. I didn’t say anything about it because I didn’t want to be a bother.”

Harry and Ginny looked doubtful, but Ron shuffled awkwardly, shamefaced. “Aw, Hermione, if
you were feeling out of sorts, you should’ve said something. I’d’ve been loads nicer all day if you had.”

Hermione’s smile wobbled only a little. “It’s all right. Is the—uh—is the feast still going on?”

Ginny nodded, although her eyes were still thin and leery. “Yeah. It’s just about halfway through, though, so if you want something to eat, you’d better hurry.”

Hermione’s stomach was empty, but she’d never felt less hungry in her life than she did now.

“Good,” said Riddle. “I’m glad we didn’t miss it. Hermione?” He smiled sweetly. “I don’t want to deprive your friends of your company, but will you come and sit with me at the Slytherin table? If only for a little while?”

Hermione hugged Crookshanks tighter.

“All right,” she said. “I mean, of course. I’d like that.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I wasn't going to post this until tomorrow, but guess what! My impulse control continues to thwart everything I do.

Two things:

1) This chapter contains a throwaway line about animal abuse. It's not explicit, and nothing actually happens, but I wanted to let you guys know in case you're sensitive about that stuff like I am.

2) This chapter also contains a bit of disordered eating: specifically, a character refuses to eat when they should because of stress. Be careful with your precious selves!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2 November 1996

Crookshanks wouldn’t stop hovering.

It was strange, this new habit of his, because he wasn’t at all the sort of cat to be constantly underfoot. True, he always turned up when Hermione needed him, and he liked to spend his evenings curled up in her lap or draped across her stockinged feet, but he was also terribly independent, and he had his own business to attend to. It wasn’t like him to smother Hermione with the force of his attentions, and yet, that was exactly what he’d been doing since Hallowe’en.

Riddle, for his part, had been terribly amused by Crookshanks’s newfound clinginess, and had even, at one point, made as if he wanted to pet Hermione’s cat between his tufted ears. Crookshanks had responded to this overture by unsheathing his claws and swatting Riddle across the back of his hand.

Riddle had not tried touching him again.

Hermione wasn’t stupid, for all that she’d been a complete idiot to get involved with Tom Riddle: Crookshanks was half Kneazle and an excellent judge of character besides, and it was clear that he wouldn’t abide by leaving Hermione alone with her psychopath of an alleged boyfriend.

He wasn’t the only one doing his level best to get between them, either.

Harry, Ron, and Ginny, over the last twenty-four hours, had all at once developed a habit of unerringly turning up whenever Riddle intimated that he’d like to spend some time alone with Hermione. Hermione was certain that they were doing this deliberately, because they were taking no pains to be discreet, and because Ron had turned up in the library twice yesterday, and everyone knew that Ron only ever went to the library to borrow Quidditch Through the Ages, the sole copy of which had been checked out by Cormac McLaggen last week.

Hermione was torn. On the one hand, she could’ve cried with relief that Crookshanks and her friends were seeing to it that she never spent more than five minutes alone with Riddle at a time. On the
other hand, she was beginning to fear that Riddle would break his promise to her and kill them all out of sheer prolonged irritation.

With all that in mind, it probably wasn’t wise of Hermione to sneak out of Gryffindor Tower early on Saturday morning, but she’d sooner brave Riddle on her own than subject her friends to his wrath.

_Better me than them_, she thought grimly as she cut through the empty common room towards the portrait hole. Luckily—or unluckily, depending on how you looked at it—Harry, Ron, and Ginny had gone to bed thoroughly exhausted from an unforgiving evening of Quidditch practice, and were unlikely to wake up in time to catch Hermione on her way out.

Just as she reached the portrait hole, though, something warm and soft brushed up against her ankles, and she looked down to meet Crookshanks’s innocent expression with a halfhearted scowl.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said, and bent to scoop him up. “I’m sorry, Crooks, but Riddle strikes me as the sort who wouldn’t hesitate to torture small, fluffy animals for fun and profit, and I doubt he’s very pleased with you, anyway, after what you did to his hand. Not that he didn’t deserve it, of course.”

She decided that she was going to march back up to her dormitory and resign herself to spending her Saturday cooped up in the tower—Harry and Ron, at least, wouldn’t be able to get to her, so she’d only have Ginny’s prying questions to contend with—but she’d already reflexively touched the back of the Fat Lady’s portrait, and it swung open before she could retreat.

Crookshanks squirmed and hissed, which was how Hermione knew without looking that Riddle would be waiting for her out in the corridor.

Her first instinct was to retreat, but the Gryffindor in her wasn’t having it, and so she plunked down an increasingly agitated Crookshanks, crawled through the portrait hole, and faced the proverbial music.

What was the worst that Riddle could do, anyway? Kill her twice?

Riddle was standing some five feet away from the Fat Lady’s portrait, back propped against the wall and legs crossed at the ankles. In one hand, he held a goblet, and in the other, a linen-wrapped bundle off which drifted the scent of toasted bread and cooked butter. He wore dark jeans and a pale jumper, and he didn’t look at all how one might expect a homicidal psychopath to look.

Of course, quite a few famous serial killers had been perfectly handsome and charming on the surface, hadn’t they? Hermione supposed that Riddle was only keeping up to form.

She crossed her arms. “What do you want?”

“Woke up on the wrong side of the bed, did you?” Riddle’s tone was friendly, joking, but the smile he’d been wearing gradually faded until it matched the undisguised coldness in his eyes. Hermione clutched her arms closer to herself.

“_Excuse me_,” said the Fat Lady, muffled. “The young man and I were having a perfectly lovely conversation, I’ll have you know—quite rude of you to interrupt—”

Hermione ignored her, and so did Riddle, and the Fat Lady’s complaints soon devolved into incoherent grumblings.

“I was hoping to spend the day with you.” They were the words of a boy who was pining away for
the girl he fancied, and Hermione choked on a scoff. “We haven’t had the chance to talk properly since Hallowe’en.”

Hermione’s shoulders drew up. She thought of the Chamber, of the thing that slumbered inside of it, and fought back a shudder as she said with commendable dignity, “Which was only two days ago. Less, even. I’m sure you won’t waste away for lack of seeing me, Tom.”

“But I want to see you.” It was not a request. He indicated the long length of the corridor with a tilt of his head, and a lock of hair fell out of place and across one of his eyes. “Come walk with me?”

No, Hermione wanted to say, to shout, but she thought of the guillotine blade hanging over her head, over Harry’s and Ron’s and Ginny’s heads, and gave her unwilling consent with an uneven nod.

“Give me a moment,” she clipped, and reached down to retrieve Crookshanks, who’d followed her through the portrait hole to squat at her feet and eye Riddle with undisguised feline hostility.

Up in the sixth-year girls’ dormitory, Parvati was still deeply asleep, but there was a slow, reluctant stirring coming from Lavender’s bed, and so it was to Lavender’s bed that Hermione went.

“Lavender,” said Hermione, in an abrupt tone that startled Lavender into sitting up straight. “Sorry, I know it’s still quite early, but could you do me a favor?”

“Hmmm?” Lavender ground her fists against her eyes and then dropped them into her lap to regard Hermione blearily. “Hermione, it’s not even half seven—”

Hermione thought back to how early Parvati and Lavender had woken her on her birthday but said nothing about it. One did not procure favors by insulting the person they meant to plead with.

“Yes, sorry. Only I was wondering—would you mind looking after Crookshanks for me? Just for a couple of hours.” Truthfully, she had no idea how long Riddle meant to keep her for, but she was trying, feebly, to be optimistic.

“Er.” Lavender scratched her fingers through sleep-mussed curls. “I—I s’pose so? Will you be back before it’s time to go down into Hogsmeade, d’you think?”

“I—er—I honestly don’t know.” At Lavender’s dubious look, Hermione said a little desperately, “Crookshanks has been a bit—well, I think he’s jealous that I’ve got a new boyfriend, and Tom and I—we were hoping to have a little bit of time to ourselves this morning—”

“Oh!” The last fog of sleep faded from Lavender’s eyes all in a rush. “Isn’t it a bit early in the morning for that sort of—but, well—” Lavender giggled so shrilly that Crookshanks grumbled and sank deeper into Hermione’s arms. “—well, I don’t suppose I can blame you, with a boyfriend as handsome as that—” Lavender muffled her giggles in her blanket, then, composing herself, gave a little nod. “Well, all right. I suppose I can mind Crookshanks for you.”

Lavender thought that Hermione wanted to go and snog Riddle in an empty classroom.

This was just too much.

Heroically, Hermione plastered on a smile and passed a loudly protesting Crookshanks over to Lavender, who had the audacity to wink at Hermione on her way out.

Unbelievable, thought Hermione.

Riddle had not moved from his spot, and Hermione’s heart sank a little. Though she knew better,
she’d been hoping that he’d grow tired of waiting for her and wander off whilst she was busy wrangling a sitter for Crookshanks.

“Lavender’s agreed to watch Crookshanks for me,” Hermione said to Riddle, “but I don’t want to leave him with her all day, so this had better not take long.”

“And they say romance is dead,” said the Fat Lady. Hermione threw her a look that might very well get her locked out of Gryffindor Tower later that evening before marching off down the corridor.

She hadn’t truly believed she’d be able to outpace Riddle, but she was still disappointed when he caught up with her in a matter of seconds. The smell drifting off the bundle he carried would’ve made Hermione’s stomach grumble under normal circumstances, but she found that prolonged stress tended to suppress her appetite, and she only eyed the wrapped stack of toast with clinical disinterest before facing front again.

“We’re going this way,” said Riddle, and headed towards the staircase that would take them to the sixth floor.

Taking the steps two at a time with a graceful ease that Hermione could never hope to mimic, he went on, “I suppose that vapid little idiot Brown thinks we’ve gone to snog in an empty classroom?”

It was so close to Hermione’s interpretation of Lavender’s version of events that it gave her pause, but it was the unfiltered venom in Riddle’s voice, and not the words themselves, that compelled her to come to a halt on the deserted landing between the sixth and fifth floors.

Riddle looked over his shoulder at her, full lips pulled tight. “What is it now?” he all but snapped.

“Lavender’s a pureblood,” said Hermione, a little stupidly. Of course, so were the Weasleys, and Riddle hadn’t hesitated to insult them. But she’d think that Slytherin’s heir, of all people, would be the most convinced of pureblood superiority—but then, the Weasleys and even the Browns were what purebloods like Malfoy called blood traitors, so perhaps Riddle felt the same.

“And what about it?” said Riddle, bored, before facing front and heading down the next set of stairs.

After a moment’s hesitation, Hermione scrambled ungracefully to keep up.

Now that she thought about it, she decided that the consensus that Riddle must be a half blood couldn’t’ve been true; surely Slytherin’s monster would obey nothing and no one less than a pureblood. As for Riddle’s Muggle surname—well, Harry’s family was pureblood on his father’s side, and their last name sounded perfectly unmagical as well. Yes. Riddle was almost certainly a pureblood, or at least had so little in the way of Muggle ancestry as to be irrelevant.

Riddle at last stopped in front of an empty fifth floor classroom, and, hands clenched at her sides, Hermione stepped inside after him. He set the bundle and the goblet down on a nearby desk, and then waved a lazy hand at the door, which swung promptly shut, lock latching audibly into place.

Riddle followed Hermione’s gaze. “I could teach you, if you’d like. Wandless magic, that is.”

Hermione choked down her instinct to say yes, hunger for knowledge burning in her gut the way hunger for food hadn’t since Thursday evening. She didn’t want to learn anything from him.

“No, thank you,” she said, and stayed put right where she was. If he wanted something from her, he’d have to get it like pulling teeth.

Riddle kicked a chair back from the desk with a clatter that made Hermione want to flinch—but she
wouldn’t, she wouldn’t, she would not give him the satisfaction—and draped himself across it. Even in his plain, modern clothes, the way he sat made him look like a Renaissance painting, all soft beauty and easy grace.

Hermione wanted to bloody his nose.

Riddle propped his left ankle on his right knee and indicated the goblet and the bundled toast. “Eat,” he said, as though commanding an obedient dog to its dinner.

She really wanted to bloody his nose.

“I’m not hungry,” she said, and did not move from her stiff stance by the door.

Riddle’s sigh seemed to suggest that he thought himself the most reasonable person on the planet, and Hermione incorrigibly difficult for refusing to indulge his inexplicable whims.

Good. She’d promised to keep her mouth shut about Riddle’s true nature, and that she’d continue to pretend to be deeply infatuated with him. She hadn’t promised that she wouldn’t be difficult about it.

“Are you on a hunger strike, then?” Riddle wanted to know. “If so, you won’t be hurting anyone but yourself. You’ll gain nothing from refusing to eat, Hermione.”

He was right, which only made Hermione that much more determined to refuse to eat the food he’d brought her out of sheer spite.

Riddle tapped out a rhythm against his ankle. “This will be much easier for you if you do it on a full stomach, I can promise you that.”

She didn’t like the sound of that, but then, that was par for course with Riddle. “What are you talking about?”

Riddle’s mouth curled, satisfied, and Hermione immediately hated herself for taking the bait.

“Your defensive magic,” he said. “It needs work.”

Hermione’s mouth soured. “My defensive magic is more than satisfactory. Ask any of my professors!”

“‘More than satisfactory’ just won’t do, I’m afraid.” He had the air of a Muggle doctor giving a terminal diagnosis, and it set Hermione’s teeth on edge. “At any rate, I don’t think any of your professors will have taught you this.”

Despite herself, Hermione was curious. “Taught me what?”

Riddle smiled and gestured to the chair opposite his. Knowing that he’d physically move her himself if it came to that, Hermione went, but she dragged her feet.

After she’d plopped herself gracelessly into the chair, Riddle leaned forward with an intent look and said, “You’re familiar, I should think, with the art of Legilimency? In theory, at least?”

“Of course,” she said immediately, driven by the same feeling that compelled her to answer questions posed by her professors before any of her classmates could have a go at it. “Legilimency is the magical art of navigating and interpreting a person’s thoughts and memories, and it’s often incorrectly likened to mindreading. A witch or wizard practiced in the art of Occlumency may block a Legilimens from entering their mind. Mastering either is terribly difficult, of course, and few are on
record as having managed it.”

Riddle’s answering smile was not kind. “Ten points to Gryffindor,” he said, mocking. Hermione’s legs twitched with the urge to kick him in the shins.

Ignoring both Riddle’s mockery and her own compulsion to do violence, Hermione said, “Why are you asking me this, anyway? Legilimency is a restricted practice. It’s not taught at Hogwarts.”

“It’s not in Professor Lupin’s curriculum, no,” Riddle agreed. “Regardless, I’m going to teach it to you, although I’ll want to start you out with Occlumency. There’s no use in learning to enter another’s mind if you can’t defend your own first.”

Hermione opened her mouth. Shut it with a click of teeth.

He couldn’t possibly mean—

Anyone could teach another person about Legilimency and Occlumency in theory, just as anyone, like Hermione had, could open a book on the twin practices and read about how they were done, but you couldn’t actually learn either one unless you had someone who already knew how to do it to teach you, or were so deeply talented that you could teach yourself. Hermione might have been talented enough to do it without an instructor, but she’d always thought the practice distasteful, and had thought Legilmens rare enough that she would have little use for learning to defend her mind from those who would pry into it.

Apparently, she’d been wrong to neglect it.

Hermione clutched the edges of her seat, fighting not to spring out of it and get as far away from Riddle as was humanly possible. Her palms had come up in a nervous sweat. Her heart was beating like a wild thing in her throat.

“You’re a Legilmens,” she said, and Riddle did not confirm it, but neither did he deny it.

She’d thought—she’d thought—

Was this why he was always looking so intently into her eyes? Legilimency worked best with eye contact, did it not? She’d always—she’d thought he’d only been trying to unnerve her all those times he’d stared her full in the face, but had he been—all this time, had he—

“You’ve been reading me,” she accused, too caught up in her own pervading horror to correct her language. Legilimency, mindreading, what did the semantics matter when she’d been so thoroughly violated? “All this time, you’ve been reading me.”

“Not often,” said Riddle, as if that made a difference. “I rarely invade a person’s mind entirely, you understand. I usually rely on—a shallow form of Legilimency, you might call it.” His smile was slow and unnerving. “For example, I can always tell when people are lying. Useful talent, that.”

What was it he’d said to her? That he’d know what she intended to do before she could do it? Was this what he’d meant?

“If that’s the case,” said Hermione, pulling the words from the depths of her throat, “then why would you teach me to defend myself against you?”

“Oh, that.” Riddle leaned back in his seat, wiggling his fingers dismissively. “Even after years of practice, I doubt you’ll ever be able to keep me out of your mind entirely. I don’t doubt you’ll be good, Hermione, but I’ll always be better.”
Go to hell, Hermione thought, then became instantly paranoid. Had he caught that thought? He’d said he was very good, and she didn’t doubt that. How many of her thoughts were her entirely own?

“But I’m not the only Legilmens in the world,” Riddle went on, “even if I’m one of the best. If you’re to know me intimately, Hermione, then I can’t have just anyone strolling through your brain and plucking my secrets out of your grey matter.”

Know him intimately. The way he’d said it made her want to shudder, and she didn’t care if he saw that thought, not at all. Let him know he disgusted her; it was no secret.

Clinging to that disgust, she said, “No. I don’t want to learn. Not from you. I won’t do it.”

There was no point in it, she knew. He’d have what he wanted, and it was unwise of her to pass up a new defensive skill, one that might protect her thoughts from his invasive magic no matter what he said to the contrary.

But she didn’t want to do it. She didn’t want anything from him.

At her rejection, Hermione thought she saw a burst of temper rising in Riddle’s eyes, and braced herself accordingly for the fallout, but he only leaned forwards again and touched his fingertips to her knee. She twitched, glad that she’d at least worn jeans instead of a skirt. Skin-on-skin contact was the last thing she wanted to share with Tom Riddle.

“Hermione,” he said with a terrible gentleness. “I’m going to teach you to defend your mind whether you consent to the lessons or not. But it will be easier on us both if you cooperate, and if you undertake your lessons on a full stomach.”

Hermione stared at him for a beat too long before remembering that eye contact was ill advised. She looked away, towards the opposite window. The day was overcast, clouds fat with rain or even an early snow. An uncanny reflection of her mood, that.

Riddle sat back, taking his hand with him, and Hermione relaxed, if only a little.

“Right,” he said abruptly. “What use is the stick without the carrot? If you cooperate with me, Hermione, I’ll consider answering any question you ask for the duration of our lesson. I might even answer honestly. How’s that?”

Hermione glanced at him sidelong, avoiding eye contact in favor of fixing her gaze on the straight line of his nose. Another bargain, was it?

Hermione felt a sudden strange kinship with the doomed heroines of old, gory fairy tales, bargaining for their lives with wits or magic or trickery. The miller’s daughter and her straw spun into gold, Scheherazade and her thousand and one stories, the runaway princess and her donkey hide. Those girls had all lived, in the end, though they’d suffered horribly along the way, and the wicked queens and mad kings were usually punished in their turn.

Hermione was not so optimistic as to believe that things would turn out as well for her.

“All right,” she said. There it was again. All right. It was terribly lacking; it wasn’t nearly grand enough to suit what Riddle was doing to her, what she was doing to herself, selling her soul to him in pieces in exchange for her life and the lives of those she cared for. “But I want you to answer one of those questions right now before we begin. Call it a gesture of good faith.”

With a look on his face evocative of the one Crookshanks always wore after he’d caught and eaten an especially fat mouse, Riddle gestured for her to go on, magnanimous as a wicked king who knew
he could afford to be generous with the girl he’d locked in the tower.

Hermione’s fingers were curiously cold; she tucked them between her knees to warm them. She did not look up at Riddle when she asked, “Did Draco know what you meant to do to me, down in the Chamber? Did he know you were going to kill me? I asked you before, and you never answered.”

“I doubt Draco would care one way or the other if you were to turn up suddenly and tragically dead,” said Riddle, unhesitating. “He really doesn’t like you at all, Hermione, and that’s putting it kindly—but Draco’s not a killer, even by proxy. He hasn’t got it in him.”

Hermione stuck out her chin. “By ‘it,’ I don’t suppose you mean ‘clinical psychopathy,’ do you?”

Riddle was unmoved. “Don’t be cute; it doesn’t suit you.”

Hermione licked her lips. *Cute,* was it? “What about the mark on his arm, then? What purpose does it serve?”

Riddle waved an admonishing finger. “One question, I believe you said. I’ll answer another after the first round.”

*First round,* he said, implying that he planned on subjecting her to this several times over. She didn’t know why she was surprised.

Without warning, Riddle lifted his long, willowy hands and framed Hermione’s face with them, sliding his fingers up and into her hair, thumbs riding her cheekbones. If she wrenched herself out of his grip, would she get a broken neck for her troubles? Riddle’s hold was gentle, but it was also firm. Did she want to risk it?

She did not.

“I know it’s a lot to ask of you,” he said, breath warming Hermione’s slack mouth, “but you’ll want to empty your mind.”

That was the only warning he gave her.

He’d meant it, when he’d said that he’d only been using a shallow form of Legilimency on her up till now. She hadn’t felt anything all, those unaware times when he’d picked her thoughts out of her brain, but now—this was—

This was something else entirely.

It was like going to the cinema and watching a movie. A terribly disjointed, obscenely personal movie.

She was seventeen and she was going to die before she ever saw the other side of twenty. She was sixteen-almost-seventeen and the summer humidity was teasing her bushy hair into even wilder curls as she turned down Knockturn Alley with her friends and against her better judgment. She was fourteen, and she was turning up her nose at all the girls in her year who were so *terribly* infatuated with *perfect* Tom Riddle. How was it that he could be brilliant and studious because he was also handsome and quiet and charming rather than plain and loud and obnoxious? No one ever called *Tom Riddle* a swot. *Tom Riddle* had probably never cried alone in a bathroom.

Hermione felt amusement not her own tease across the furrows of her mind, and she struggled to pull away from it, but the claws sunk into her brain held fast.
“Do better,” she heard in Riddle’s voice that was not a voice.

She was ten and she thought she was Matilda, with how she could mend torn pages without glue and move things without touching them. She was different; she was special. What did it matter that the other children teased her for her hair and her teeth and her loud, grating voice? Not only was she more brilliant than them, she was better than them, intrinsically. But it wasn’t a nice thought to have, and her parents wouldn’t want her to have it, so she kept it to herself.

She felt something else on the wake of that memory, something that didn’t come from herself, like the amusement had, but she couldn’t identify what it was; it was there and gone too quickly.

He was paging faster through her thoughts and memories and impressions now, flicking through them like the pages of a book he was in too much of a hurry to read properly.


Hermione didn’t fight it. She was drowning in her own mind, and she couldn’t remember how to fight it. To fight him.

She didn’t have to. As soon as it had begun, it was over. Hermione was slumped in her chair, and the only thing stopping her from sliding onto the floor in a heap seemed to be Riddle’s hands, which had moved from her face to clamp down on her arms.

Her muscles seized, then liquified. Her ears were full of ringing church bells.

Riddle peered into her eyes. “Enough for now, I think.”

Hermione wanted to smack him, but didn’t, at present, have the muscle control for it. She settled for glaring at him with all the force of her dislike written clear across her face, no Legilimency needed.

“How can you sit up on your own?” he asked her, and after a pause to consider it, she gave a jerky nod. Even if she hadn’t been able to sit on her own, she’d have said yes anyway, if only to get him to stop touching her.

Riddle let go of her and passed her the bundle of toast and the goblet, and it only took Hermione two tries to get a good grip on either. The pumpkin juice was still cool, though it should’ve been room temperature, probably because the goblet had been enchanted to keep it that way. She nibbled on the toast between sips, the hunger she’d been suppressing coming tentatively back.

Having one’s mind invaded was hungry work, as it turned out.

Riddle watched her as she ate, and she forced herself to finish one slice of toast before putting the goblet and bundle aside and saying, “The mark on Draco’s arm. What is it?”

Riddle crossed his arms and tap-tap-tapped his finger against his bicep. “A prototype,” he said shortly.

Hermione licked stray crumbs off her bottom lip. “A prototype for what?”

“You don’t need to know.”
Hermione was going to protest, but, well—he’d said he would answer her questions honestly, not that he’d answer all of them. Damn technicalities.

“All right,” she said, deciding it was best to move on, “then—”

“Yes, before that,” said Riddle, cutting her off, “I’ve a question for you. I saw your memories. I felt what you felt when the other children teased you and called you an obnoxious swot.” He tilted his head, bird curious. “Why don’t you pretend?”

Hermione frowned. “You’ll have to be more specific than that.”

“Why don’t you pretend as I do and convince them that you’re something you’re not? Something they’ll like and accept? Wouldn’t that be easier?” God help her, he sounded genuinely confused.

Hermione wasn’t confused. She knew exactly how she’d respond the minute he asked the question. “Because,” she said, “I’d rather be disliked than pretend to be something I’m not. There’s no point in being liked if it’s not for who you truly are.”

Riddle stared at her. When he continued to stare and failed to say anything in response, Hermione said, a little desperately, “Why did you want to join S.P.E.W. so badly? Something tells me you don’t care one way or the other for elfish welfare.”

Riddle finally blinked, thank Merlin. “I needed to get closer to you, to find out what you’d guessed about me. But you refused to humor me, so you left me with no choice but to feign romantic interest in you.”

Right. That.

“About that,” said Hermione. “Have you any particular reason for carrying on with that farce, aside from, what, ‘keeping an eye on me’?” Riddle snorted when she framed her words in air quotes. “And don’t tell me it’s because you like me; you and I both know that’s not true.”

Riddle studied her from beneath his lacy eyelashes. Was he reading her again?

“Do you really want to know?” he asked at length.

Hermione sat up straighter, bristling. “Of course I want to know; if I didn’t, I wouldn’t have asked.”

But Riddle did not open his mouth to reply, and Hermione was about to press him again when she heard a faint scratching coming from outside the door.

Riddle’s head came up, and he eyed the door as though he wanted to blast it off its hinges and into whoever dared to interrupt them. Hermione stood hastily and moved forwards on wobbling legs, unlocking the door manually rather than with magic.

There was no one in the corridor, and Hermione frowned, looking down the length of it. Had Peeves —?

There was a sharp, plaintive meow, and Hermione looked down into Crookshanks’s warm yellow eyes.

“Clever Crooks,” she said, too relieved to feel vexed, and crouched to scratch him between his ears. “Did you find me?”

“When?”

“Hermione!”
“Sorry,” said Lavender between little huffs. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to—we were sitting together in the common room, and he seemed content enough, but then someone came in through the portrait hole, and he’d taken off before I could catch him—”

“That’s all right,” said Hermione, meaning it. “We were just about—” She didn’t want to say finished, because that was too laden with innuendo for her to contemplate. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Are you all right? Do you want to, er, sit down for a minute and catch your breath?”

“Is everything all right out here?”

Hermione stood in such a hurry that she became dizzy with it, or perhaps that was only an aftereffect of having her mind so thoroughly rifled through. She sidled out into the corridor, trying not to trip over Crookshanks as she went, so she could watch both Lavender and Riddle at once.

Lavender stood up straight as well, cheeks flushing pink. “Hello, Tom! Sorry, I didn’t mean to, er, interrupt—” She choked on a giggle, and because she was watching for it, Hermione saw a muscle in Riddle’s finely cut jaw twinge. “I’ll just, er, leave the two of you alone—c’mon, Crookshanks—”

“No,” said Hermione, with too much feeling, if the look Lavender gave her was anything to go by. “I mean, er, I was just about to head back to Gryffindor Tower—sorry, Tom, but I’ve got studying to do, you know how it is—”

“No,” said Riddle without missing a beat. “I wouldn’t want you to risk your good marks on my account. If you need any help, though, you should come down and meet me in the library. I’d be happy to give your work a lookover.”

Lavender was having paroxysms, and Hermione couldn’t help but worry after her health. “Oh, that’s so sweet! Isn’t that sweet?” Hermione couldn’t be sure if the question was addressed to her, Riddle, Crookshanks, or if it was rhetorical, so she ignored it.

Riddle ignored it as well, not that Lavender seemed to mind, preoccupied as she was with her ecstatic fit.

“Hermione,” he said, taking her hand. “You’ll meet me for lunch if nothing else, won’t you? And if you’ve got the time, you really ought to drop by the Dueling Club. I know you’re already terribly accomplished as it is, but it never hurts to practice defensive magic, now, does it?”

Hermione’s fingers twitched in Riddle’s grip. She wondered how many more times he’d have delved into her mind that day if Lavender and Crookshanks hadn’t come when they had.

“Of course,” she said. “I’ll see you later, Tom.”

Riddle smiled and let go of her hand, stepping deeper into the empty classroom’s doorway, and Hermione—

Hermione was possibly suffering from temporary insanity on account of having her mind so recently scrambled, but all she could think was that she was tired, so tired, of Riddle winning against her in every tiny little thing, of always allowing him to have the last word, of dancing on his marionette strings, and she—

She stepped determinedly forward into Riddle’s personal space, rose up on the very tips of her toes
to put them on eye level, and pressed a quick, dry kiss to his lips.

It was hardly anything at all, and not what anyone would call intimate, but when Hermione withdrew from it, her cheeks were flushed, and she was shaking. Not from excitement, though, or infatuation. Merlin, no.

She was flushed and shaking because she couldn’t quite believe what the hell she’d just done.

Riddle’s eyes were wide as tea saucers, and his mouth was slack. Hermione’s terror was briefly overcome by elation, and she looked him in the eyes as she thought, quite clearly, So, there.

Lavender had gone stock still and utterly silent. Taking advantage of her shock—of Riddle’s shock—while it lasted, Hermione hooked her arm through Lavender’s and pulled her down the corridor.

“Come on, Lav,” she said, glancing down to ascertain that Crookshanks was trotting along in their wake. “Parvati’ll be missing us by now, won’t she?”

Lavender said nothing. She was staring straight ahead, lips slightly parted, a fresh blush climbing her cheeks.

Hermione wasn’t Lot’s wife, and she refused to look over her shoulder at what she’d left behind, but she could feel Riddle’s eyes on her back. Even after she’d turned the corner and moved beyond his line of sight, she swore she felt them still, digging holes in the nape of her neck.

Chapter End Notes

So. That happened.

On the subject of poor impulse control, I have remade my tumblr, even though I continue to hate tumblr. Hmu @ talloohlips and scream at me about Tomione. Or just scream at me in general, that's fine.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Hi! I'm not feeling well, so I spent my morning editing this. Also, I switched my pseud around so my main pseud matches my tumblr, where you can come talk to me or ask me to write something for you. Here's to consistency, or whatever.

I'd like to warn you that there's a brief mention of non-con in this chapter--nothing explicit, and nothing happens, because I promised you guys that there wouldn't be non-con in this fic, but I just want you to be careful! Be safe, babies.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

3 November 1996

Deep within the library’s labyrinthine stacks, Hermione hooked a corner at a brisk pace only to come to an abrupt halt. Some fifteen feet away, at the dead end of a cramped aisle formed by two looming bookcases, stood Draco Malfoy.

Hermione had been making an effort to move about quietly, lest she call down Madam Pince’s wrath, which possibly explained why Malfoy had yet to notice her. At any rate, he seemed to be quite captivated by the book through which he was currently, furiously paging, so that could have had something to do with his inattention as well.

More importantly than all of that, though, was that he was, by all appearances, entirely alone.

And fixed squarely between Hermione and the dead end, no less.

Trapped, one might venture to say, if one were feeling particularly opportunistic.

Hermione’s fingers squeezed slowly into fists.

She was striding determinedly forward before her brain could quite catch up with her legs and feet, and even when it had, she could not bring herself to stop. In point of fact, she would not stop, because, apparent lack of murderous intent aside, Malfoy had still deliberately and maliciously baited Tom Riddle’s trap, and Hermione did not care if Malfoy had been bullied into it, if he’d been afraid of what Riddle would do to him otherwise. All she could think of was fourth year, of the way Malfoy had looked at the threatening graffiti on the corridor wall before turning to Hermione to say, sneeringly, “You’ll be next, Mudbloods.”

Malfoy finally tore his eyes away from his book when Hermione was within arm’s reach of him. Pale eyes bulging in his paler face, he stumbled back a step, the book slipping from his slackened fingers to land with a dull thud by his feet.

“Granger, what the fu——”

Thinking distantly that Madam Pince would be furious, Hermione neatly sidestepped the abused book and continued relentlessly forward until Malfoy had no choice but to backpedal and bump into...
the unforgiving wall. It must have smarted, too, because he let loose with a flurry of swear words that would doubtlessly have given his snobbish mother a fit of the vapors, or whatever it was that you called it when posh people had their sensibilities offended.

Hermione stopped, feet planted a shoulder width apart. She slipped her satchel’s strap off her shoulder and set it down with more care than Malfoy had afforded his library book.

“Granger,” Malfoy said again, not so loudly as to risk attracting Madam Pince’s attention. “What in Merlin’s fucking name d’you think you’re doing?”

“Riddle said you knew what he had planned for me.” Hermione spoke as plainly as if she was reporting the news printed in the morning edition of the paper. “But he’s an incorrigible liar, isn’t he? So, you tell me: is it true, what he said?”

But Malfoy’s face had cycled through an alarming number of contortions as soon as she’d got the first sentence out, and Hermione knew. There was no denying it.

Just this once, Riddle had told her the plain truth.

The seconds dragged on painfully, and Malfoy remained stubbornly silent, eyes fixed on some point over Hermione’s shoulder. Still, she pressed, “Well? Are you or aren’t you going to deny it?”

At last, Malfoy met her gaze, if only briefly. Dredging up a ghost of his usual sneer, he said, “What does it matter, then? Even if I were to deny it, you wouldn’t believe me, would you? You’ve got it fixed in your bushy head that I’m the antagonist to your tragic fucking hero, don’t you, Granger? Honestly, why even bother?”

Hermione clenched her fists tighter still. She wanted, badly, to pull her wand on him and watch him squirm, but—

“That’s a laugh,” she said, funneling her wrath into her words and her voice in a bid to redirect it away from the impulse to do physical violence. “You’ve only ever given me reason to think the worst of you. It shouldn’t be surprising, really, that you’d allow Riddle to bully you into becoming an accessory to murder, but I’d hoped that you’d have had some standards, at least, that you’d draw the line somewhere—”

And just like that, Malfoy seized the baited hook firmly between his teeth. “Is that what he told you? Well, then, did he tell you what he’d do to me if I didn’t go along with his scheme, in all its gory detail? Merlin, Granger, do you honestly think you’re the only person he’d kill as soon as look at?”

“So, what?” she challenged. “You’re telling me that you honestly didn’t think he’d kill me? What did you expect him to do with me, then? Invite me to tea with his pet monster? Honestly, Malfoy, how thick can you be?”

“I didn’t,” Malfoy burst out, but cut himself off before he could finish his own sentence. Looking deeply uncomfortable, and not meeting Hermione’s eyes, he shuffled to one side as though he meant to sidle around her and escape down the aisle.

Stubbornly, Hermione shifted to mirror him, cutting off his escape before he could see it through. As she’d noted earlier, it was quite a narrow aisle.

“Didn’t what?” she pressed, trying to catch his eyes as they darted about, never quite landing on her face. “Didn’t think it was anything more than a mostly harmless prank? You know what Riddle is, Draco. I’m certain you do. You had to’ve at least considered, if only briefly, that he might kill me. Before you’d buried yourself neck deep in denial, at least.”
Malfuy, it seemed, had come to the end of his scarce supply of patience; drawing himself up, he pushed off the wall and loomed until, for all that she had cornered him, Hermione felt quite trapped.

“And so what if he had?” Malfoy asked in a vicious undertone, the depths of his dislike for her warping his thin, pointed face into an ugly mask. “Yeah, I’ll admit, starting off my day with a rousing premeditated murder doesn’t excite me the way it does Tom, but d’you honestly think I’d’ve been sad if anything had happened to you? Did you think I’d cry because there was one less filthy little Mudblood in the world—?”

Whether he’d meant to say even more awful things after that, or if he only meant to have the last word and then flounce off, Hermione never found out. She never found out, because Malfoy’s teeth were clicking shut around his tongue, hard enough to draw blood, and he was reeling backwards into the wall, and there was a hot red smear marking his cheekbone—

Hermione’s palm was tingling. She rotated her wrist and stared at her hand rather dubiously. Why was it—?

Oh.

She’d slapped him.

Huh.

Malfoy was clutching at his reddened cheek, and his teeth were clenched against what might’ve been pained tears. Hermione felt no pleasure in seeing him like this. She didn’t feel much of anything at all, really.

Curious. Perhaps she’d finally reached her limit.

“How are you mental?” Malfoy hissed through his teeth, which were flecked with red. He really had bitten down on his tongue, then. “You crazy fucking bint—”

“What’s all this, then?”

Hermione started at the semi-familiar voice, and angled her body so she could get a good look at the newcomer whilst still keeping an eye on Malfoy (call her crazy, but she didn’t feel especially comfortable putting her back to him at the moment).

Correction: newcomers. At the mouth of the aisle stood two Slytherins with whom she was passingly familiar. Zabini, handsome face set in a bored look, and…Dolohov, was it?

Neither of them seemed particularly concerned for their Housemate’s wellbeing, not even Zabini, who was something like a friend to Malfoy, or so Hermione had assumed. Dolohov had been the one to ask what was going on, but he didn’t seem inclined to follow through on his line of inquiry, sparing Malfoy only a brief glance before nodding curtly at Hermione.

At a loss, Hermione nodded back.

“’Lo, Granger,” said Dolohov. His tone was a little sullen, but polite enough.

Now, that: that was something Hermione would never get used to, this strange new civility with which the Slytherins—the Slytherins apart from Malfoy, anyway—had been treating her, all thanks to Riddle, no doubt. Even Pansy had stopped saying cruel things to her, although she still pulled an awful face whenever their eyes met, as though it physically pained her not to say something scathing about the way Hermione’s hair looked that day.
“…Hello,” said Hermione after too long a pause, if the look Zabini was giving her was any indication. “I’m sorry, Dolohov, but was there something you and Zabini wanted?”

“S’not what we want,” said Dolohov. “S’what Tom wants. He asked us to come and fetch you. Said you’d probably be in the library at this hour, and to start here.”

“We weren’t expecting to find you with Draco, though,” said Zabini, with a suggestive lilt to his voice that Hermione liked not at all.

Before she could demand to know what he’d meant to imply with a tone like that, though, Dolohov said, “Tom’s waiting for you in an empty classroom on the fifth floor. He said you’d know which one.”

And now Zabini had the nerve to smirk outright at her. Hermione’s hand was still smarting from the strike she’d dealt to Malfoy’s face, and something about the feeling kept her temper in check. Perhaps she was afraid of what she’d do if she allowed anyone to provoke it further.

“Yes,” said Hermione, painfully crisp. “All right. Thanks for passing along the message, then.”

She bent to fetch her schoolbag, but before she could straighten up fully and sling the strap over her shoulder, Malfoy said, “Yes, go on and get out, you crazy little Mud—”

He was cut off by Zabini of all people, who stuffed his hands deep in his pockets and said, laconic, “I wouldn’t if I were you, Draco. Not if you like your head firmly attached to your neck.”

Zabini didn’t have to say who would be tearing Malfoy’s head off—that much was quite clear—but it wasn’t the who Hermione was left wondering after so much as the why. What did the Heir of Slytherin care if pureblooded snots like Draco Malfoy went about calling Hermione a Mudblood?

Perhaps Zabini wasn’t in the know like Malfoy was. Perhaps he thought Riddle’s attraction to Hermione was genuine, and that she was some sort of exception. Maybe Riddle had told him and the other Slytherins that Hermione was different, that she wasn’t like those other Mudbloods.

What a revolting notion.

Hermione compressed her lips and said through gritted teeth, “Excuse me.” But as the aisle was so narrow, she couldn’t stop her foot from nudging the book Malfoy had dropped as she went. She had half a notion to pick it up and return it to its place on the shelf—it wasn’t right to leave books laying about on the floor, and Pince would absolutely have a fit if she saw it—but then Hermione saw the book’s title.

She paused, momentarily, before forcing herself to continue forward, thoughts of retrieving and replacing the book draining from her head as she was left with something new to consider.

Dolohov and Zabini pressed themselves up against a bookcase to make room for Hermione to leave, but she hadn’t quite cleared the mouth of the aisle when Malfoy called after her, “You’ll regret what you did.”

Hermione’s footsteps didn’t even hitch. “You sound like a cartoon villain, did you know? All you’re missing is a mustache to twirl.”

Taking a measure of satisfaction in knowing that neither Malfoy nor the others would understand just what on earth she’d been talking about, Hermione continued on. She didn’t particularly want to go to Riddle, but she’d almost prefer his company over Malfoy’s at present. Moreover, if she didn’t go to Riddle, he’d come to her, and she doubted he’d make the retrieval pleasant for her.
She didn’t want to think of that, though, so she thought of something else. She thought of the book in which Malfoy had been so deeply absorbed.

Hermione recognized it well, because she’d already read it from cover to cover, herself.

Malfoy had been reading *Indelible Ink*.

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She was in her third year at Hogwarts, and to say that she was at the end of her tether was to be guilty of vast understatement. She was going to fail. She was going to fail, and all of it—her hours of studying, her bloated class schedule, that dratted Time Turner—all of it would be for nothing, because she just wasn’t good enough, wasn’t clever enough, was going to prove prejudiced snots like Draco Malfoy right when they said that Muggle-borns simply didn’t belong at Hogwarts, and everything, all of it, took the form of Professor McGonagall as she brandished failing marks at her in livid red ink—

Hermione burst out of the dark and onto Hogwarts’s sun-washed lawn, screaming. Professor Lupin was rushing forward, pallid face stark with concern, but Hermione kept running, running away from this memory, chased by something worse than a boggart, worse than her pathological fear of failure—

Everything faded all at once, the bright afternoon sun dimming into grey panels of light filtering in through the vaulted windows lining the fifth-floor corridor, and it was by this surly light that Hermione looked Tom Riddle in his wine-dark eyes and stood on her toes to kiss him.

It had been nothing more than a graze of lips at the time, but in her memory, everything went slow like treacle, so that she noticed that Riddle’s lips were cushion soft but also rather chapped and dry, that his breath was crisp from the spearmint toothpaste he’d used to brush his teeth that morning—he hadn’t had breakfast, then, if his mouth was still this cool and clean—and that he’d taken a sharp intake of breath when Hermione had pressed her mouth to his, as though, in all his machinations, he’d never accounted for this—

No. No no no. She was not going to relive this, not with an audience, not with the real Riddle peering over her shoulder and assessing her motivations and thoughts and feelings and the flush climbing her throat—

She stumbled out of the dark corridor and into the library’s darker stacks. She was walking briskly away from an awful, spoilt boy before he could say anything nastier than he already had, but her foot clipped something hard and square, and she glanced down automatically, and there, there was a title with which she was terribly familiar, and why was Malfoy reading that—

“Interesting.”

The grip on her mind relaxed, and, feeling as if she was coming up for air after a deep dive beneath the ocean’s surface, Hermione was released from a prison made of her own memories with an overloud gasp.

*God.*

“*Three times,*” she panted, nailing Riddle with a glare that would have flayed a lesser boy alive. “In one morning. Without a break.”
The hands cupping her face gave a squeeze. “A Dark wizard intent on picking your brain for information isn’t going to allow you to take breaks, Hermione.”

Hermione decided not to point out that a Dark wizard was already picking her brain: she thought it too obvious.

But then the set of Riddle’s mouth softened, and he stroked her cheekbones with his thumbs just as he had yesterday morning. That she found the touch more soothing than unnerving attested to the strength of her headache.

Brains, she thought firmly. Scrambled.

Riddle sighed. “But I suppose you’re right.” He pushed his hands up along the sides of her face and into her hair, and was that—was he petting her? “We won’t make any progress if I push you too hard, too soon. We’ll have a break, then. You should try eating something. At least have a sip of pumpkin juice.”

Hermione twitched her shoulders and ducked lower in her seat, and Riddle stopped stroking his fingers through her hair and pulled slowly out of her personal space—but even after he’d stopped touching her, her scalp still tingled.

Strange.

“You’ll have seen it, then,” she said, broaching one perilous topic in favor of firmly ignoring another. “The book Malfoy was reading.”

“Hmmm. Yes.” Riddle laced his fingers together and propped his linked hands on his knee, a curious smile playing at his mouth. “Seems to be quite popular, doesn’t it, that book? It certainly gets around.”

Hermione gripped her goblet of pumpkin juice by the stem but did not drink from it. “You don’t suppose that Malfoy couldn’t be entirely content with the prototype you stuck on his arm, do you?” she asked maliciously.

“Possibly not,” Riddle allowed, taking a swig of pumpkin juice, himself—he’d brought two goblets today rather than one. “But I don’t especially care. He knew what he was getting into when he agreed to it; if he’s having second thoughts, it’s no skin off my nose.”

That’s what he said, but Hermione wondered if Malfoy would be punished later, in private, for possibly looking for ways to remove Riddle’s mark from his arm. She might have even felt sorry for him, if not for the way he’d spoken to her earlier.

Putting that aside, she finally took a mouthful of pumpkin juice, but she didn’t savor the taste of it as she usually did. Swallowing, she said, “Can it be removed? The mark you put on him?”

Resting the goblet on his thigh, Riddle actually seemed to be giving Hermione’s question some thought. At length, he said, “I can’t say for certain, as it’s the first of its kind, but—probably not.”

“Hmph,” Hermione mumbled, thinking of the lasers Muggle’s used to remove tattoos, of the long and painful processes that were oftentimes not entirely successful, because that’s just what you got when you decided to pay someone to punch ink through the subdermal layers of your skin. “Talk about buyer’s remorse.”

Riddle’s laugh was sharp and startled, as though he hadn’t expected what she’d said to amuse him so, and something about the quality of his laughter wasn’t quite as hair raising as usual, and
Hermione’s lips were twitching in response to Riddle’s mirth before she realized what was going on and forced her face into a frown.

What was wrong with her? They weren’t an actual couple. They weren’t even friends. They weren’t having a shared laugh at Malfoy’s expense, and Hermione wasn’t pleased to have teased a laugh from Riddle’s mouth.

…Possibly she was experiencing a form of Stockholm Syndrome.

God, what a week.

Riddle’s cold laughter finally died in his throat, but his smile lingered as he said, “Yes, well, talking of your memories, I wanted to ask—are you really that terrified of failure? That boggart of yours—”

Hermione sat up straighter. Had he really asked her that? Just what was he playing at?

“I’m a Muggle-born, Tom, or have you forgotten? I’ve a great deal more hinging on whether I can excel here at Hogwarts than purebloods like Draco Malfoy who were born into magical families. Blood discrimination is technically illegal, but that doesn’t stop prejudiced little blighters from feeling validated in their beliefs when a Muggle-born like me fails to live up to their impossible standards. I’ll never have a magical pedigree, but if I can get higher marks than every pureblood in this school, then that’s enough for me.”

Her voice had gradually risen as she’d talked, until it began to strain and crack so that she feared she’d start crying. But she wouldn’t. She’d already cried in front of Riddle once. She wouldn’t do it again.

Riddle, for his part, was staring at her unblinkingly, searchingly, and Hermione set aside her fear that she’d cry in front of him to snap, “Stop looking at me like that.”

Riddle’s lips twitches. “Why?”

“Because,” Hermione said, fiercely, “it makes me want to crawl out of my own skin when you do.”

Saying so was a mistake: Riddle looked intrigued by her words, and so Hermione rushed to say, “Anyway, can’t you relate? I mean, you’re not a Muggle-born, but in some ways, you might as well be one, mightn’t you?”

It was a gamble, and Hermione half expected Riddle to burst into an ugly temper for daring to compare him to a Muggle-born, so she couldn’t quite believe it when his jaw twinged only a little, and he said, in a perfectly measured voice, “You’re…not entirely wrong, I suppose. Like you, I had no idea about all this—” He twirled his hand to indicate the magical world in general. “—until McGonagall came to fetch me. Actually, I’d thought I was the only one.”

Hermione was curious despite herself. “The only one who could do magic?”

Riddle nodded.

“That…was terribly conceited of you,” Hermione said slowly, and when he once again failed to explode at her, she went on, “I…thought that I was special as well when I got old enough to notice what I could do, but I’d also hoped…well, I suppose I hoped that I wasn’t the only one. That I could share what I had with someone else who was special as well. I hoped…that we could be friends, this hypothetical person and I.”

She wasn’t opening up to him, exactly, as he’d already learned as much by digging through her
memories, but it still felt wrong to be sharing this with him voluntarily, so she quickly shut her mouth and returned to her pumpkin juice. She couldn’t tread too close to something uncomfortably like intimacy if her mouth was full.

“That,” said Riddle, “was terribly trite.” Hermione flushed hot in contrast to the cool pumpkin juice on her tongue. She badly wanted to hurl the contents of her goblet in his face, but it was her own fault, wasn’t it, for sharing something like that with someone like him.

She wouldn’t make the same mistake again. He could rip all her innermost thoughts and feelings from her brain, but she would not willingly share anything about herself with him ever again.

_Stockholm Syndrome_, she thought. _Got to be it._

“Yes, well,” she said, setting down her goblet with an overloud thunk. “We can’t all of us be unfeeling automatons, unfortunately.”

Riddle’s eyebrows went up. “Is that what you think of me? That I’m unfeeling?”

What a waste of her time, this was. “You’re the Legilimens. Why don’t you tell me what I think of you?”

Baiting him was a mistake. She knew it as soon as he set aside his own goblet and leaned forward in his seat, eyes intent and hungry on her face. She knew it, and yet she wasn’t entirely sorry for what she’d said.

“I think,” said Riddle, “that you’d do anything to try and throw me off, wouldn’t you? To get some sort of foothold? Why, you’ll even kiss someone you find deeply repulsive, if that’s what it takes.”

Hermione’s heart seized in her chest.

Riddle smiled to show teeth, and they weren’t perfectly straight after all, those teeth. The upper left cuspid was ever so slightly crooked, so that you wouldn’t notice unless you had occasion to look very, very closely.

That one small imperfection did nothing to detract from his overall looks, of course. And what a waste of looks those were.

“I can’t help but wonder,” said Riddle, so quietly that, even at this close distance, Hermione had to strain to hear him, “will you do it again? You’ve lost the element of surprise, of course, but that doesn’t really matter, does it, if your true intention is to _embarrass_ me in front of our respective social circles?”

Hermione shrank in her seat. He’d hit it right on the head, hadn’t he? Even now, Lavender was probably telling anyone who’d listen that Tom Riddle had been ever so _shy_ when his own girlfriend had kissed him on the lips, and wasn’t that _sweet_?

“All Hermione really heard were the words _Kiss me_, eyes unwillingly fixed on the shifting shape of his mouth as it pulled tight on the _K_ and pushed forward on the sibilant _S_. God, the top of her head was going to fly off. _She was going to have an aneurysm._

“What,” she said, hearing herself as though from a distance. “You’re talking like—_like you want_ me to kiss you again.” No. Couldn’t be.
But Riddle—

Did not deny it.

Aneurysm, thought Hermione, gripping the seat of her chair so hard her fingernails put scratches in the buffed wood.

Riddle finally—finally—sat back in his seat. He examined his nails. Picked something out from under his thumbnail.

“Call it...scientific curiosity.”

Oh, God, Hermione thought, chest tight and lungs short on breath. Oh. My. God—

A disbelieving laugh wrenched itself out of her throat. She covered her mouth in a rush, but it was too late: Riddle was glaring at her in such a way that put basilisks to shame, probably.

“And what,” he rapped out, “is so very amusing?”

“You’ve—” She couldn’t quite believe this, but at the same time, she could. “You’ve never been kissed before, have you?”

“Have you?” Riddle challenged, and Hermione lost a little steam. “And if you have, can you count the number of people you’ve kissed on more than one hand?”

Hermione shut her mouth. Grudgingly opened it to say, “I’m not kissing you again. Yesterday—I was angry, and I couldn’t think of any other way to get back at you. It was a mistake.”

Riddle assessed her with cool eyes. Hermione wondered, distantly, if he was using Legilimency on her. “Was it, then?”

“Yes, it was.” But then a thought—an awful, skin-crawling thought—crept to the surface of her mind. Tucking her hands against her thighs so Riddle hopefully wouldn’t notice the way they were shaking, Hermione said all in a rush, “I suppose you could make me, if you really wanted. After all, you’ve got leverage, and I haven’t.”

Riddle recoiled.

“I wouldn’t,” he started to say, then stopped. “No. I find...that sort of thing...distasteful.”

Relief threatened to melt her spine, but she said, disbelievingly, “What, so, murder’s all right, but you draw the line at forcing yourself on someone? Interesting standards you’ve got there, Riddle.”

“At least I have standards,” he snapped, and Hermione started as though struck. “You’re lucky, really, that you cast your lot in with me rather than someone who hadn’t any at all.”

Lucky. This boy, this clinical psychopath, had been seriously thinking of killing her, and now he wanted to kiss her because, what, scientific curiosity, and he said she was lucky?

“Funny,” said Hermione, ice crackling in her voice. “I don’t feel very lucky.” Pushing back her chair, she stood up and said, “I’ve had enough for today. I need some air.”

She wanted nothing more than to storm off in a huff, but she forced herself to wait. Riddle might hesitate to force himself on her, but she was quite certain that he wouldn’t balk at locking her in here with him out of spite.
Her forced patience paid off: visibly disgusted with her, Riddle waved a dismissive hand, and the magically locked door unlatched. Tamping down the urge to leave him with a rude gesture, Hermione gathered up her bag and went.

She’d said she needed some air, but the truth was that she doubted it would do her any good. Still, she set off for the entrance hall all the same, thinking that she might pay Hagrid a visit. He was still cross with her for dropping Care of Magical Creatures, so she thought she’d try and make it up to him by helping to groom the unicorn foals or something like that.

Today was clearer than yesterday had been, the sun distant and hard in the sky, and it was almost too chilly to be walking about outside without a cloak, but Hermione refused to return to the castle for anything short of an emergency. Worse came to worst, she could always conjure a bit of her bluebell fire for warmth.

Pausing for breath on the castle’s front steps, Hermione took in the sight of Hogwarts’s sprawling grounds. They were rather empty for a Sunday, the weather keeping all but the more adventurous students indoors, and it was still rather early. Deserted was good, though. Hermione didn’t know what she’d do if she ran into someone determined to engage her in conversation. Scream at them, possibly.

Shaking her head, Hermione clipped down the steps at a brisk pace—

Only to stumble and trip when something blunt and heavy collided with the back of her skull with a meaty thud.

Her vision went starburst bright, then black, and that was that.

That was all there was.

Chapter End Notes

You'll probably hate me for ending it here, but I'll make it up to you in Chapter 11. I think you'll like what's coming next. Probably.

Something else of note: in honor of breaking 100 kudos, and of posting ten chapters, I want to do something for you guys! As Nothing Like the Sun proper is sharply limited to Hermione's POV, I was wondering if there were any particular scenes you'd like to see remixed from Tom's perspective? If there are, please let me know which ones in the comments, and I'll consider posting companion pieces from Tom's POV.
Hi! If you like this fic even a little bit, please go and give some love to the beautiful graphic that eliamatrell made to go along with it! I'm in awe tbh.

Emetophobia warning for this chapter. There will be puke.

When Hermione was ten years old, she read a book she shouldn’t have.

The book was called The Bloody Chamber, and it was written by a woman named Angela Carter. It was as slim as a children’s book, no thicker than the width of an adult’s finger, and the cover art—a lurid sketch of a chimera-like thing that had the body of a naked woman from the neck down and a snarling maned lion for a head—was simply ghastly to look at. But Hermione had been told that she wasn’t allowed to read it, and so she had coveted it.

Her mother had bought it and read it and then consigned it to the topmost shelf of a bookcase that was nearly twice Hermione’s height, but Hermione hadn’t needed to build herself a ladder out of stacked furniture to get to it. She’d simply stood in front of the bookcase and thought very hard of what she wanted, and the book had fallen off the shelf and into her waiting hands as though pushed.

She’d read the whole thing, cover to cover, in one night, beneath her tented blankets and by the wavering light of a torch that was low on batteries. She’d kept an Oxford dictionary on hand so she could look up the words she didn’t understand, of which there had been several.

Nearly every story collected in The Bloody Chamber had unnerved her in some way—“The Tiger’s Bride” had at once saddened and disturbed her, and she found the “The Snow Child” to be totally repugnant—but it was the collection’s title story, with its mad Bluebeard of a husband and its confusing portrayal of adult desire, that left her with a curdled stomach and a week’s worth of nightmares.

The following morning, Hermione had pushed an armchair flush with the towering bookcase, climbed onto its seat, and shoved The Bloody Chamber back into the gap where she’d found it, swearing vehemently to herself that she’d never touch it again for as long as she lived.

But she hadn’t kept her promise: no, she came back to The Bloody Chamber when she was fourteen and old enough to read it by daylight with her mother’s blessing, thinking that it couldn’t’ve been as bad as she’d remembered it, that four years of additional mental and emotional maturity would render the stories within mundane and unable to touch her.

She’d been wrong.
Hermione wasn’t dead, but she rather wished she were.

The crawl back to consciousness had been slow and syrupy, coming in fits and starts as Hermione’s brain came online cell by cell and synapse by synapse. And now that she was awake—groggy and confused, but awake—she couldn’t say in all honesty that she wouldn’t’ve preferred unconsciousness, because if she’d still been unconscious, she wouldn’t’ve been able to feel her pounding headache.

Gingerly, she lifted her head off the swathe of earth on which it had been resting, and when she swallowed convulsively, she tasted blood. Blood. There was blood on her tongue, which meant that she’d bit through it when she’d been knocked out—how had she got knocked out? God, she couldn’t remember. She couldn’t remember.

Concussed, she thought, although the thought came slow and stupid. You’re concussed.

She’d never been concussed before, but she knew how it worked in theory. It wasn’t anything at all like how they portrayed it in movies and television dramas, but it could result in some memory loss, as well as difficulty forming new memories in the hours following the event. That was normal.

So, she had a mild traumatic brain injury. That was fine, because the key word here was mild, and concussions could only ever get better, not worse, and they rarely resulted in long-term damage unless one made a habit out of getting knocked hard about the head. Anyway, blunt force trauma to the head was presently the least of Hermione’s worries, as she’d become aware enough of her surroundings to recognize them for what they were, and she didn’t like what she saw.

She was lying on her stomach in the loose dirt of a tiny clearing, and this clearing was ringed on all sides by massive, gnarled trees whose drooping branches creaked in an unfelt wind.

Somehow, she’d wound up in the Forbidden Forest—deep within the forest, from the look of things. Hermione rarely swore to herself, let alone out loud, but if there was ever a time for profanity, it was now, so she whispered, with feeling, “Fuck.”

She had to get out of here. She had to get out of here yesterday.

Hermione passionately and violently did not want to move, but she had to, so she did. Spreading her fingers to more properly brace her hands against the dirt, she eased herself upright, shutting her eyes when the world seemed to spin on its axis. She became aware of a bubble of nausea in her stomach, which ballooned alarmingly as acid rose in her throat. She fought against it as if willpower alone could keep her tipping stomach in check: bad enough that she was stranded in the Forbidden Forest with a concussion to account for. She was not about to vomit down her front: not only would it be disgusting; the smell might attract the wrong sort of attention.

After what felt like ages, the spinning came to a gradual halt like a merry-go-round brought to a stop, and Hermione cautiously opened her eyes—for all the good it did her. She was deep enough within the forest that the canopy overhead had woven itself into an impenetrable net, and she couldn’t even say whether it was day or night, the shadows cast by the branches were so thick and absolute.

Bringing her legs slowly beneath her so that she was kneeling rather than lying prone, Hermione reminded herself that concussions didn’t compromise motor skills. Her body—her brain, rather—might have simply wanted to lie down and die, but it shouldn’t have any trouble carrying her out of
herself. All she had to do was get her bearings and start walking. First, though, she ought to fetch her wand from her pocket and tell it to point her north.

Did she still have her wand, or had the person who’d dumped her here taken it while she was out? Growing still more queasy by the minute, Hermione patted clumsily at her skirt’s pockets—and relaxed only fractionally when she felt the thin, telltale outline of her wand.

Thank Merlin for small miracles.

Clenching her jaw as though that could hold back her rising gorge, Hermione took a steadying breath and staggered to her feet. Her vision fuzzed over with blots of grey before clarifying again, and she almost fell to her knees.

You’re just dizzy, she told herself as she tugged her wand from her pocket. Your motor skills are fine. You’re fine.

She was decidedly not fine, but if she chanted the contrary to herself hard enough and often enough, perhaps she’d eventually come to believe it. The measure of one’s success was at least half owed to a positive attitude, or so she’d been told by several adults who’d seemed quite convinced by what they were saying.

Balancing her wand across the flat of her palm, Hermione said, “Point Me,” and felt only moderately better when she managed not to slur the simple incantation. Her wand quivered and twitched from side to side before pointing firmly in the direction she was facing. Right, okay, so that was north, which meant that Hagrid’s hut and the edge of the forest ought to be that way.

Hermione curled her fingers around her wand and dropped it to her side, but she did not put it away again as she set off in what she passionately hoped was the right direction. This swathe of the forest appeared perfectly deserted save for her and the odd fallen leaf, but Hermione had lived in the magical world long enough to know that things were rarely what they seemed.

Although her head continued to throb like a second heartbeat, and the nausea stirring greasily in her stomach never went entirely away, her gait got smoother the longer she walked, so that was something. What was more, about twenty feet away from the clearing in which she’d awakened, a buttery shaft of autumn sunlight pierced through the interwoven canopy of branches to reassure her that it was, in fact, still daylight.

Well, that only made sense. Concussion victims were very rarely out for very long, so she’d known, intellectually, that it couldn’t be nightfall just yet. Still, it was nice to see some tangible proof. Daring to feel a spurt of optimism, Hermione lengthened her stride, heart feeling somewhat lighter if not entirely soothed.

Of course, the moment Hermione dared to feel better about her present situation was the same moment it took yet another turn for the worse.

The tree roots in this section of the forest were so old and so thick that they burst in great curves out of the earth, looking like sea serpents half-risen from the ocean, and it was impossible to navigate the ground here without having to climb over at least one or two or twelve. Hermione had just cleared the first of the three massive roots that were situated directly in her path when she heard it.

Hoofbeats.

Her body went cold, colder even than the chilly day should have accounted for.

Perhaps those were the hoofbeats of unicorns she heard, but she doubted it. Her luck wasn’t that
As though to confirm her fears, the swell of noise that followed the thunder of hoofbeats was evocative of nothing so much as the sound of several people speaking all at once, and unicorns, for all their magical properties and abilities, could not talk.

Hermione froze where she was perched on that great swelling root, wavering with indecision. She should keep moving forward. She might run into the centaurs if she carried on, but she’d never get out of the forest if she didn’t, and there were worse things in here than centaurs. Much worse.

God, what had she done to deserve a straight week of unparalleled mortal peril? First the bloody buggering Chamber of Secrets, and now this—

Wait.

Hermione could have struck herself over the head but decided that it would be best not to aggravate her concussion. It wouldn’t’ve been right for her to summon Dobby to the Chamber of Secrets, not when Riddle would have certainly killed him for what he’d seen, but it would be all right, wouldn’t it, to try and call him here? Dobby could Apparate in and Disapparate out before the centaurs were within Hermione’s line of sight.

Clearing her throat and clinging to the root with one hand while she clutched her wand with the other, Hermione whispered, “Dobby?”

As soon as she spoke his name, she whipped her head about, ears pricked for the telltale crack of Dobby’s arrival, but she saw nothing. Heard nothing, but for the distant rumble of hooves that might’ve been growing farther away but might also have been coming closer.

Hermione’s nauseous stomach sank.

So much for that.

Blinking back frustrated, frightened tears—nothing would come from crying—Hermione swung her legs over the other side of the bulbous root and set her feet on the gently sloping ground. She’d just have to keep going, then. And if she ran into the centaurs, well, perhaps Firenze would be among their number, and he’d always been reasonable, if not exactly kind. Firenze wouldn’t let the others hurt her. And if he wasn’t there, well, then she’d just have to talk her way out of it, somehow, although the somehow of it all was still nebulous and unformed—

But she never finished formulating that plan, her train of thought derailed by the sharp, ear-splitting crack that had rent the autumn-pungent air. She very nearly dropped her wand. She almost certainly shrieked.

And then she was left to wonder if hallucinations were among the symptoms of a concussion, as she simply couldn’t be seeing what she thought she was seeing.

And what she thought she was seeing was Tom Riddle, standing directly in front of her, his neat hair in disarray and his eyes sharp and searching. At his side, spindly fingers twined in the neat crease of his trouser leg, was Dobby.

“Tom?” said Hermione, rather stupidly.

Riddle looked at her oddly, possibly because it was the first time Hermione had ever said his given name genuinely, rather than as a pretense or a thinly-veiled insult. Or maybe he was pulling that face because she looked an absolute mess, with brambles in her hair and mud on her skirt and runs in her
socks.

“Tom,” Hermione repeated, and it was awfully rude of her, the way she was ignoring Dobby in favor of staring unblinkingly at Riddle, but she really couldn’t help herself. Later, she would blame the blunt force head trauma for her behavior, but for now, all she could think to say besides Riddle’s name was, “What’re you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question.” The words were scarcely out of his mouth before he was eating up what little distance lay between them, hands raised as though to grab her, or possibly throttle her. One never knew with Riddle.

Hermione half raised her wand, knee-jerk defensive, but Riddle didn’t try and strangle her. No, he scooped up her chin with one hand, the better to examine it from every angle, and with the other he touched careful fingers to the back of her skull.

Hermione hissed through her teeth and tried to wrench herself out of Riddle’s grip, but he only pinched her chin tighter. His hand came away from her skull, and when he held it out between them, his fingertips gleamed wetly red.

Blood. Hers, no doubt.

“You’re concussed,” Riddle decided, as though that was news to her. Hermione was deeply exhausted, but she found that she had energy enough to scoff, and this time, when she jerked out of his grasp, he let her go.

Hermione shifted so she could look at Dobby, who was staring up at her with watery eyes. When they made eye contact, whatever dam had been holding Dobby’s emotions at bay broke: he gave a great, wet sob, and buried his face in the loose tea cozy he was wearing as a sort of toga.

Oh, dear.

“Dobby,” Hermione said kindly, although she wondered if he could even hear her over the sound of his own weeping. “Dobby, how did you find me? Did you see what happened to me?”

Sniffling, Dobby quieted enough to say, haltingly, “No, Miss Hermione Granger, Dobby did not. Only Mr. Tom Riddle fetched Dobby and asked if he could please take Mr. Riddle to Miss Granger, and so that was what Dobby did.”

Right. Of course. Such was the strange, powerful magic of house-elves.

Hermione turned to Riddle, who was rubbing his fingers together so that Hermione’s blood came off in drying flakes. He was staring at it, at the blood, and it wasn’t until Hermione cleared her throat that his dark eyes flashed up to meet hers.

“How did you know?” she asked. She didn’t clarify. She didn’t need to clarify.

Riddle dropped his hand and shoved it in his pocket. “I didn’t,” he said, crisply. “Only I didn’t like the way you’d stormed off all in a huff—”

Hermione made an offended noise, but Riddle ignored her.

“And I was about to go looking for you myself when I came across that cat of yours, and he wouldn’t leave me be until I’d followed him to Dobby, here.”

“Oh, I see,” Hermione mumbled. “Lassie came to fetch you because Timmy had got down the well
again.” That was what she said, but she also knew that she’d be spoiling Crookshanks rotten in the near future: she could always count on him.

Riddle ignored her quip, possibly because he didn’t want to admit to understanding a reference to Muggle pop culture. “And as Dobby was the most expedient way to go about finding you, I asked for his assistance.” At that, Riddle turned to Dobby and said, quite kindly, “Thank you for your help, Dobby: I don’t know what I’d have done without you. I can ask Headmaster Dumbledore to increase your wages, if you’d like. His students are precious to him, and I’m sure he’ll want to reward you.”

Hermione’s expression soured. Usually she’d be thrilled to see someone talking to a house-elf in such a manner, but she knew Riddle’s courteous attitude to be nothing more than an act, and it disgust ed her.

But Dobby hiccupped nervously and gave his head a vehement, ear-quivering shake. “Oh, no, Mr. Tom Riddle, sir—Dobby could never. Dobby already earns more than enough as it is, sir.”

Hermione would’ve argued the point, but Dobby’s bat-like ears cocked, and his expression grew more anxious still. Hermione’s own ears prickled, and was that—yes, hoofbeats again. And this time, she was certain that they were coming closer.

Riddle had heard them too; the kind look he’d adopted while speaking to Dobby darkened, and he turned and crouched in the dirt.

At a loss, Hermione stared at the graceful slope of his back.

“Er,” she said.

“Well, come on,” said Riddle, impatience curdling the gentle persona he’d adopted for Dobby’s benefit. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

He wanted her to—

He wanted her to climb up on his back so he could carry her? That had to be it, but it couldn’t be, because it was just—it made no—it was ridiculous. This entire thing was ridiculous.

Also—well. Hermione was wearing a skirt, which meant that, when Riddle held her beneath her knees, he’d be touching her bare skin, which was just—not happening. No.

“Dobby’s going to Apparate us back, isn’t he?” Hermione asked a touch desperately. “You don’t need to carry me.”

Riddle stood up, and turned, and was bearing down on Hermione before she could process what had happened. She took a wobbling step backwards, the heel of her foot catching on one of the skinnier tree roots, and her center of gravity tipped—

She never hit the ground. There was an arm at her back and another tucked beneath her knees, and she was being cradled against Riddle’s chest in a princess carry, of all things, and, oh, God. God.

“Dobby,” Riddle was saying. “Please escort us to the hospital wing.”

His tone was measured, polite, but Hermione had an excellent view of the underside of his sharp jaw from here, and the muscles had gone all tense, as though he were clenching his teeth.

Anger. He was angry, or at least he looked angry, but why would he be—
Dobby squeaked, “Right away, sir!” and pattered over to clutch the leg of Riddle’s trousers. Then came the crack, and a sensation of being squeezed through a very tight tube—God, Hermione would be sick—only for the world to reappear before her eyes, changed.

The hospital wing. They were standing outside of the hospital wing.

“Dobby,” said Riddle. “The doors, if you please?”

Dobby said, “Of course, sir!” and hastened to push open the heavy double doors with more ease than one might expect from those spindly arms of his. The doors creaked open at a touch to reveal Madam Pomfrey already rushing towards them, possibly spurred to action by the curious sixth sense which never failed to alert her to the presence of injured schoolchildren within a hundred-foot radius.

Madam Pomfrey had gone chalk white at the sight of Hermione cradled in Riddle’s arms, probably having assumed that she was worse off than she really was if she needed to be carried. Squirming, Hermione opened her mouth to let Pomfrey know that it wasn’t nearly as bad as it looked.

Which was a mistake.

It might’ve had something to do with Apparating while concussed. Perhaps her agitated stomach had simply reached its limit all on its own. But the moment Hermione opened her mouth to tell Madam Pomfrey that she was all right, she felt a sour, acidic rush flood her throat and pool on her tongue, and it was only by the grace of her mercurial luck that she was able to lean to one side before she could get sick all down her front.

Riddle made an appalled, wordless sound, as if even profanity couldn’t quite encapsulate what he was currently feeling.

Stomach decidedly evacuated, Hermione blinked down at the puddle of sick steaming on the cobbled floor. It had missed Riddle’s shoes by inches: pity, that.

“Mr. Riddle!” Pomfrey exclaimed, having got close enough to chastise them properly. “What on earth has happened to Miss Granger?”

Edging away from the puddle of sick with Hermione swaying in his arms, Riddle composed himself to say, “That’s a bit of a long story, ma’am. Perhaps you could see to Hermione while I explain—?”

By all appearances, Madam Pomfrey was rather vexed to have a student telling her how to do her job. Still, she nodded briskly, and wordlessly Vanished the puddle of sick even as she directed Riddle to deposit Hermione on the nearest bed.

“She’s concussed, ma’am,” said Riddle as he arranged the pillows in a stack for Hermione to recline against. “She’d gone missing, and I was worried for her, so I asked Dobby here to take me to her—and where should I find her but the middle of the Forbidden Forest? I hate to think the worst of my classmates, ma’am, but there’s really nothing for it—it seems as though somebody knocked her out and left her there, doesn’t it, Hermione?”

At this revelation, Pomfrey went whiter still, hand creeping up to clutch at her throat. “I can’t believe it—to think a student would—” Pomfrey broke off with a shake of her head. “I’ll be speaking to Professor Dumbledore about this, I can promise you that, but for now, I must see to Miss Granger.”

And see to Hermione she did: Pomfrey checked her pupils, gave her a glass of icy water so she could rinse the taste of vomit from her mouth, tended the bruises and abrasions on the crown of her skull, and all but force fed her a goblet of noxious potion that was supposed to help the swelling in her brain to go down faster. All the while, Dobby hovered fretfully at the foot of her bed while Riddle
perched on the mattress at her side, both of his hands cupping one of hers.

By the time Madam Pomfrey announced that she was off to go and speak to Professor Dumbledore, Hermione was feeling as suffocated as if someone had taken one of the pillows supporting her back and pressed it down against her nose.

Pomfrey hovered between the bed and the doorway, wringing her hands in her matron’s skirts and looking conflicted. Clearly she was torn between her obligation to speak to Dumbledore and her natural inclination to fuss over her patients.

“Yes, well,” Pomfrey said in crisp tones that weren’t fooling anyone. “I must go and—well, I suppose it would be all right if I—”

“Madam.” Riddle let go of Hermione, standing up to press Pomfrey’s fidgeting hands between his. “It’s all right. You go and speak to the Headmaster about this awful mess—I promise to watch over Hermione while you’re gone. I won’t let anything happen to her.”

Hermione cupped a hand over her mouth to stop herself scoffing out loud. He’d very nearly killed her on Thursday, and now he was swearing to the hospital matron that Hermione’s health and safety were of his utmost concern? What a laugh.

Pomfrey’s mouth was still warped with discontent, but her shoulders relaxed gradually, and she nodded.

“As to be expected from our Head Boy,” she said, and smiled at Hermione over Riddle’s shoulder. “You’re quite lucky, dear, to have such a caring, responsible young man for your beau.”

Even the hospital matron knew that Riddle and Hermione were dating? God. Slughorn must’ve been gossiping about them. Had to be.

Pomfrey seemed to be waiting for some sort of response, though, and, at a loss for what else to do, Hermione forced her lips into a queasy smile.

Satisfied, Pomfrey gave Riddle’s hands a pat before turning smartly on her heel to bustle out of the hospital wing.

“Come along, Dobby!” Pomfrey called, and with one last watery-eyed look spared for Hermione, Dobby went, trotting at Pomfrey’s heels.

Hermione gave Dobby a sad little wave, badly wishing he could stay and act as a buffer between her and Riddle. At least her head had stopped throbbing quite so violently. That was something.

Riddle returned to his seat on the edge of Hermione’s mattress and took her limp hand in his again, even though there was no one around to pretend for.

Rather than meet his searching eyes, Hermione glared at the outline of her legs beneath the sheets. “Playing at the concerned boyfriend, are you?” she muttered.

Riddle ignored her. “Have you any idea of who could have done this?”

Hermione glanced sharply at him, but then a fierce bolt of agony shot through her brain—so much for feeling better—and she pressed her free hand to her forehead as she mumbled distractedly, “I… dunno, I…I s’pose it might’ve been Malfoy?”

“What?” Something in Riddle’s voice compelled Hermione to blink through the fading pain and look
him in his face. His disbelieving face.

“Malfoy, he… I slapped him this morning—you saw it in my memories—and he said he’d get me back for striking him. I suppose he and his cronies snuck up behind me and hit me with a Beater’s bat or something, I don’t know.”

But Riddle didn’t even stop to consider it. “No,” he said. “No, he wouldn’t have done.”

Hermione dropped her hand. She wasn’t goggling, exactly, but— “And why ever not?”

Riddle was tapping out an agitated rhythm against Hermione’s knuckles. It was rather irritating. “Because he knows that I wouldn’t stand for it, that’s why.”

Was Hermione hearing this correctly? “And why should you care if something were to happen to me?”

The tapping stopped, and Riddle dropped his chin to regard their entwined hands with an unreadable look. Hermione wondered why she hadn’t pulled away from him yet.

“I’ve decided that I want you alive and uninjured,” said Riddle at length. “And I can’t very well use you if you’re dead or in a coma, now, can I?”

Right. Of course. It wasn’t as if Hermione had expected him to admit that, what, he’d grown fond of her in the last few days, and even if he had, she wouldn’t’ve believed him. After all, she hadn’t believed him the first time he’d claimed that he’d come to like her.

He was a pathological liar. Even if he wanted to tell the truth, he probably wouldn’t know how.

Hermione extricated her hand from Riddle’s—surprisingly enough, he let her go without a fight—and, flipping back the sheets, she swung her legs over the side of the bed opposite Riddle and planted her feet on the floor.

“What,” said Riddle, “are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” Hermione sniped, tentatively standing up and pressing her eyes shut in abject relief when her legs didn’t buckle beneath her own weight. “I’m leaving.”

Strange: Hermione could recall, clearly, every instance of Harry and Ron limping out of the hospital wing against Madam Pomfrey’s advisement, and how fiercely Hermione herself had scolded them every time. And yet, here she was, doing exactly what she’d so often railed against.

She supposed she ought to be ashamed of herself, but, frankly, she wasn’t in the mood to indulge in self-flagellation. Being concussed and left for dead in a Forest that was known to eat people really put a new perspective on things, as it turned out. Doubtless she’d eventually feel bad about giving poor Madam Pomfrey a fright, but at this present moment, all she wanted was to get the hell away from Tom bloody Riddle.

But when Hermione cleared the bed and made for the exit, Riddle stood and planted himself directly in her path.

“You’re not leaving the hospital wing, Hermione,” Riddle said, and he didn’t even twitch when Hermione bore down on him like a freight train. “I’ll not allow it—”

“Won’t you, then? Madam Pomfrey will be positively thrilled to hear that you used offensive magic on one of her injured patients, I’m sure.”
Riddle blinked at her, caught out, and Hermione took advantage of his rare moment of distraction to sidestep him and hurry for the open doors. He caught up with her in no time, of course, but at least he didn’t try and physically restrain her.

“…I wouldn’t’ve used offensive magic on you,” said Riddle, in the tones of someone who’d been planning on doing exactly that.

“Right.” Hermione scowled openly at a set of lingering first years, who abruptly decided that they had something very important to do somewhere very far from here. “And I’m a garden gnome.”

“I wish you were,” said Riddle in a vicious undertone. “I could simply pick you up by the legs and fling you into parts unknown whenever you got particularly irritating, which is often.”

Hermione stumbled a bit, but she kept walking even as she glared sidelong into Riddle’s face. “Feel free to cut me loose, then. I await our breakup with baited breath.”

“You really shouldn’t,” he said in a voice scarcely above a whisper. “Because the day I break up with you is the day I no longer have any use for you, and, really, Hermione, I don’t think you’d at all appreciate my interpretation of ‘ditching’ someone.”

Right. Because all that this day had been missing was casual death threats.

Firming her quivering lips, Hermione continued on, eyes fixed on an especially ugly tapestry all in shades of vermilion and puce.

“You’re still concussed,” said Riddle. His hands, when Hermione bothered to glance in his direction, were loose at his sides and not looking at all inclined to throttle her despite his threats. Which was a good thing, she supposed.

“Nonsense,” she said. “I’m perfectly all right.” Those loose hands tightened imperceptibly, going white round the knuckles: perhaps she’d spoken too soon.

“Let me take you back to the hospital wing.”

“No.”

“To Gryffindor Tower, then.”

“No.”

Riddle swung round to block her path, and Hermione could’ve sworn his left eye was twitching. Had she ruffled the unrufflable Tom Riddle, then? Was he finally displaying genuine human emotion that hadn’t been constructed for someone else’s benefit?

“I’ll not use offensive magic,” Riddle said, talking quietly even though the corridor was entirely empty, “but don’t think I won’t hesitate to pick you up and fling you over my shoulder like a sack of flour, you stubborn little idiot.”

Hermione reared back, then clutched at the side of her head as it gave another spin. Riddle’s hands flashed out as though to brace her, but she stepped out of his reach.

“Don’t touch me,” she said, dropping her hand to hold it out in front of her like a shield. “You were planning on killing me in cold blood only a couple of days ago, so I’ll thank you not to pretend to care now—and how do I know that you hadn’t anything to do with it?”
Riddle’s eyes thinned, and although Hermione didn’t doubt that he already knew what she was on about, still, he asked, “Had anything to do with what?”

“Knocking me out.” Although her tone was crisp and cool, she still felt sickening pangs of the fear that had pervaded her when she’d woken up in the forest with no sure way out. “Dumping me in the forest. Perhaps this is your way of scaring me into compliance, into relying on you.”

Riddle’s mouth worked soundlessly, and then he said, “Are you mental?”

A hysterical laugh tripped off Hermione’s tongue. Was she mental? Was she mental?

Shaking her head—mistake: the corridor spun rather alarmingly before righting itself—Hermione shoved past Riddle, but his hand flashed out again, and this time, he got a grip on her arm that she couldn’t shake off, try as she might.

“Let—go of me,” Hermione gritted out, and when he wouldn’t, she brought her foot down hard on his instep.

Riddle swore, but his grip did not loosen. If anything, it only grew tighter, and he used it to drag her over to the ugly puce tapestry, which he twitched aside to reveal a small, dark alcove.

“What’re you—” But the tapestry had flapped shut behind them, and though Riddle let her go once they were properly inside of the alcove, he also situated himself between her and the only way out, and he did not look inclined to let her leave just yet.

Hermione ground her teeth. “What,” she said, “are you doing?”

“Sparing the rest of the school your hysterics,” said Riddle, and although Hermione couldn’t quite make out his face in the dark of the alcove, his tone suggested that he was sneering at her.

“Doubtless you’ll thank me later.”

Hermione saw red.

Her fist was flashing out before she quite knew what she was doing, knuckles digging into the flesh of Riddle’s abdomen. He huffed out a pained breath, but Hermione didn’t give him time to catch it: no, she kicked him in the shin, as she’d wanted to yesterday when he’d first subjected her to the horror of Legilimency.


But as he had in the Chamber of Secrets, Riddle was quick to manacle Hermione’s wrists in his hands and pin them to her sides, forcing them both into an awkward, painful crouch to keep her from kicking at him. Hermione trembled in his grip, panting. Riddle tightened his fingers, and her wrist bones creaked.

“Be still,” Riddle spat at her, hissing like a snake, and one of his hands released her wrist to wrap around her throat. His thumb rode her windpipe: if he pressed down hard enough, he could probably crush it.

Hermione shook her hair out of her eyes—God, there were still twigs and bits of shredded leaves stuck in it—and glared into his face, so close to hers. His hair was looking rather disheveled, several strands of it falling across his forehead and catching in his eyelashes. His lips were parted. His eyes were hot and incandescent with something like fury.

He rather looked like he wanted to kill her. Perhaps he would. Perhaps he’d decided that she wasn’t
worth the trouble of keeping her around.

Three vividly red lines trailed from the high curve of his cheekbone to the sharp line of his jaw, and Hermione didn’t remember scratching at his face, but she must have done, for him to look like that. If he was going to kill her, as she suspected he might, then she should put more marks like those on him while she was still breathing, if only to spite him, and she lifted her freed hand to do exactly that, but—

But.

She’d thought his eyes hot with fury, and she was right, they were. But there was something else in them as well, something breaking like a slow dawn over the horizon.

Hermione had thought, once, when Riddle was still playing at being infatuated with her, that he never looked at her the way boys looked at girls they were attracted to. His eyes had always been cool with calculation, like he couldn’t get them to lie as convincingly as his face and his mouth, but now—

Now, they were—

No.

 Couldn’t be.

Riddle’s breath was heavy with exertion, filling up this small, quiet space. He still looked positively furious, but his hand was loose on her throat as if he hadn’t decided whether to throttle her.

As if he couldn’t decide whether he wanted to throttle her, or—

There. Flash of his pink tongue, darting out to wet his lips as though—as though—

Riddle had forced her onto her haunches, but now Hermione straightened slowly up until she was sat more properly on her knees, pushing against Riddle’s hand on her throat. His thumb twitched, but it did not bear down to crumple her windpipe.

Riddle’s lips were still slightly parted from when he had wet them, and Hermione could see his tongue and teeth gleaming in his mouth. The jut of his lower lip looked soft. Crushable. Easily bruised.

Slowly, hyperaware of the hand at her throat and of the Dark magic seething within the boy in front of her, Hermione tilted her chin and grazed her lips across Riddle’s, a testing, tentative drag.

Riddle breathed in through his nose. Hermione did not hear him exhale.

She pulled away, but only by centimeters, so that she’d have to cross her eyes if she wanted to bring Riddle’s features into focus. She didn’t: she didn’t want to see the look on his face.

Squeezing her eyes shut the way one might when one set about doing something terribly unpleasant, Hermione leaned back in and pressed another, firmer kiss to Riddle’s slack mouth.

His mouth. His mouth was still as chapped as when she’d first kissed him, but it was also slick from the dart of his tongue, and Hermione’s lips slid damply, easily across his when she tilted her chin for an angle that wouldn’t bump their noses together. Her breath whistled awkwardly out of her nostrils, and when she parted her lips to breathe through her mouth, her lower lip got caught between both of Riddle’s.
Startled—was the inside of her mouth that hot?—Hermione twitched as though to pull away, but Riddle had pulled his lips back from the ridges of his teeth, and then those teeth were closing around Hermione’s lip, and her abortive movement resulted only in a painful little tug.

Painful, yes, but also—

God.

Riddle unclasped her lip, and Hermione’s tongue darted out to soothe the dents his teeth had left behind, but their mouths were still so close together that her tongue bumped his, and—and—

Riddle’s hand swept off her throat and caught in her hair, tugging it as his teeth had tugged her lip. He levered himself up on his knees so he was curved over her again, and his open mouth sealed wetly over hers, sucking the very air from her lungs.

Something ignited in Hermione’s stomach.

She didn’t know what she was doing. She didn’t know what she was doing, only that Riddle’s mouth was working hotly, frantically across hers, and that his other hand had released her wrist to press at the small of her back, press her forward until their hips were lined up, and she felt—she felt—

Riddle sat back on his haunches, and their lips parted, but Hermione followed his mouth blindly until it was under hers again, and Riddle gave the bundle of hair he’d grabbed a little tug before sweeping his hand down her back and urging her forwards so that she could either sprawl inelegantly across him or straddle his thighs.

He kissed her clumsily, almost cruelly, with too much teeth and not enough tongue, and he really hadn’t ever been properly kissed before, but Hermione didn’t care. Her pulse was thundering in her wrists and blocking off her throat so she could scarcely breathe through it, and blood was funneling in a sweet rush to the apex of her thighs.

God, this was wonderful. She was kissing a boy who didn’t know how to kiss, a boy who’d only recently thought of killing her, and she’d never felt better than she did right now. She was lightheaded with it.

The insides of Hermione’s thighs pressed against the outsides of Riddle’s, and the fabric of his trousers scratched at the bare skin beneath her skirt, which had flipped awkwardly up, and she really ought to pat that down, as it was entirely inappropriate, but Riddle had broken off their kiss to pant against the corner of her mouth, and the fingers that’d been kneading at her spine scraped farther down until he’d filled his palms with her backside and brought her hips flush with his. And she felt him, she was making a breathless noise against his mouth and she could feel the thick ridge of his—

Oh, God.

What was this?

Riddle’s mouth was fumbling damply across Hermione’s jaw, spine-tingling scrape of teeth, but now she jerked her head away so his lips only barely grazed her chin. She stared unseeingly towards the ceiling and tried to contain the hysterical hiccups that wanted to break free from her throat.

“Tom,” she breathed, in a voice that was not entirely her own, “get your hands off my bum.”

Riddle’s searching mouth went still. The hands on Hermione’s backside slackened, then slid down her thighs—and Hermione couldn’t help herself; she twitched—to clasp the undersides of her knees.
Riddle pushed off the floor with Hermione hitched up in his arms, staggering a bit under their combined weight so that Hermione could do nothing but grab him round the shoulders and cling like a limpet. She could do without a bruised tailbone on top of everything else, thanks.

Desperate to break off physical contact, Hermione unhooked her legs from Riddle’s waist to plant her feet firmly on the floor, and took as large a step back as the cramped alcove would allow. Once she got there, she crossed her arms in front of herself, hunched and defensive, but couldn’t help but to dart a tentative look or twelve at Riddle’s face.

A flush was riding his cheeks, and his usually neat hair was an awful mess. Their kisses had stained his pink lips red.

Hermione’s own lips felt bruised. Branded.

Riddle cleared his throat, and Hermione gave a start.

“I,” she started to say, but found she had nothing worthwhile to add to it, so she said nothing at all. What was there to say? She’d just—she had just—

Riddle, it seemed, wasn’t feeling quite as conflicted.

“That,” he said, “was enlightening.” His voice was remarkably steady, too, even if his breathing wasn’t.

Well. He’d recovered rather quickly, hadn’t he? It took every ounce of willpower Hermione had left not to look down and see if—if everything about him was quite so unaffected. It helped that she was presently feeling crushed with shame, which did a lot for her self-restraint.

God. What had she done?

“I’m—” Even if he felt comfortable talking about what they’d just done to each other as if it was nothing more remarkable than the weather, she didn’t, so she pointedly pretended nothing had happened in favor of saying, “I’m going back to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey will be missing me, and you—you were right. I shouldn’t have ever left.”

Because if she hadn’t left, then this wouldn’t have happened, would it?

Riddle’s tone took on a distinctly unimpressed edge when he said, “Running away again, are you?”

Tossing her wrecked hair out of her face—hair through which Tom Riddle had so recently carded his fingers, God—Hermione turned away from him, arms still crossed, and nudged the tapestry aside with her shoulder.

And who should be waiting for her but Crookshanks, sunning himself by one of the vaulted windows opposite the hidden alcove?

Hermione wondered if she was only imagining the judgmental look on his face.

She took a steadying breath.

“C’mon, Crooks,” she said. “Come and walk me back to the hospital wing, won’t you?”

And to the hospital wing and the inevitable accompanying lecture they went. The walk wasn’t long, but it gave Hermione more than enough time to think, and in her desperation not to remember the feel of Riddle’s tongue sliding along her teeth, she focused, of all things, on a book that she’d last
read when she was fourteen. It’d been an unnerving book, but none of the collected stories bound up in its pages had bothered her quite as much as the first.

One particular line had always stuck with her, and now she turned it over in her head as though it were a tangible thing she could examine, thinking of how terribly relevant it had become to her life.

Because “The Bloody Chamber” had been narrated by a girl of about Hermione’s age, and of her mad, murdering husband, the girl had said: *I lay in bed alone. And I longed for him. And he disgusted me.*

Chapter End Notes

I'll be catching up on comments over the next few days, so sorry in advance for the inbox spam.

Thanks as well for letting me know which scenes you're interested in seeing from Riddle's perspective: I'll be posting a companion collection of perspective flips to NLTS in the coming days. Keep in mind that the offer for Riddle POV scenes is an open one: if there are scenes from this chapter or future chapters that you'd like to see from Tom's perspective, let me know!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Hello! Some things:

eliamatrell made another (!!!) beautiful series of edits to go along with this fic, and they're all entirely my aesthetic, holy shit. And ariel-riddle was also kind enough to make a beautiful edit for this fic; it contains lots of fun details and motifs, too, like the locket and the basilisk. Go and give them both some love, folks!

On the writing front, I've started posting that collection of Tom POVs, so go and have a look if you're so inclined.

Warnings for this chapter...er...casual sexual harassment? (Not between Hermione and Tom.) Teenagers being gross, basically.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

4 November 1996

Harry and Ron were waiting for Hermione when she came down to the common room on Monday morning. She was slightly out of breath from her rush to get herself sorted in time, having slept in later than usual, and her head was still a little sore from yesterday, although she already felt much better than she would have done under a Muggle doctor’s care.

She’d taken the spiraling staircase to the common room at a clip, but when she made the final turn and saw Harry and Ron waiting at the foot of the stairs, she tripped to a halt. They were standing shoulder-to-shoulder, heads bent close together, and they weren’t doing anything unusual or special by waiting up for her—they were best friends, the three of them, and it was to be expected—but Hermione’s breath still caught for love of them.

They meant everything to her, and she had kissed the boy who would use that affection against her. For God’s sake, Harry’s mum and dad had been murdered by monsters just like Riddle, and Hermione had known that, and still—

Harry broke off talking to Ron—about what, Hermione didn’t know because she hadn’t been listening, but it’d probably had to do with girls or classes or Quidditch—and his green eyes flickered up to meet Hermione’s. They warmed immediately with quiet affection.

“Morning,” Harry said, as easy as anything, and Ron tossed her a careless smile, and, God, they had no idea, did they, of what she’d done, of the implications—

Blinking furiously, Hermione skipped the last two stairs and threw herself headlong at Ron, who was nearest. Flinging out her hand, she grabbed a fistful of Harry’s robes and dragged him in closer, too.

Ron huffed out a breath on impact, and Harry choked—she might’ve accidentally strangled him—but neither of them tried to prize her off, and Ron was quick to wrap an arm around her shoulders.
“What’s the matter, ’Mione?” Ron wanted to know, and Hermione clung to him tighter still. “You all right? Has that tosser Riddle done something to you? If he has, I swear I’ll—”

“No,” Hermione rushed to say, to cut off Ron’s tirade before it could begin. “No, it’s just that I—”

Just that she’d what? What could she say to them? Riddle will kill the both of you if I don’t toe the line, but knowing that didn’t stop me from kissing him like my life depended on it? Sure. Brilliant.

“Hey.” Harry stepped closer, forming a sort of warm, living shield all along Hermione’s back. The three of them were probably garnering strange looks from the other Gryffindors that were filtering through the common room on their way to breakfast, but Hermione didn’t especially care, and she doubted that Harry or Ron did, either, at least not right now. “Are you sure it’s not something Riddle did? Tell us the truth, Hermione.”

“And what are you going to do if he has done something?” Hermione asked, pulling out of the tangle of their arms to glare into their faces. “Beat him bloody on the Quidditch pitch like you did Draco Malfoy? You’ll be lucky if all you get is a year’s worth of detentions.”

In point of fact, they’d be lucky if they survived the encounter, but she couldn’t very well say as much, could she?

Harry and Ron exchanged dark looks. “So, he has done something to you,” said Ron.

Hermione supposed she ought to thank her lucky stars that they weren’t Legilimens. She was an abysmal liar, and they knew her tells, but they couldn’t really prove that she was lying, could they? And if she carried on denying their suspicions, then surely they’d drop it. Maybe. Eventually.

“He hasn’t done anything.” Hermione spoke firmly, if not convincingly. “Well—he has, sort of, it’s only—it’s only that we got into another fight. But we’re fine now; we’ve talked it through. Dating someone—it can be emotionally exhausting, that’s all.”

Hermione dared to think that their faces cleared a little once she’d finished talking, and she felt mildly better when Harry turned to Ron and said, “Is dating always this complicated? Is there usually so much…crying?”

“Search me,” Ron said to Harry, and then to Hermione, “I dunno, ’Mione. Maybe you shouldn’t date someone who makes you cry this often.”

Temper rising, Hermione snapped, “You’ve made me cry often enough, but I haven’t broken off our friendship yet, have I?”

Ron flinched, and Harry abruptly found the ceiling intensely fascinating and worthy of extensive study, and Hermione felt bad, really, she did, but not bad enough to apologize.

Even though Hermione’d been wrong to snap at them when all they’d done was worry for her, Harry and Ron still accompanied her down to breakfast, flanking her like a pair of support pillars. They were just as unmovable, too, not so much as budging when Riddle caught Hermione’s eye and gestured for her to come and sit with him.

Hermione wavered. From the toxic looks Harry and Ron were throwing at a perfectly unfazed Riddle, she couldn’t help but wonder if they’d try and physically stop her from going over to the Slytherin table. She dearly hoped not.

“Er.” Hermione clutched the strap of her satchel, knuckles bleaching white. “So, erm, I suppose I’ll just—”
“We’ll come with you,” Harry said quickly. Ron, looking begrudgingly resolute, nodded his support.

Hermione pursed her lips. “Will you, then?”

“What?” Ron shifted his weight from foot to foot, possibly eager to get this whole affair over with before he could change his mind. “Are you the only Gryffindor who’s allowed to sit with the Slytherins, then?”

“Don’t be silly, Ron; there aren’t any rules against sitting at other Houses’ tables.” Harry’s and Ron’s faces cleared as though they were heartened by this information, so Hermione hastened to add, “But I am, at present, the only Gryffindor who’s dating a Slytherin—unless Harry would like to do something productive about the painfully obvious crush that Daphne Greengrass has had on him since the start of term.”

Right on cue, Harry flushed as red as any stoplight and spluttered so violently that Ron was prompted to beat him hard across the back. Shamelessly taking advantage of what she’d wrought, Hermione turned on her heel and walked as swiftly towards the Slytherin table as her legs would carry her.

As she neared the Slytherin table, though, she couldn’t stop herself from searching for and picking out a pale head of hair. Malfoy was sat beside Blaise Zabini and directly across from Riddle, pointed chin propped in the cup of his hand. His eyes were shadowed with dark circles, and his expression was rather listless, but he didn’t particularly look as if he’d been recently beaten within an inch of his life.

Riddle had been right, then, when he’d said that Malfoy wouldn’t’ve dared to touch Hermione for fear of swift and violent retaliation. Riddle might not have liked Hermione romantically, but she suspected that he was the sort to jealously guard that which he perceived as his possessions.

The very thought of being regarded as something to be owned made Hermione’s skin crawl, and she couldn’t bring herself to return Riddle’s nod when she joined him at his House’s table.

The Slytherins all along the bench had cleared a space for Hermione, but they hadn’t allowed her so much room that she could avoid pressing the length of her thigh flush against Riddle’s. The scratch of his wool trousers against her bare leg triggered a sense memory of straddling his narrow hips, of grinding down into his lap, and she was quick to cross her legs at the ankles so that her calves, at least, weren’t touching his.

Riddle’s smile was warm and practiced when he bade her a quiet good morning, and the kiss he pressed to the top of her head was perfunctory and dispassionate. If the tight press of their thighs had stirred any sort of visceral reaction in him, it didn’t show on his face or in his actions.

Mumbling a halfhearted greeting for their audience’s benefit, Hermione turned her face away from Riddle’s to scan the table for something she could eat quickly. Toast. Where was the toast—

But then a bowl of sugared porridge was being nudged in front of her, and a spoon was being pressed into her hand. Thwarted, Hermione thought, and when she darted her eyes up to meet Riddle’s, she was met with a smile that dared her to refuse his attentiveness.

Hating him and hating herself, Hermione wrapped bloodless fingers around the spoon’s handle and stabbed it rather violently into the unsuspecting porridge.

“How’re you feeling this morning?” Riddle asked her. “Is your head all right?”
"What d’you mean, is her head all right? What’s wrong with it?"

Hermione looked up with a start and nearly dropped her spoon into the porridge. Harry and Ron had come over to the Slytherin table, after all, and were squeezing onto the bench opposite Hermione and Riddle. Harry’s elbow accidentally—probably—on-purpose caught Malfoy in the ribs as he sat, but Malfoy didn’t even look up from his breakfast to hiss at him.

That…was probably something to be concerned about.

But Hermione had more important things to worry about than Malfoy’s psychological state, so she rushed to say to Harry and Ron, “Nothing—it’s nothing. I’ve got a bit of a headache from crying, that’s all.”

“Yeah, about that.” Harry fixed Riddle with a piercing look. “If you like Hermione so much, then why’re you always making her cry?”

Riddle regarded Harry coolly, and Hermione’s heart stuck to the walls of her throat as she tried to guess at what he’d say next. Would he tell Harry and Ron about what had happened to her yesterday? She hadn’t told them—she couldn’t bring herself to tell them. If they knew, they’d fuss and they’d prod and possibly somehow stumble onto the truth about Riddle—they had an uncanny knack for discovering the truth of things quite on accident, those two—and then Riddle would—

But Riddle didn’t tell Harry and Ron about Hermione’s concussion and the circumstances through which she’d got it. No, he wrapped his arm around Hermione’s shoulders, tugged her into his side, and said, “I could ask you the same question, Potter. You and Weasley claim to be her friends, but you’ve got a poor way of showing it. Have you or haven’t you ignored her for weeks on end over trivial little spats?”

Hermione flushed cold with shock. That wasn’t—that wasn’t fair. Riddle was making it sound as if she’d confided in him, when all he was doing was throwing the memories he’d wrenched from her unwilling brain in Harry’s and Ron’s faces. She turned wide eyes to Harry and Ron, wordlessly imploring that they not take what Riddle had said at face value, but they weren’t looking at her. No, they were scowling fiercely at Riddle, cheeks flushed with mounting anger. The other Slytherins up and down the table had stopped pretending that they weren’t hanging on to every word, and even Malfoy’s blank eyes were stirring with interest.

“Listen, you—” Ron started to say, but Riddle wasn’t finished.

“I can’t help but wonder,” Riddle went on, enunciation clear and crisp, “whether the two of you are simply jealous that Hermione’s gone and got herself a boyfriend. You must feel rather possessive of her, mustn’t you? But surely you knew that you couldn’t keep her to yourselves forever.”

Ron’s hands clenched into fists where they rested on the tabletop. If Hermione didn’t speak up soon, this would end in physical violence, and she didn’t want to consider what Riddle would do to anyone who dared to strike him across the face.

“Stop it!” she snapped, and quavered only a little when all eyes swung to focus on her. “The three of you, just—behave like civilized adults, won’t you?”

“But Tom was being perfectly civil, weren’t you, Tom?” Zabini piped up, and although his tone was characteristically disinterested, his eyes were sparkling with something like mischief. “It’s Potter and Weasley who wanted to have a go at him.”

“That’s all right, Blaise,” Riddle said, playing at the reasonable adult he wasn’t, and Hermione could
have hit him herself, she was so infuriated. “Potter and Weasley obviously care about Hermione very much, and that’s admirable—it’s only that they ought to express their feelings more maturely.” He gave Hermione a little squeeze as he said this, and she had half a mind to step on his foot.

Harry and Ron were still looking inclined to reenact the Great Quidditch Pitch Thrashing of ’95, though, so it was with abject relief that Hermione noticed an incoming distraction in the form of Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown.

“Hello!” Lavender gushed, insinuating herself between a fuming Harry and a frowning Malfoy. “Mind if we join you?”

Fully roused from his stupor, Malfoy grouched, “Merlin, it’s an invasion.”

Lavender and Parvati ignored him.

“Sorry,” Parvati said to Hermione and Riddle as she squeezed into the narrow wedge of space between Ron and a boy in Riddle’s year named Avery. “Only we had something rather urgent to tell Hermione, but—”

“But we’re not certain if we should tell her in front of Tom.” That was what Lavender said, but her giddy expression spoke to the contrary.

“Don’t hold back on my account,” said Riddle pleasantly, but the fingers cupping Hermione’s shoulder gave an agitated little ripple.

Hermione had gone tense all over, but Lavender and Parvati were oblivious to her discomfort, blinded by their own excitement.

“Yes, all right.” Lavender tried for reluctant and failed miserably, restless fingers folding a linen napkin into pleats. “It’s only, well—it’s got to do with—”

“With that great lump, McLaggen,” Parvati rushed out. “He’s been going round saying that—sorry, Tom—but he’s been saying that Hermione deserves better than some dodgy Slytherin—”

“He’s not wrong, there,” Ron muttered.

“—and that he’s going to ask her to Slughorn’s Christmas party come December!”

Silence fell like a veil across the table in the wake of Parvati’s announcement. When no one else broke it straightaway, Hermione said, haltingly, “Er—you can’t mean—”

“That McLaggen fancies you?” Lavender was all but throttling that poor napkin. “Don’t be coy, Hermione.”

But Hermione wasn’t being coy. Cormac McLaggen had not once spared her a second look in all the time she’d been attending Hogwarts, and now here were Lavender and Parvati, spreading unfounded rumors with no thought for the consequences.

Even so, Hermione couldn’t help but to dart a glance or two at the Gryffindor table, and it did rather look as if McLaggen was scowling in this general direction, but.

But—

*Oh, Merlin.*

Relinquishing the napkin, Lavender pressed her fingers to her mouth and said, thoughtful, “I only
wonder why McLaggen’s talking this way when you’re clearly uninterested—not to mention taken.”

To this, at least, Hermione had a definite answer. “Male entitlement.”

Malfy’s reaction to this whole thing had been rather delayed, but now he barked out a rather unhinged cackle and said, “You’re joking. D’you honestly mean to tell us that that sad sack McLaggen wants to get into Granger’s precious knickers? What a laugh.”

“Draco,” said Riddle—just that, just his name, but Malfy instantly shut his mouth and retreated into silence.

Lavender frowned at Malfy. “It’s not a joke. Cormac’s been expressing a rather vocal interest in Hermione’s…nether regions…since October at least.”

“Nether regions?” Harry echoed, looking rather green about the gills.

“Genitals,” Zabini supplied helpfully.

Half rising from his seat, Ron said, “Oi! Quit talking about her genitals!”

Hermione clutched at her face. “Stop saying genitals,” she hissed.

“How come?” said Avery. “That’s the technical term, innit?”

“Enough,” Riddle snapped, and everyone, even Harry and Ron, fell silent. “I won’t stand for this sort of harassment, do you understand? And I’ll have ten points each from Gryffindor and Slytherin.”

Avery squirmed. “But, Tom—”

But Riddle was unmoved. “That’ll be another five from Slytherin,” he said to Avery. “Would you care to see how many more I’m willing to take before you learn to watch your mouth? Go on: try me.”

No one dared to take Riddle up on that challenge. As for Hermione—

She’d had quite enough for one morning, thank you.

Ducking out from under Riddle’s arm, Hermione squirmed round to sling one leg over the bench in preparation to get up and flee.

“Riveting as this conversation’s been,” she said, “I wanted to pop by the library before class, so if you’ll all excuse me—”

But Riddle had folded his fingers around her wrist and pinned it—gently—to the tabletop, holding her in place. Hermione scowled at him, half hoping he’d use Legilimency on her and see for himself just how willing she was to make a scene by throwing off his touch, but then he nodded towards the High Table, and, grudgingly, she looked up.

Professor Dumbledore was standing up, but not to leave the Great Hall. No, he was rounding the High Table and approaching the lectern, and silence rippled in waves across the gathered students even before he’d opened his mouth.

What was this? Professor Dumbledore almost never made announcements over meals that weren’t the start-of-term banquet or the end-of-term feast. Unless this had to do with—
“And a happy Monday morning to you all,” Dumbledore was saying, voice carrying clearly to all corners of the vast room. “I do hope that your term has been going swimmingly, and that you’ve been duly absorbing every last drop of knowledge that your brains can stand to hold.”

At this, there was some muted grumbling, particularly from the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. students.

It was difficult to tell from this distance, but Hermione thought she saw Dumbledore’s lips quirk briefly into a smile. If she had, it didn’t last, as his next words took on a distinctly solemn—almost stern—edge.

“I am afraid, however, that I must darken this bright autumn morning with the reiteration that the Forbidden Forest is out of bounds to all students, and that even the most well-intentioned of seemingly harmless pranks can take a dark turn should they be executed within its borders.”

Hermione had been staring unblinkingly at Dumbledore, but she still caught Riddle’s sharp look in her periphery. Tearing her attention away from the headmaster, Hermione glanced down—and saw that she’d flipped her wrist over in Riddle’s grasp to curl her fingers into his sleeve, clutching at him as she might a lifeline.

When had that happened?

Face growing hot, Hermione untangled her fingers from Riddle’s sleeve. The Great Hall had broken out into a cacophony of furious whispers, but everyone quieted all at once to hear what Dumbledore had to say next.

“Now that I’ve cautioned you all against your more reckless impulses, I have nothing more to say than the fervent wish that your days be full and productive—but not too productive, mind. Off you go.”

Dumbledore withdrew from the lectern, and there came a great scraping of wood on stone as everyone stood back from the dining tables at once.

“Wonder what that was about,” Ron said to Harry, and Hermione tried not to twitch guiltily as she gathered her things. In an effort not to meet her friends’ eyes, she skipped quickly over their faces—and noticed that Malfoy was favoring his left leg as he prowled down the aisle between dining tables.

Hermione caught Riddle’s sleeve—deliberately, this time.

“Tom,” she said, sweet as spun sugar, “could I have a word with you in the entrance hall, if it’s not too much trouble?”

Riddle gave her a well-crafted perplexed look, but said, “Of course, darling,” readily enough.

“Lovely,” Hermione grated out, and led the way to a mostly-deserted corner of the entrance hall. Deciding that this was as private as it was going to get, she rounded on Riddle.

“What,” she said in a rather garbled undertone, “was that?”

Riddle cocked his head. “Sorry?”

“Don’t play stupid,” she snapped, and had the dubious pleasure of watching Riddle’s mask flicker. “Malfoy—there’s something wrong with his leg; he’s limping.”

Riddle crossed his arms. “So, of course, it’s got something to do with me. Did it not occur to you that he could’ve injured himself during Quidditch practice?”
“No, it did not, as the last time I saw him, his leg was perfectly fine, and Slytherin hasn’t had Quidditch practice since then. Really, Tom, I don’t know why you bother lying to me, of all people—but I don’t suppose you can help yourself. It must come to you as naturally as breathing.”

“What a pretty little tirade,” Riddle drawled. “But are you quite finished? I’ve got lessons to attend, you understand.”

Hermione crossed her arms, mirroring Riddle, and said nothing. She found she was breathing rather hard, chest pushing rhythmically at her folded arms.

Riddle, for his part, had already relaxed his stance, arms uncrossing, one hand creeping up to cup Hermione’s chin. The tip of his index finger traced the shape of her mouth.

Hermione went quite still, feeling rather like a plump mouse cornered by a hungry cobra.

“Malfoy wasn’t responsible for knocking you out and dumping you in the forest,” Riddle said, so quietly that Hermione had to strain to hear him over the growing buzz that was filling the entrance hall. “Of that, I’m quite certain. But as I’ve failed to find the true culprit just yet—and I will find them soon; I can promise you that—I decided to make an example out of a convenient target.”

Hermione struggled to speak; it was quite difficult, as her tongue was very dry. “An example?”

“It’s nothing he won’t recover from in less than a week’s time,” said Riddle, dismissive, as he scraped his fingernail across Hermione’s lower lip. “I can’t allow this sort of thing to go unpunished, Hermione. My Housemates must understand viscerally that you aren’t to be touched.”

“You don’t know for certain that it was a Slytherin who did it.”

Riddle gave her bottom lip a tug, just as he had yesterday with his teeth instead of his fingers. “Yes, I do.”

Yes, well, putting that aside— “You can’t just—don’t you understand that it’s fundamentally wrong to punish someone for something they didn’t do?”

“Is it?” Riddle thumbed the corner of Hermione’s mouth, tugging it into an unwilling half smile. “Teachers will dock House points for a single student’s mistake, thereby punishing their peers. How is this any different?”

Was he being deliberately obtuse, or did he genuinely think the comparison a sound one? “For starters,” Hermione ground out, “our teachers don’t use corporal punishment—”

Quick as any striking snake—yes, Hermione was still clinging to that analogy—Riddle tightened his grip on Hermione’s chin, tilted her face towards his, and dropped a kiss onto her shocked mouth.

Hermione froze.

*Oh, God.*

She’d miscalculated terribly, hadn’t she?

She’d thought—

She’d thought that she’d finally got one up on Riddle, the first time she’d kissed him, just as she’d thought that she’d found a way to control or at least divert him the second time she’d kissed him. But God, she’d made a mistake—she’d made a bloody stupid mistake by stirring up whatever it was that
was simmering between them, because if anyone on this earth could weaponize their sexuality and use it as a tool for their own ends, it was Tom Riddle.

Tom Riddle, who was at this very moment kissing her sweetly, languidly, as though he wanted her, as though he cared for her.

Hermione’s arms uncoiled, and she hovered her hands in the space between their bodies, torn between common sense, which was telling her to shove him away immediately, and her hormones, which were urging her to clutch him closer despite the extremely public forum. She simply didn’t snog people in public, and she’d do very well to—

Riddle’s lips parted, tongue slicking wetly across Hermione’s upper lip, and she jolted as though stung, toes curling in her shoes. Were her ears ringing? She thought they might be—

No, they weren’t. That wasn’t ringing; that was tittering, and Hermione jerked her face away from Riddle’s to glare fiercely at an audience of lingering Gryffindors, among whom was none other than—

Cormac McLaggen, who was looking rather put out.

Oh, for the love of God.

Hermione transferred her glare from the Gryffindors—who’d already begun to disperse, because they knew what was good for them—to Riddle, who, if Hermione wasn’t mistaken, was looking rather pleased with himself.

“What’s the opposite of schadenfreude?” Hermione wondered.

Riddle’s nasty little smile didn’t fade even as he arched one eyebrow in a mute request for clarification. The bastard.

“It irritates me when you’re happy.”

Riddle’s tongue darted out—tasting her on his lips? No. She refused to entertain the notion.

“Is that right?” he asked, head drooping forwards as though he meant to go in for another kiss.

“What shall I do to brighten your mood, then?”

Hermione was going to push him away—really, she was. Only, her good intentions got lost on their way from her brain to her hands, and she instead pulled him closer as he leaned in to drag his mouth across hers, a damp swipe of nerve-jangling contact.

Her toes were beginning to cramp from staying curled for so long. Kissing Riddle, it seemed, was detrimental to her health—which made perfect sense, really.

And if kissing Riddle was bad for her, then she ought to put a stop to it, oughtn’t she? Right. That was what she would do. Right this instant—

But she never had to, because someone was clearing their throat, and Hermione knew without looking that it wasn’t her classmates who’d interrupted them this time.

Riddle tilted his face away from Hermione’s, perfectly unaffected by what they’d been doing save for the slight flush in his cheeks and the swelling of his lips.

“Good morning, Professor McGonagall,” said Riddle, quite unembarrassed, whereas Hermione felt
as if she’d been doused in ice water. “Can I help you with anything?”

The deliberate pause that followed spoke more loudly than words of censure ever could, and Hermione spent it desperately wishing for the floor to crack open and swallow her.

At length, McGonagall said, “It’s not your company that I’m after, Mr. Riddle, but Miss Granger’s.”

At that, Hermione dragged her eyes off the floor—which remained stubbornly unbroken beneath her feet—and looked Professor McGonagall in her face, which was fixed in a cool mask.

This day could not possibly get any worse.

Unhooking her fingers from Riddle’s robes, Hermione took a step wobbling towards McGonagall. She could feel Riddle’s eyes on the back of her head, and her scalp prickled.

“Yes, Professor? What was it you wanted?” Her voice, Hermione thought, was remarkably steady, all things considered.

“It’s not what I want, Miss Granger, but rather what Professor Dumbledore wants. He’s asked to see you. Privately, in his office.”

Had she said that this day couldn’t get any worse? She’d been wrong. Catastrophically wrong.

Hermione’s jaw strung tight. “I don’t—what could Professor Dumbledore want to talk to me about —”

“Excuse me, Professor.” Riddle had stepped up alongside Hermione, and he cupped her shoulder in a gesture that looked like reassurance but felt like control. “This wouldn’t have anything to do with yesterday’s—incident, would it?”

McGonagall’s lips pursed, which was as good as an affirmative.

Hermione started to shake. Riddle gave her shoulder a squeeze.

“If it’s all right, Professor,” said Riddle, “I’d like to accompany Hermione to the headmaster’s office. I care for her a great deal, you understand, and I’d like to be there to offer her moral support.”

The hard line of McGonagall’s lips seemed to soften ever so slightly, but her voice was as stern as ever when she said, “As lovely a gesture as that would be, Mr. Riddle, I am afraid that I cannot indulge it. You’re a N.E.W.T student in your final year at Hogwarts, and you can’t afford to miss even a moment of your lessons.”

The hand on Hermione’s shoulder tightened, fractionally. “Professor, I—”

“That will do, Riddle. You’re Head Boy, and you must conduct yourself accordingly.” Angling her body towards Hermione’s as though to physically shut Riddle out of the conversation, McGonagall said, rather gently, “Come along, Miss Granger.”

Hermione ought to’ve been glad to get away from Riddle—and she was, truly—but for some reason, her feet dragged across the flagstones as she ducked out from under his hand to follow in McGonagall’s brisk footsteps.

As she mounted the first flight of stairs, Hermione told herself that she wouldn’t look back at Riddle—but she did. She looked over her shoulder as she hadn’t on the day she’d first kissed him, and she saw that his eyes were openly, hotly furious as they followed her every movement.
Was that how he’d looked on Saturday, after she’d kissed him out of spite and walked away?

Trying not to tremble, Hermione quickly faced front.

Hermione hadn’t had the dubious honor of being summoned directly to the headmaster’s office until today, and she hadn’t quite known what to expect. As she covertly studied the circular room from her seat opposite Professor Dumbledore’s desk, she decided that the spindly instruments humming quietly away on nearly every available flat surface and the fully-grown *phoenix* crooning sleepily on a perch were all perfectly in character.

Dumbledore, meanwhile, had been directing shimmering streams of pumpkin juice from the tip of his wand into a pair of waiting goblets, and now he smiled benignly at Hermione and said, “Thank you for coming, Miss Granger. Forgive me, but I wasn’t certain if you’d finished your breakfast. Will you have a sip of pumpkin juice? A bit of toast, perhaps?”

Hermione opened her mouth to politely decline, only to realize that she hadn’t, in fact, helped herself to the bowl of porridge Riddle had forced on her. Anxiety had suppressed her appetite, but her throat was rather dry, so she said, “I’m not very hungry, but I’ll have some pumpkin juice, sir, thank you,” and accepted one of the goblets.

Dumbledore’s benevolent smile did not fade, but as he sat forward in his seat and steepled his long fingers, Hermione fancied that his warm blue eyes had gone rather sharp. Searching.

“I expect,” he said delicately, “that our dear Professor McGonagall already appraised you of my purpose in summoning you here?” At Hermione’s mute nod, he went on, “I’m sorry to have called on you at this early hour, Miss Granger, and I’ll be certain to write you a note to pass on to your instructor, but I could not clear my schedule until this morning.”

Hermione shook her head. “That’s perfectly all right, Professor. I wanted to thank you, actually, for not—for not singling me out earlier. I didn’t…particularly want what had happened to me to get spread around the school.”

“Yes, I suspected as much. You’re not the sort to overburden your friends with worry for you, are you, Miss Granger? Of course, you might do well to confide in them when circumstances grow too heavy to bear all on your own—to my understanding, Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley are exemplary young men as well as warm and loyal friends.”

Funny: he’d criticized her, technically, for her habit of taking too much on herself, but Hermione didn’t feel the usual sting of criticism, possibly because he’d spoken so kindly. And his assessment of Harry and Ron was rather the opposite of what Riddle had said about them earlier, wasn’t it? Hermione vastly preferred Dumbledore’s evaluation of her friends to Riddle’s.

“But I’ve gone off on a tangent, haven’t I?” Dumbledore laced his steepled fingers and propped his chin on his knuckles. “About yesterday’s, ah, incident—I’ve already spoken to Hagrid, but he didn’t see anything, unfortunately—he was quite preoccupied with his unicorn foals, you understand—and he’s quite distraught over what happened to you, Miss Granger. Perhaps you ought to go and reassure him that you’re feeling quite well once you’ve had the chance.”

Hermione’s smile froze on her face. She loved Hagrid dearly, but she sincerely doubted that he’d manage to keep the truth of what’d happened to her from Harry and Ron for very long. He was a
rather poor secret keeper, to put it delicately.

“And I’m certain that you’re quite tired of hearing it, but, please, Miss Granger, indulge an old man: have you no suspicions at all regarding the identity of your assailant?”

Hermione licked her lips and tried very hard not to think of how she could still taste Riddle on her tongue.

“No, sir,” she said. “None.”

Professor Dumbledore leaned back in his chair with a muted sigh, and Hermione immediately felt awful for having nothing of any use to tell him.

“Yes, I’d thought as much, but one does hope—well, there’s nothing to be done about it at the moment, is there? We can only be glad that you escaped the whole awful ordeal relatively undamaged. And now, I think I’ve taken up quite enough of your time, Miss Granger, don’t you? I’ll get to writing you that note.”

Having said so, Dumbledore retrieved a piece of parchment with one hand and flicked the fingers of the other at a nearby quill, which hopped up to dip itself in the inkwell before sailing forwards to scribble down Hermione’s note.

Feeling something rather like relief, Hermione set down the goblet of mostly-untouched pumpkin juice and started to gather her things, only to pull up short when Dumbledore made a thoughtful noise.

“I trust your term is going well, Miss Granger?”

Small talk, was it? Hermione eyed the quill and willed it to go faster as she said, “Quite well, sir, thank you.”

“And I trust that you’ve managed to balance your academic life quite well with your social life? Only the school is all abuzz with talk of your nascent relationship with Mr. Riddle.”

Hermione’s jaw nearly came unhinged. Even the headmaster knew about her involvement with Riddle? God, what was this? How was this her life?

But Dumbledore was waiting for an answer, so Hermione unstuck her tongue from the roof of her mouth to say, “Er, yes, sir, you’ve got it right.”

Dumbledore’s eyes were warm, but something about the way they fixed unerringly on her face was—not unnerving, exactly. A little discomfiting, perhaps.

“And Mr. Riddle makes you quite happy, I trust? I expect he would, being the charming young man that he is. If nothing else, he ought to be able to keep up with you academically, oughtn’t he?”

Everything Hermione wanted to say got caught in her throat. No, he doesn’t make me happy. He’s a liar and a murderer. He’ll kill my friends if I tell you the truth, and even though you’re the greatest wizard of the modern age, I’m not sure that you’d be able to stop him.

Hermione dropped her eyes to her lap.

“Yes, sir. He makes me perfectly happy. Thank you for asking.”

When Hermione glanced at Dumbledore’s face, she could’ve sworn that he looked—well, that he
looked a bit disappointed. But the expression cleared quickly, if it was ever there at all, and he handed over the finished note along with the wish that she have a pleasant day.

Riddle was waiting for her in the corridor, back against the wall, hands in his pockets. Hermione drew up short when she saw him.

“What,” she said, “are you skiving off? You’ll get into trouble.” Not that she cared.

Straightening up, Riddle approached her at a leisurely pace that belied the look in his eyes.

“No,” he said, “I won’t.”

Hermione’s legs trembled as she fought the instinct to retreat. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. She wouldn’t.

“What did Dumbledore want with you?” Riddle asked, smoothing his hands across her shoulders as though to neaten the set of her robes.

Hermione firmed her jaw. “Professor Dumbledore wanted to ask me personally about the—the events that transpired yesterday morning. That’s all.”

Riddle’s fingers twitched. “Is it really?”

Hermione broke eye contact, teeth sinking into her lip. “Yes.”

Riddle’s fingertip skimmed her chin. “You’re bleeding,” he said.

Darting her tongue across her lower lip, Hermione tasted copper. Yes, she was: she’d bitten her lip through and broken the skin. She reached for her wand to mend it, but Riddle cupped her jaw and stopped her short.

Lashes fanning forward to veil his eyes, he leaned into Hermione—and licked the blood off her mouth.

Hermione jerked back, appalled. “What are you—that’s unsanitary!”

“So’s kissing,” said Riddle, “and we’ve already done a fair bit of that, haven’t we?”

Hermione curled her hand into a fist and pressed her knuckles against her mouth. It felt as if someone had seized her heart in their hand and given it a squeeze.

This boy—he was mad. Mad. He wanted to kiss her and he wanted to kill her and he’d injured a classmate simply to make a point. He was morally deficient. He was a monster.

Hermione knew all this, and still she wanted him to kiss her again.

“Come on,” said Riddle, pressing Hermione’s lower back. “I’ll walk you to class.”

“Don’t bother,” Hermione told him, but when he urged her to move, she went. She went, and she tried not to think of her blood on Tom Riddle’s tongue.

Chapter End Notes
Feel free to hit me up on tumblr. I'm not often around, but when I am, I take TRHG writing prompts and answer any questions you may have about this fic and its posting schedule!
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Hi! This chapter was originally twice this length, but I decided to split it in half so I could give you guys a faster update. Don't say I never did anything for you.

Warnings for this chapter: brief description of (past) animal death.

14 December 1996

“So that’s how Potter manages to skulk about the castle night after night without getting caught.”

Hermione resurfaced from a bottomless lake comprised of her own thoughts and memories with a sharp intake of air, but her muscles didn’t spasm as they had during the first couple of times Tom had subjected her to his Legilimency. Her physiological reactions to having her mind assaulted had grown less violent over the past month, but that was the only real progress she’d made.

A month. It had been a month, and not once had she managed to push him out.

Tom had manacled Hermione’s upper arms with his long fingers, pinning her in place against the back of her chair lest she slide out of it and onto the floor, but now his grip eased, hands sliding down to cup her elbows through her thick jumper. Hermione wished he’d remove himself from her personal space altogether, but she knew that he was unlikely to fulfill her wish, just as she knew that he was unlikely to skirt over the secrets he’d plucked from her mind.

And, true to Hermione’s expectations, Tom affected a thoughtful expression and said, “I wonder—how would our dear headmaster react to hearing that one of his students was in possession of an Invisibility Cloak, and in the habit of using it to break curfew on a nightly basis? Not the sort of behavior one would expect from a prefect, that.”

Right. Because opening the Chamber of Secrets and unleashing a bloody basilisk on the school was the sort of behavior to which a prefect should aspire. Tom was full of it.

Shrugging off Tom’s touch, Hermione raked shaking fingers through her hair, if only for something to do with her hands that didn’t involve throttling the boy in front of her.

“Don’t bother,” she said, wishing distantly that she’d thought to bring along a handful of kirby pins; she’d started fussing with her hair as a distraction, but she really was having a bad hair day, and that was saying something. “Professor Dumbledore already knows about Harry’s Cloak, and if he hasn’t done anything about it yet, why should he do anything about it now?”

Batting back Hermione’s restless hands, Tom set about tidying her hair, himself. His touch was gentle, and he was careful not to pull on her roots, but the sneer that’d overtaken his face was unexpectedly fierce, and Hermione’s stomach gave an anxious flip to see him looking like that.

“Of course.” He mumbled it, sullen like a child, and you wouldn’t know from hearing him talk that way that he was renowned for his maturity. “That’s just like Dumbledore, isn’t it, to favor
Gryffindors even when they’re blatantly flouting school rules.”

Was that resentment in his voice? Putting that together with the way he’d followed her to Dumbledore’s study to quiz her about what the headmaster had wanted, Hermione couldn’t help but wonder if there was more to Tom’s relationship with the man than that which could be seen on the surface.

Hoping that she didn’t sound as if she was fishing, Hermione said, “Don’t be silly, Tom. Professor Dumbledore can’t favor us Gryffindors overmuch, can he, if he chose a Slytherin as Head Boy.”

Tom smiled at her, and it was like watching a carnivore bare its teeth. “D’you really think that he wouldn’t’ve chosen someone else—anyone else—if left to his own devices?”

Hermione’s eyes had started to droop—Tom’s fingers felt good, too good, running through her hair and scratching blunt nails across her tingling scalp—but she forced them open wide to treat Tom to a questioning look.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing that concerns you,” said Tom, speaking as an adult might to an irritatingly inquisitive child, and Hermione grit her teeth, no longer feeling pleasantly tingly at all. “Putting that aside—do you understand, now, that your own thoughts and memories aren’t all that’s on the line, should a hostile wizard use Legilimency on you? There’s far more at stake than your memories of using a Time Turner to double up your class schedule when you were thirteen.”

Right. That’d been his motivation from the start, hadn’t it? Tom didn’t care about the sanctity of Hermione’s mind—if course he didn’t, or else he wouldn’t’ve violated it himself in the first place. All he wanted was to keep his own secrets safe.

Bracing her feet against the floor, Hermione scooted back her chair with a teeth-aching scrape of wood on stone, effectively placing herself out of easy reach. Tom’s fingers snarled in her hair as she went, and her eyes wanted to water from the sting.

“I suppose you’re expecting me to thank you for the object lesson? I’m quite aware of what’s on the line, thanks, but to date, you’re the only person to’ve ever used Legilimency on me.”

Tom slumped in his seat. A strand of Hermione’s hair that’d pulled free of her scalp was clinging to his sleeve, held in place by static.

“Right,” he said. “No one but me has ever used Legilimency on you—as far as you know.”

And wasn’t that a disturbing thought. As if Hermione hadn’t enough to be paranoid about, between her farce of a relationship with a violent psychopath and the fact that whoever had attacked her was still out there, still perfectly capable of hurting her again, of subjecting her to far worse than a concussion.

Valiantly suppressing the anxiety attack that wanted to overtake her, Hermione wet her lips and carried on. “It’s been a month, and I’ve made hardly any progress at all.”

To be quite honest, hardly any progress was putting it generously. At best, she’d occasionally manage to push weakly at the nets he’d weave around her mind, but she could never, ever untangle the knots.

And, look. Hermione hated to lose and she hated to fail and she despised being second best at anything, anything at all. That she hadn’t taken to Legilimency immediately was only making this
entire thing harder on her, her towering insecurities and her pathological fear of failure feeding back into her inability to properly shield herself and she—couldn’t—stand it. It was driving her mad.

After an overlong beat during which he’d regarded her silently, critically, Tom said, “What, are you calling it quits? It’s not like you to give up without a fight, Hermione. I must say, I’m rather disappointed. Where’s your Gryffindor valor, now?”

Temper igniting as it always seemed to whenever she was forced to share Tom’s company for any span of time that was longer than five minutes, Hermione snapped, “I’m not giving up, I’m only saying—I’m only saying that maybe it’s not something that I’m doing wrong. Maybe it’s you—maybe it’s only that you’re a poor instructor.”

Tom’s goading smile flickered. “I’ve given Occlumency lessons before, Hermione, so I can assure you that it’s not me who’s the problem. But I suppose it must be difficult, mustn’t it, emptying that busy little mind of yours?”

Oh. So it was going to be like that, was it?

Tossing her nose in the air, Hermione said, “You’re an Occlumens as well, aren’t you? What does it say about your mind, then, that you can empty it so easily?”

Tom’s face went as blank as a new sheet of parchment, and Hermione had to bite the inside of her cheek to stop herself from laughing. Was this the first time in his life that someone had called him stupid, then, either explicitly or implicitly? If so, Hermione ought to do it more often: humbling experiences such as this one should do him some good.

Recovering, Tom said from between his clenched teeth, “The only thing it says about me is that my discipline is better than yours, which is to be expected. If you want to effectively guard your mind, you’ll have to divorce yourself from your emotions.”

Hermione’s mouth twisted to one side, and, after some thought, she chose her next words for maximum impact. “You sound like a visitor from planet Vulcan, did you know?”

If it had been a pleasure to strike Tom Riddle dumb, then that was nothing compared to watching his face go through all five stages of grief in as many seconds before it settled on pained resignation. Yes, she’d had a feeling that he’d understand that reference, and that he’d hate himself for understanding it as much as he’d hate her for saying it.

He was quick to change the subject, though—so quick, in fact, that Hermione had to choke back another laughing fit.

“I think,” he said, consonants clipped and precise, “that now’s as good a time as any for a break, don’t you?”

Hermione’s unborn laughter died in her throat.

A break, was it?

He didn’t mean to say that he wanted to break for food. Hermione knew that that wasn’t what he meant to say, because, in addition to the weekly Occlumency lessons from Hell, this last month had been punctuated by bouts of intermittent snogging. Tom, as it turned out, was a frightfully fast learner, and it’d taken him not long at all divine all the ways in which he could most effectively turn Hermione to goo.

Honestly, Hermione didn’t know why he’d bothered to threaten her friends as a means of bringing
her to heel. As it turned out, all he had to do was grab her by the bum and stick his tongue down her throat, and she was as good as Imperioed.

And make no mistake, she hated it. She wore her self-loathing like a second layer of dead, filthy skin, like scum on water. She hated Tom and she hated herself and she hated the fact that she’d woken up twice now with a sticky-wet pulse jackhammering between her legs and half-remembered dreams of his long, clever fingers on her groggy mind.

She could only consider herself lucky that he’d yet to pull those memories from her brain. It wasn’t physically possible to die of shame, she knew, but if Tom were to find out that she’d been having sex dreams about him, Hermione might become the exception that proved the rule.

Having possibly grown impatient in the face of Hermione’s mute non-answer—in her defense, she was presently having something of a moral crisis—Tom rose like a wave from his seat to grab her round the waist and transfer her neatly from her chair to the nearest desktop. Stepping between her splayed legs, he planted his hands on either side of her hips and leaned in so close that they had no choice but to breathe the same air.

His eyes went hooded, and his tongue darted out to wet his soft, inviting lips, and Hermione—panicked. She panicked so badly that she didn’t realize what she was doing until after she’d slapped her hand over his mouth.

Tom’s eyes went wide, but Hermione knew that it was only a matter of seconds before his surprise wore off, so she blurted, “Why?”

Brows knitting, Tom tilted his head to one side so that his mouth was no longer covered by Hermione’s fingers.

“Why, what?” he said.

Hermione’s fingers flexed against Tom’s jaw. Darting her eyes all around the empty classroom, she stammered, “Why d’you—why do you want to snog me all of the time, anyway? You can’t really be attracted to me, I mean—I mean, I’m a Muggle-born.”

Not that blood status mattered all that much to pureblood boys when it came to snogging and groping and—other things. Hermione understood all too well that you didn’t have to like or even respect someone to want to sleep with them. Malfoy and his goons had tossed too many sexually charged derogatory comments her way for her to ever think otherwise.

Still, Hermione couldn’t help but to grasp at straws. Anything to convince herself to stop snogging Tom Riddle.

“And, my best friend’s parents were murdered by blood purists like you, so, really, we’re the last people on earth who ought to be kissing one another—”

This time, Tom folded his fingers over her mouth, and Hermione stared at him over his muffling hand, wide eyed.

“She’s not a blood purist.”

As if she believed that. Still, she tugged his hand away from her mouth to say, “You’re not?”

Why she bothered asking, she had no idea. He was lying, of course. He had to’ve been lying.

Tom cupped her jaw in one hand, thumb tracing circles on her chin, and said, with a trace of laughter
coloring his voice, “No, I’m really not. It’s Muggles I hate, not Muggle-borns. You can’t help where
you come from, and you can’t choose your parents.”

Oh, Merlin. He was missing the point entirely. Eyes going thin and squinty, Hermione snapped, “An
attitude like that’s nearly as bad as Muggle-born prejudice, I’ll have you know.”

That was what she said, yes, and she meant it, but—

But something, some hard knot of tension in her chest, was easing. It was guilt, she realized. Guilt
for wanting someone who only thought of her as a Mudblood he’d like to shag for the thrill of
slumming it. It wasn’t the only guilt she’d been feeling, but to have even that one burden lifted was
—something.

But—no. No. It was nothing, and it meant nothing, because Tom was still a psychopath and a
murderer and who even cared if he harbored no genuine Muggle-born prejudice? His sins still
outweighed his virtues by an order of magnitude.

“It’s for my social circle’s benefit, you understand.” His thumb was toying with her lower lip, now,
and she badly wanted to bite it. “They like to cling to certain archaic attitudes, most Slytherins, and if
I’m to use them, I’ve got to make them think that I’m like them, do you understand?”

No. No, she did not, because she would never understand pretending to be something she wasn’t for
someone else’s benefit. But she’d already told him as much, hadn’t she? Clearly, she hadn’t struck
any chords by saying so.

“Right,” she said, fist ing her hands against her thighs because he was beautiful, and even though she
was furious with him—she was always furious with him—her palms still itched to touch him, to pet
his hair and stroke his jaw. “About that. You may not be a blood purist, but the vast majority of your
Housemates are. What sort of excuse did you give them, then, for wanting to date a Mudblood like
me? Why date me at all, even? I asked you before, and you never answered.”

Tom moved his hand farther along her jaw, fingers reaching up to graze her earlobe, and Hermione’s
stomach contracted as she held in an unwilling laugh. God, what she wouldn’t give not to be ticklish.

“I would have answered, if Crookshanks and that stupid little friend of yours hadn’t interrupted.” He
flicked her ear, hard, and Hermione nearly flinched. Nearly, but didn’t. “And, had I been allowed to
answer, I would have told you that you’re good for public relations.”

Hermione’s brain stuttered.

“Public relations—

“Public relations?” she squawked.

Tom rolled his eyes heavenward. “Please stop doing that.”

Hermione wasn’t listening. No, she was squirming to get away from him, from this lunatic, only she
was trapped between him and the desk, and when she reached for her wand—possibly to Stun him
or hex him; she hadn’t decided yet—he seized her wrists, pinned her hands to the desktop, and
leaned all of his weight on her until she was bent nearly flat.

“You’ve got this terrible habit of demanding truthful answers from me only to react poorly when I
give them to you, did you know?” As he talked, his breath fanned across her snarling lips, smelling
faintly of pumpkin juice and mint toothpaste. “I need old, established pureblood families in my
pocket if I’m to get anywhere in this world, but people are bound to make certain—assumptions
about me on account of the company I keep, just as you have done. What better way to counteract any nasty rumors than to be seen publicly with a brilliant, ambitious Muggle-born?”

Hermione went still and blinked into Tom’s too-close face. “You’re playing both sides,” she accused, although, strangely enough, she wasn’t quite as angry as she’d been mere seconds ago. Possibly because he’d called her brilliant and sounded as if he’d meant it.

Dratted vanity.

Tom inclined his head, lips grazing Hermione’s almost incidentally. “You’re not actually surprised, are you?”

No, she supposed she wasn’t. It was all very Slytherin of him, wasn’t it?

Hermione wet her lips, and she couldn’t help but notice the way Tom’s eyes tracked the motion. Her stomach gave a giddy little leap.

Did he really, genuinely want her, then? Was there more to all this snogging than weaponized sexual attraction? More to it than seeing her as convenient pair of lips against which he could vent his hormonal frustrations?

Meeting Tom’s eyes, Hermione saw that his pupils were dilated. People could fake a lot of things, but they couldn’t fake pupil dilation.

What would happen if she were to—?

Looking deliberately away, Hermione said, “I think we ought to resume our lessons—and get off me, for God’s sake. You’re putting a crick in my back.”

The fingers manacling her wrists gave a rough squeeze, momentarily cutting off her blood flow—but he let her go, in the end, leaning back so Hermione could sit up properly on the desk. He didn’t step out from between her legs, though.

“Right.” Tom sighed hard through his nose, as if growing tired of this futile exercise. “From the top, then—”

Hermione seized him by the ears and dragged him in for a kiss.

Their noses knocked together, and he swore at her, and his teeth clipped her tongue, but for all that they got off to a poor start, Tom was quick to sink into the kiss. His arms came up to wrap around Hermione’s middle, and his tongue unfurled from his mouth to lick the roof of hers, turning the clumsy contact into something smoother, sweeter. That giddy feeling was back in Hermione’s stomach, and it felt like nothing else so much as when she got a spell right for the first time. And on that note—

Sending up a prayer that this would actually work, or at least not backfire horribly, Hermione allowed one of her hands to drift, fingers scratching Tom’s chest through his shirt—he made a rough sound that buzzed against Hermione’s lips, and she felt another giddy twinge, lower down this time than her stomach—before pressing her palm against her own hip, over her pocket.

Wrapping sweaty fingers around her wand, she yanked it out of her pocket, jabbed it against Tom’s throat, and held it there like a knife. Gathering every scrap of magic that whirled within her, she breathed into their kiss, “Legilimens.”

If being on the receiving end of Legilimency felt like being pulled to the bottom of an ocean by a
mighty undertow, then casting it on someone else was rather like diving headlong into a murky lake.

Everything was blurry down here, as if seen through a thick pane of warped glass, but, no—that wasn’t an entirely apt comparison. She was at the bottom of a lake, wasn’t she? So it was more that she was looking at things underwater, everything wavering and shimmering and difficult to make out. She wondered if she could chalk this up to Tom’s shields being far stronger than hers, and then she didn’t wonder anything at all, because she knew it was only a matter of time before she was caught.

Hermione didn’t run, exactly, as she had no physical form in here, no legs to pump, but she did flee. She fled from the malevolent knot of seething anger and hatred that was rising like a shadow across the surface of her metaphorical lake, and as she fled, she kept catching fleeting snatches of memory that scarcely made any sense to her, free of context as they were.

There was Draco Malfoy’s pale, pointed face, gone waxier still with pain, his pure blood pouring out of his nose to stain his thin lips—

And over there, a little dark-haired boy was getting struck across the face by a screaming adult, only for that same adult to turn up the next day with a horrible burn scar all along her cheek—her right cheek, to match the welt on the little boy’s right cheek—the water in the pot had boiled over, see, even though the stove’s burner hadn’t been set all that high—

And, there, that same little boy, coaxing a sweet-faced rabbit into his arms, stroking its ears for a moment only to wrap his fingers around its soft throat and snap its neck, feeling the bones crunch under his touch like twigs—Hermione’s stomach churned, and she looked away, looked at—

Another dark-haired boy, this one older than the last—but it was the same boy, the same—curled beneath his blankets, speaking in a hissing undertone to a small snake twined round his arm like a bracelet—

Stern McGonagall coming to fetch him, his reaction, thinking that a doctor had come to cart him off to the mental ward—*I’m not mad*—seeing Diagon Alley for the first time with hungry eyes and a hungry heart, a stipend from Hogwarts jangling in his pocket to cover books and necessities, but it wasn’t enough to buy that jewel-encrusted globe, or that churning model of the Milky Way, or that sleek broomstick—getting fitted for robes only for another boy in the shop to sneer at them because they were secondhand, and his fist curling bloodlessly tight as he thought, vividly, of breaking the nose that the other boy had turned up at him, of mangling his soft, spoilt face—

The train with its crimson steam engine, the Sorting—*Riddle? What sort of name is that? You’re not Muggle-born, are you? There must be some sort of mistake; Slytherin never takes Mudbloods*—the Chamber, the dawning fear and respect in his Housemates’ eyes as they realized that, yes, even with his filthy Muggle name, he was still the best of them, Slytherin’s own heir—

Professors fawning over his prowess, over his quietly polite demeanor. Especially Slughorn, always Slughorn, collecting him and other brilliant or influential students the way most people collected bobbles—terribly softheaded for a Slytherin, Slughorn, and so eager to please, so eager to tell him anything he wanted, if it meant keeping his favorite student *happy*—

He was talking to Slughorn, now, alone in his study, and his mouth was moving, and it was like hearing someone trying to talk underwater, but Hermione strained and stared, and she *heard* it, and it was a nonsense word, but it must have meant *something*—

—*horcrux*—
But Hermione saw nothing more, heard nothing more, and with a feeling like her skin being ripped off, she was being pulled from the bottom of that lake, pulled out and tossed without ceremony onto dry land.

Her eyes were watering. Her eyes were watering, because Tom—the very real, very present Tom—had caught her by the hair and yanked. His face was too close to hers, and his dark eyes were glittering with a wild fury, and Hermione hadn’t felt this afraid for her life since he’d cornered her in the Chamber.

His face was warped with outrage, but when he spoke, he spoke quietly. Calmly.

“What,” he said, bringing his teeth down hard on the t, a betrayal of his otherwise steady voice, “did you see?”

He didn’t know? On the one hand, that was reassuring, but on the other, it begged the question of just how much he’d seen in her mind during their lessons that she hadn’t noticed him looking at.

Hermione swallowed, hard. Her wand was still pointed at Tom’s throat, but if he hadn’t bothered to Disarm her yet, he probably felt confident in his ability to break her neck before she got the chance to Stun him. To do to her what he’d done to that poor rabbit.

Fingers tightening in her hair, Tom shook her, shook her like a disobedient child, and her teeth clacked together. She had to grit them tight to stop them from biting into her tongue.

Abandoning his calm façade altogether, he ground out, “Tell me what you saw.”

Hermione gripped her wand tight, so tight she was in danger of snapping it in half. “Does it matter?” Her voice wavered, from the fear and the pain, but she wouldn’t let him intimidate her. She wouldn’t. “I couldn’t understand half of it, so what difference does it make?”

The fingers in her hair eased, fractionally, but the look on Tom’s face warned her that the storm hadn’t passed entirely.

“I could always use Legilimency on you and find out for certain,” he said, and somehow, somehow, Hermione knew that she couldn’t allow him to do that, not today, not right now, not if she wanted to keep breathing.

She had to get out of here.

So, she fell back on an old favorite, and kneed him in the stomach, hard.

Tom grunted, and the fingers in her hair tightened reflexively before going loose, and Hermione was scrambling backwards off the desk and edging around it to the classroom door, wand trained on Tom all the while.

Straightening up from his pained hunch, Tom fixed Hermione with a watery glare.

“And just where do you think you’re off to?”


“I don’t know,” Hermione lied, and she didn’t even care if Tom could tell she was lying. “Somewhere you aren’t. I’ve had enough of these lessons, do you understand? Enough.”
Tom crossed his arms. The cords in his wrists stood out, strung tight with tension, or possibly with the impulse to strangle her.

He said, “We’ve got Dueling Club coming up.”

“Incorrect: you’ve got Dueling Club. I’ve got somewhere to be that isn’t anywhere near you.”

And while whirling on her heel and stomping out into the corridor would have made for a more dramatic exit, Hermione knew better than to turn her back to Tom. She knew better, so she stumbled backwards over the threshold, not dropping her defensive stance for a second, and slammed the door shut.
Hello! Couple things:

Some lovely folks over at Beyond the Book Fanfiction Nook have nominated me for their fandom awards! NLtS is up for Favorite Romance and Favorite WIP, and I've been nominated as a Favorite New Author! I'm honored to be up for consideration, and if any of you nominated me, please come forward so I can love you!!

You can vote for your favorite stories and authors here!

Regarding this chapter’s content: we're pulling into Smut Station, folks, so gird your loins, I guess.

14 December 1996

The first breath of winter had come to Hogwarts, whiting out the sky and coating the short, bristly grass in a layer of frost so thick it crunched underfoot. It was only mid-December, but it felt like January, and the air was hard and bright with the sort of cold that chapped the lips and settled into the very marrow of your bones. Nobody sane would have wanted to linger outdoors on a morning like this, so, naturally, Harry had decided that today was as good a day as any for a bout of Quidditch practice.

Violently resenting every last second she spent out in the cold, and with her gloved fingers clamped tight around a jam jar full of tame blue fire, Hermione stepped off the rickety wooden stairs that fed into the deserted Quidditch stands. The wind was strong at this altitude, frightfully chilly and sharp as any knife, which begged the question of how Harry and the others were managing to keep astride their brooms in these conditions, let alone stay on course and not get blown into the Whomping Willow.

Which wasn’t to say that they were trying all that hard not to get snatched off course and flung into parts unknown. Ginny had braked hard as soon as she’d spotted Hermione, nearly colliding with Katie Bell in the process, and Hermione frowned her towering disapproval rather than return Ginny’s cheery wave. Honestly, all seven of them could stand to take a refresher course on flying safety standards—

Wait a moment.

Shading her eyes and leaning forward in her seat, Hermione did a quick count and came up not with seven players, but with fourteen. It looked as if some of the other Gryffindors had joined their House’s Quidditch team for a scrimmage—yes, there were Dean and Seamus, as well as—

Cormac McLaggen. Ugh.

Perhaps Hermione would have been better off retreating to the library, after all, even though she
bloody well knew that it’d be the first place Tom would come looking for her. Frankly, she’d have almost preferred Tom’s threats to McLaggen’s graceless attempts at winning her favor.

God. Boys.

But, then again, if Hermione could hardly make out the players flying high above her—she’d only been able to identify Ginny by the coppery gleam of her long red hair, and McLaggen by the arrogant set of his broad shoulders—then she was probably little more than a brown-haired speck to the lot of them. Sure, Ginny had spotted her, but the rest of the players were quite focused on their mock game, and they probably weren’t inclined to look down at the empty stands—least of all McLaggen, who was still quite sore over having lost the Keeper position to Ron and probably determined to prove to Harry that he’d been wrong to pass him over.

That was what Hermione told herself, but she still hunched lower in her seat and patted down her windswept hair, trying to make herself look smaller. But even if McLaggen spotted her, his obnoxious attentions were still preferable to the way Tom had acted when Hermione had used Legilimency on him.

Remembering the way his dark eyes had glittered with an almost inhuman fury, Hermione shuddered and clutched her jar closer to her stomach, which had gone icy for reasons that had little to do with the seeping cold.

The wind picked up, then, as though agitated by the uneasy turn Hermione’s thoughts had taken, biting at her cheeks and whipping her hair into a frenzy. Grumbling, she raked the disheveled mass of it back from her face, clearing her periphery and allowing her to catch a flash of Slytherin green to her left.

Hermione froze, fingers still caught in her hair. How had that one paleontologist in *Jurassic Park* put it, again? *It can’t see you if you don’t move.*

It was a ridiculous thought to have, of course, because this wasn’t a movie and Tom wasn’t a velociraptor, even though he was just as viciously intelligent as they were purported to’ve been. And he was already coming closer, besides, all bundled up in his cloak and scarf, sitting down within arm’s reach.

Within arm’s reach, which meant that he was perfectly capable of grabbing Hermione by the scruff of her neck and pitching her off the stands to the uncushioned ground below.

Not that Hermione really thought he’d do that. Not in front of witnesses, anyway.

“Not exactly an ideal day for Quidditch practice, is it?” said Tom, conversational, and Hermione blinked herself out of her daze, hand drifting from her hair to settle limply in her lap. “Reckon I should’ve expected as much from Potter.”

Hermione bristled, forgetting entirely her own uncharitable thoughts regarding the state of Harry’s sanity.

“A good Quidditch player must be prepared to play in all sorts of conditions. If Harry and the others can’t endure a bit of wind, then they won’t stand a chance of winning the Quidditch Cup.”

The wind had gone down as they’d talked, but now it picked up again, whistling through the stands with an eerie moan that was evocative of nothing so much as the cries of restless ghosts. Hermione swayed under the force of it, noting resentfully that Tom’s windswept hair was looking more artful than messy.
“A bit of wind, was it?” said Tom. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say we were due for a tornado.”

Hermione’s guts gave an anxious twinge, but she snapped, “Don’t be silly; the conditions are all wrong. If anything, we’re due for snow.”

“Hogwarts is probably due for a snowstorm, yes,” Tom conceded, and was he inching closer to her on the bench? “As for you and me—we’re due for a talk, aren’t we?”

The set of his jaw was relaxed, and there wasn’t a trace of fury in his eyes, but Hermione still budged over on the bench, edging out of his reach.

“No,” she said, facing front, desperate to focus on anything that wasn’t Tom. “No, I don’t think we are.”

Tom didn’t chase her across the bench, but when he spoke, there was a certain quality to his voice that suggested a repressed desire to throttle her.

“You claim to have seen nothing—”

She’d promised herself that she wouldn’t engage with him, but still, she found herself talking to him through her teeth. “No, I said that I couldn’t understand half of what I’d seen.”

“Right, of course, my mistake. You claim not to understand what it was you saw, but you must’ve seen something that disturbed you, or else you wouldn’t have run away.”

Swiveling on the bench, Hermione scowled into Tom’s face, for all that it was a risk to engage in prolonged eye contact.

“I ran away because you went mental on me, not because of anything I’d seen in your head. And why did you lose your cool, come to that? What, it’s all right for you to go traipsing about in my head, but I can’t return the favor? What’s good for the goose isn’t good for the gander, then, is that it?”

Tom’s jaw tightened. “What,” he said, “did you see?”

Hermione’s fingers flexed against her jam jar. She considered unsealing the lid and throwing it at him.

“I saw you snap the neck of another child’s pet rabbit. I’m so sorry if watching you kill an innocent animal put me off being alone with you.”

Tom visibly relaxed, but only just. “Would telling you that the other child had it coming make you feel any better?”

Hermione’s gorge threatened to rise. God, he was awful. So awful it was making her physically sick.

“No.” And she faced front again, tilting her head to watch the Quidditch players dart about like oversized dragonflies.

“I’ll find out, Hermione. Eventually, I’ll find out.”

Hermione gripped her jam jar tight, so tight it was a wonder she didn’t put cracks in the glass.

Don’t look him in the eye, she told herself. Don’t look him in the eye. Empty your mind. Empty it.

But was there more to it than emptying her mind of thoughts? No one could ever truly shut their
waking brain off; even when she’d sunk into a stupor during the most tedious of her History of Magic lessons, lulled into a half sleep by Professor Binns’s drone, she’d always been thinking of something.

Perhaps it wasn’t about draining the moat so much as building a wall around it.

Eyes drifting half shut, Hermione tugged at a thread of her magic, following that thread to the core of herself like Theseus in the Labyrinth. And when she got there, when she reached the core of her magical self, she dipped her fingers into that wellspring and cupped the thing that made her a witch in her palms.

But she didn’t direct it outwards, that indefinable thing, the way she would have done while casting a spell. No, she pulled it inwards, gathered it in her fists, balled it up in her stomach, cocooned it around her brain.

It wasn’t easy. It was almost like holding her breath, like tensing all her muscles and keeping them tensed. It was difficult, and it was uncomfortable, but after a fraught moment that lasted forever, Hermione was tentatively certain that she’d got the trick of it.

But there was only one way to know for certain, wasn’t there?

Looking Tom in the eye, Hermione thought, as clearly as she could, Horcrux.

Tom’s brow furrowed, but then his face went smooth. Slack, almost. He composed himself immediately, and rearranged his face into a mask of indifference, but Hermione had seen it. She’d seen it.

“Well done,” he murmured. “Those are some pretty walls you’ve got there, Hermione, but I should warn you that they won’t hold up against me for much longer.”

Hermione’s breath whistled out of her lungs in a relieved gust. She was shaking, and sweating in the freezing cold, but she’d done it. She’d used Occlumency, and it had worked.

A smile twitched at her lips.

“They’ll hold up long enough,” she countered. “Long enough for me to fortify them.”

Tom sized her up, and if Hermione hadn’t known any better, she’d have said that he looked proud. Of her?

“And to think of all the progress you could’ve made by now if I’d only offered you the proper incentive.”

Hermione’s triumph soured a little. “Is that what you call it?”

“Hey, Hermione!”

Hermione started, and the reflexive jolt of her legs nearly upended her jam jar. Ginny was hovering in front of the stands, and she was doing a good job of smiling brightly at Hermione while firmly ignoring Tom.

Clearing her throat, Hermione said, “Hullo, Ginny. Shouldn’t you be practicing?”

Ginny shook her head, and her long ponytail bobbed with the movement. “Practice has sort of devolved into…” Ginny glanced over her shoulder, and Hermione followed her gaze first to Seamus
and Dean, who were tossing the Quaffle back and forth without any real purpose, and then to Harry, who was coasting aimlessly above them. “That. Fancy a ride?”

“A ride?” Hermione echoed stupidly. “A ride on wh—” Ginny patted her broomstick, illustrating the obvious, and Hermione shook her head so hard that she became dizzy from it. “Oh, no. No. I emphatically decline.”

Ginny rolled her eyes theatrically. “Can’t you just say ‘no’ like a normal person?” But Ginny’s smile was fond, and her clear affection for Hermione took the sting out of her words. “C’mon, Hermione, are you a witch or aren’t you? I promise you won’t fall off, not as long as I’m the one steering. I mean, if it were Ron’s broom, that’d be a whole ‘nother—”

“She already said no,” Tom broke in, looking at Ginny with open dislike. “If she’s not comfortable flying, then she’s not comfortable flying.”

Hermione twitched. A lot of nerve he had, talking about what did and didn’t make Hermione uncomfortable as if he hadn’t gone out of his way to make her uncomfortable from the moment they’d got properly acquainted.

Ginny, for her part, had sat up straighter on her broom and fixed Tom with a glare that burned hotter than the fire in Hermione’s jam jar.

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“Shove off, Riddle,” said Ginny, and Hermione sucked in a breath. “Hermione’s your girlfriend, not your pet, and she can bloody well speak for herself.”

“Ginny!” Hermione got abruptly to her feet, and Ginny broke off her tirade to treat Hermione to a dubious look. “I, er. I’ve changed my mind. I want to take you up on your offer. Right now.”

Ginny blinked rapidly, and even Tom was struck momentarily dumb from the shock of Hermione Granger volunteering to climb onto a broom.

“Er.” Ginny hesitated even as Hermione set down her jam jar and approached the waist-high barrier separating spectators from a fatal fall. “Okay. But you’re dead sure you want to?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, and stretched out a hand for Ginny to take. “Yes, I’m sure, so would you please give me a hand up before I change my mind?”

Tom had recovered from his shock, though, and was fast approaching Hermione and Ginny.

“Now, Hermione,” he said, sounding so much like a longsuffering husband that Hermione had to swallow a hysterical laugh. “Just wait a moment—”

But Ginny had already grabbed Hermione’s hand and helped her to hitch her leg over the broomstick. Tucking her arms around Ginny’s waist and her face against her shoulder, Hermione clung for dear life as Ginny skimmed away from the stands at a speed that most would consider reasonable, but which had the bottom dropping out from Hermione’s stomach.

God, she would never get used to this feeling of dangling in midair with nothing solid to support her feet. She felt like a Christmas bauble hanging from a tree, and all she could do was hope that she wouldn’t drop and shatter.

“Hey.” Ginny rolled her shoulder, and Hermione lifted her head to meet a pair of earnest brown eyes. “Has Riddle been giving you trouble? Because if he has—”

Amusement bloomed in Hermione’s chest, soothing the worst of her nerves. “You sound exactly like
your brother, did you know?"

Ginny treated Hermione to a sour look before facing front to point them towards one set of towering goalposts. Eventually, she said, “Talking of my brother, would you believe me if I told you that I always reckoned you’d end up with him? Well, not Ron, specifically, but with one of my brothers. Maybe Fred or George or even Percy—”

Hermione pictured life married to a Weasley twin. It was a vivid picture, and it made her faintly nauseous.

“God, no,” said Hermione. “Perhaps Ron, but the others—no. Although—did I ever tell you that I fancied Percy for about a week during my first year?”

Ginny’s shoulders shook with laughter. “I’m not surprised, although I commend you for coming to your senses before it was too late. I know you get on with him fairly well, Hermione, but not even you could endure a lifetime with that pompous arse.”

“He’s not that bad,” Hermione chided, although she privately agreed. Even for her, Percy could sometimes be a bit—much.

“Point is, even if it wasn’t one of them, I never thought it’d be Tom Riddle—or any other Slytherin, really. They’re a vile bunch of blood purists, the lot of them. You deserve better than that.”

Hermione’s heart squeezed with affection for Ginny—for all the Weasleys, really, even pompous Percy. There wasn’t a better family of purebloods alive than the Weasleys, and they’d been kind to Hermione from the start—or nearly from the start, Hermione amended, thinking back to how awful Ron had been to her during their first few weeks at Hogwarts. Rocky beginnings aside, though, Hermione would be forever grateful to Ron and his family for the way they’d welcomed a Muggle-born girl into the Wizarding world and given her a second family, a second home.

God, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley would be so terribly disappointed in her when they found out she was dating a Slytherin.

But she wouldn’t think about that. Not right now.

Clamping her legs tighter around the broomstick and focusing on their conversation as a means of distracting herself from the morbid temptation to look down, Hermione said, “Would you believe me if I told you that Tom’s not a blood purist?”

Ginny snorted. “Isn’t he, then? Then what about his mates? Are you going to tell me that Draco Malfoy’s been championing for Muggle-born rights all along?”

Hermione shook with laughter, then forced herself still when she swayed alarmingly. God, she was going to find a way to travel back in time a thousand years and throttle whoever had had the brilliant idea to enchant broomsticks to fly.

“No,” Hermione said, and wondered distantly if she was cutting off Ginny’s blood flow with her death grip. “No, the lot of them still hold to old pureblood prejudices as far as I know.”

“No they? Then, Hermione, even if Riddle’s not a blood purist, if he hangs around them without speaking out against their beliefs, isn’t he as bad as one?”

God, Ginny didn’t know the half of it.

But Hermione supposed she was meant to argue for form’s sake—it wouldn’t look good, would it, if
she failed to defend her putative boyfriend? She opened her mouth to offer what was bound to be a lukewarm defense, only to be interrupted prematurely by a boisterous shout.

“All right, Granger?”

Hermione had been focusing on the back of Ginny’s head to stop herself from looking down, and so hadn’t been paying much attention to her surroundings—she’d known they were heading towards the goalposts, and that was it. Only, she hadn’t realized that they’d been heading towards the goalposts that McLaggen had been manning.

Automatically, Hermione’s eyes went to the source of the greeting, which was a mistake. Fleeting eye contact was all the encouragement McLaggen needed, and he came swooping towards them at once.

“Oh, brilliant,” Hermione muttered, and Ginny laughed.

“Shall we head in the other direction, then?” Ginny asked, but she was already turning her broom around.

“Yes, let’s,” Hermione said, and squeezed Ginny’s waist in a gesture that was less about security and more about affection. “Only I don’t know if that’ll be enough to discourage him.”

“Oh, it definitely won’t be,” said Ginny airily. “If he wasn’t put off by your having a boyfriend, then he won’t be put off by blatant avoidance, either.”

Resting her cheek against Ginny’s shoulder, Hermione said, “Sometimes I wonder if he’s only interested in me because I’ve got a boyfriend.”

“Bet you a Sickle that he is.”

In the end, Hermione and Ginny were both right in their thinking that blatant indifference wouldn’t be enough to throw McLaggen off Hermione’s scent, as he had already dropped down beside them and leant towards Hermione with an apparent lack of concern for his own balance.

“Morning, Granger.” McLaggen hardly spared Ginny a glance of acknowledgement as he greeted Hermione, which was rather funny, seeing as Ginny was widely regarded as the best-looking girl in her year and Hermione…wasn’t. “Finally ditched Riddle, have you?”

Well, no one could accuse him of beating round the bush, could they?

“No, I haven’t,” said Hermione, thinking of Tom’s definition of ditching someone and hoping that the other two would chalk up her shiver to the windchill. “And I don’t know what gave you that idea, either.”

“I saw the two of you sitting together in the stands,” said McLaggen, blissfully unaware of how creepy he sounded. “But then you nearly broke your neck getting on Weasley’s broom, so I reckoned you were in a hurry to get away from him.”

Ginny cleared her throat, sounding an awful lot like she was trying to cover up a laugh. Hermione scowled at the back of Ginny’s head before transferring her fierce look to McLaggen, who remained unaffected because he was an idiot who couldn’t read the mood.

“Well,” Hermione prevaricated, thinking that now would be a good time for someone to leap in with a convincing explanation, Ginevra. “Well, I wasn’t. I wanted to go flying, that’s all.”
McLaggen’s eyebrows bounced towards his hairline. “That right? Only from what I hear, you’re not much for flying.”

Hermione ground her teeth. “Well, you’ve heard wrong.”

McLaggen’s lips twisted to one side; had she finally put him off? “Christ, Granger, don’t get your knickers in a twist.”

“My what?” Hermione flared, just as Ginny snapped, “Who the bloody hell d’you think you are, talking about her knickers like they’re any concern of yours?”

McLaggen reared back, and his broom’s trajectory wobbled alarmingly. “Merlin, don’t get shirty. I was only joking.”

But Hermione wasn’t having it. Bravely unclamping one arm from around Ginny’s waist, she pointed her finger and jabbed it in McLaggen’s face, forcing his eyes to cross.

“No,” said Hermione, jabbing her finger harder for emphasis. “No, do you hear me? I have had it. It wasn’t a joke, it was sexual harassment, and you dismissed our perfectly rational reactions to something so disgusting as, what, female hysterics? I am done with you and your inability to take no for an answer, do you understand? Leave me alone.”

McLaggen goggled, mouth popping open wide enough to catch flies. Turning away from him with a sniff, Hermione said, “You ought to face front if you don’t want to crash.”

Hiccupping with laughter, Ginny said, “And with that, I think we ought to make our dramatic exit.”

Putting on speed, Ginny did just that, and Hermione hurried to refasten both arms around her waist.

Predictably, though, McLaggen’s shock didn’t last. Not a minute of peaceful silence had passed before he was calling out to Hermione. Craning her neck, Hermione saw that he was fast catching up to her and Ginny.

“Ginny—”

“Yeah,” said Ginny. “I know. Circe’s tits, some blokes never learn, do they?”

Flattening her torso out against the length of her broom, Ginny put on speed, but her broom wasn’t a Firebolt, and she wasn’t in Harry’s league speed-wise. She was fast, but she wasn’t quite fast enough, and McLaggen was catching up.

“D’you think he’ll get the point if I hex him?” Ginny asked, and Hermione opened her mouth to say that, no, he probably wouldn’t, but all that came out was a shocked huff of breath as McLaggen dropped abruptly down beside them.

Too abruptly.

From that point forward, Hermione had a difficult time parsing what was happening.

First, there was the shock of McLaggen coming so close to them, and then the greater shock of his broom colliding with Ginny’s—of his shoulder catching Hermione’s and nearly unseating her—“Oh, fuck,” said McLaggen—of Ginny swerving hard, too hard, into the wooden wall that separated the stands from the steep drop below—

There came a sickening, meaty crunch. A crunch, and pain the likes of which Hermione had never
felt before, radiating in hot waves from her lower leg to twist her stomach into greasy knots. She opened her mouth to vomit, but no vomit came out.

She didn’t vomit, but she screamed. She screamed, and Ginny screamed, too. Oh, God, Ginny. What had happened to Ginny—?

“Fuck, Hermione, hang on,” Ginny grated out, and there were tears in her voice.

The broom pitched forwards, pointing towards the ground, and Hermione’s arms were slack from the mind-numbing pain, but she held on as Ginny had told her to, she tried so hard to hold on—

The ground rose up to meet them, and Ginny skidded across the frosty earth in a sloppy landing, a landing that made the pain in Hermione’s leg flare so bright and so hot that it greyed her vision and blotted out the world.

She was off the broom. Somehow, she was off the broom and sitting on her bum in the dirt, and Ginny was cradling her wrist to her chest and crying great fat tears—and that was wrong; it was wrong because Ginny never, ever cried—

Shouting. Everyone was shouting.

Where had they all come from?

Hermione picked out Ron, white faced and furious and hitting McLaggen across the nose, and McLaggen was shouting, “I didn’t fucking mean it; it’s not my fault she flew into the stands,” through the blood pouring out of his nostrils. Harry was kneeling in front of Ginny and Hermione, and his mouth was moving, but Hermione couldn’t make out what he was saying over Ron’s shouts of, “My sister—my fucking sister, you stupid bastard—you broke my sister’s fucking arm and Hermione’s fucking leg—” And here came the others, all of them, pressing in and reaching out to touch, but, God, Hermione didn’t want any of them touching her, not when she felt like this, not when her bones were shifting around all wrong, not when she was in splinters—

“Get out of the way.”

Everyone went quiet, and through the searing tears of pain clouding her vision, Hermione saw the gathered Gryffindors part like the Red Sea for Tom Riddle.

He knelt. He knelt in front of Hermione and touched featherlight fingers to her shoulder. His face was composed. His eyes were coolly assessing. You wouldn’t know from looking at him that Hermione had just broken her leg.

“Lie back,” he said. “I’m going to cast a Hover Charm on you and Weasley so nothing can aggravate your broken bones on the way to the hospital wing. All right?”

Hermione pictured herself hovering flat in midair and on display, floating all the way across the grounds and into the castle. She didn’t like it at all, but she knew Tom had the right of it.

“Tom,” she said, and it was difficult to breathe past the pain, but she had to get this out. “Tom, you’re not going to do anything to McLaggen, are you?”

Tom’s eyes shuttered. He didn’t answer, which was answer enough.

“Tom,” she pressed, but Harry was pushing in close, and Ron had let go of McLaggen to hover protectively over her and Ginny.
“It’s all right, Hermione.” Harry pushed Hermione’s hair back from her face and pressed his palms against her cheeks. Hermione’s nostrils filled with the smell of his leather Quidditch gear. “It’s gonna be all right.”

No, it wasn’t going to be all right. Not really. Not at all.

Ginny was released from the hospital wing four hours before curfew. Hermione wasn’t.

True, Hermione’s injury had been more severe than Ginny’s, but it had mended well, and you couldn’t tell but for a splattering of bruises that she’d been hurt at all. No, Madam Pomfrey clearly held a grudge against Hermione for waltzing out of the hospital wing with a concussion last month and had decided to take this grievous slight out against her with a forced overnight stay.

Knowing that nothing productive would come of it but finding herself unable to resist the impulse, Hermione rotated her wrist and studied her watch’s face.

It was coming up on half one in the morning.

God.

Hermione couldn’t sleep. Not properly, anyway. Every so often, she’d drift into the grey haze that was situated between consciousness and unconsciousness, where her brain was drained of waking thought but where she could still feel the sheets twisted round her legs and hear the ticking of her watch’s hands. But, inevitably, some sound—a creak of hinges, the whispery voices of drifting ghosts—would snatch her out of that almost-unconsciousness and leave her where she’d started: staring at the distant ceiling with dry, itchy eyes.

Thinking that it would provide her with a change of scenery if nothing else, Hermione rolled onto her side—and froze.

There was movement by the doorway, but whatever the source of the movement, it wasn’t a ghost. It was too solid to be a ghost, but it was also too large to be Peeves.

Slowly, Hermione reached for her wand where she’d set it down on top of her bedside cabinet—but abandoned that endeavor in favor of sitting up straight in bed.

Squinting, she hissed, “Tom?”

The figure by the door came closer, close enough that Hermione’s eyes, long adjusted to the dark, could make out the shape of his face. Yes, that was Tom. Tom, who was skulking about the hospital wing after curfew.

The lights in the matron’s quarters were out, but Pomfrey’s ears were keen, and she was a notoriously light sleeper. Thinking of all the points they could and would lose if they were caught, Hermione beckoned Tom closer rather frantically, the better to lecture him in an undertone that wouldn’t carry.

Snatching him by the sleeve as soon as he was within arm’s reach, Hermione whispered fiercely, “What are you doing here? It’s past curfew—even prefects ought to be in bed by now—”
Tom sat down on the edge of Hermione’s mattress and fixed her with a stern look as if she were the one breaking the rules, which was just so patently ridiculous that it struck Hermione momentarily dumb. Taking advantage of her petrified tongue, Tom said, “Did you know, it’s only been a little over a month since your last visit to the hospital wing? This trend of getting yourself badly injured is fast becoming a bad habit.”

The fingers Hermione had pinched around Tom’s sleeve went slack. She couldn’t say for certain, but she suspected that the look on her face was that of a person who’d just sucked on an especially sour lemon.

Finding her lost voice, she said, rather huffily, “You say that like I’m doing it on purpose.”

“Aren’t you?” Tom said silkily, and Hermione looked away.

She didn’t look away because she was angry, though. Or at least, not only because she was angry.

They’d come crashing down, you see, the psychic walls she’d bricked up around her mind, had broken down when her leg had broken, had crumbled to dust from the shock of searing pain. She’d spent her sleepless night in the hospital wing building them back up, and now she prodded at them with the invisible fingers of her own magic. If anything, they seemed stronger than they had earlier, possibly because she’d had so much time on her hands to devote to fortifying them.

Giving the walls of her nascent Occlumency one last poke, she licked her dry lips and tried to work up the courage to meet Tom’s eyes—

But he’d already framed her chin with his fingers and forced her to face him. Hermione’s eyes went wide, but her walls held. And held.

Stroking his thumb across her chin, Tom said with an unsettling sort of tenderness, “How are you feeling?”

How was she feeling? She’d been getting that question a lot today—yesterday, rather, as it was past one. She’d got it from Pomfrey and Harry and Ron and what felt like half of all Gryffindor House before Pomfrey had shooed them out of the hospital wing. McLaggen had asked her that, over and over, between fumbling out frantic apologies as he darted wild eyes between her and a stone-faced Tom. Ginny wouldn’t stop apologizing, either, as if it were somehow her fault that McLaggen was a raging imbecile.

“You haven’t done anything awful to McLaggen, have you?” Hermione blurted in a too-loud voice. Rather than answer her, Tom arched his brows and darted a significant look towards Madam Pomfrey’s quarters.

Right.

Swallowing, Hermione said in a strained undertone, “Well, have you?”

“His limbs are all intact, if that’s what you’re asking, but I’m not sure if he’ll ever recover from the blunt force trauma.” Hermione’s mouth popped open in dismayed shock, and Tom rolled his eyes. “Don’t look at me like that; I was having you on. I haven’t done anything to the great lumbering idiot, although I can’t imagine why you’re so concerned for the arse who broke your leg.”

Hermione’s mouth gaped wider still. He’d been joking. He’d been joking with her. She hadn’t realized that Tom knew how to joke.

Shaking her head, Hermione pressed, “Yet. You haven’t done anything to him yet.”
Tom’s lips pulled tight. “He hurt you. If the angle at which you hit the stands had been different, you could’ve broken something other than your leg. Your spine, for example. Or your neck.”

As if Hermione hadn’t had a great deal of time to think over how close she’d come to dying that morning. Suppressing a shudder, she said, “It’s not as if he hurt me on purpose. Furthermore, I’ll thank you not to pretend to care.”

Tom cocked his head. “You always say that. That I’m only pretending to care.”

Hermione huffed and looked away. If he did care, it was in the same way that he’d cared when she’d been concussed—he didn’t like the idea of someone messing about with his things. She was only good for public relations, lest she forget.

But then cool air hit her bare legs as the bedsheets were whisked away, and Hermione found herself staring at Tom once more. He was studying her left leg, and after a moment of hovering his hand in midair, he touched the very tips of his fingers to her skin.

Her flesh broke out in goosebumps under his touch, and she twitched. Ginny had brought her a knee-length cotton nightgown to change into, but now Hermione wished she’d specifically requested pajamas, pajamas that would have covered her from neck to ankle.

Tom flattened out his hand, curving his palm around her leg. His thumb stroked her skin, and he didn’t look away from the point of contact as he repeated, “How are you feeling?”

The skid of his thumb tickled, and Hermione had to swallow a hiccup. “You can see for yourself that I’m perfectly fine. You were here when Madam Pomfrey mended the break. Why are you here now?”

Tom’s thumb went still, but he did not release her leg. “I had a feeling that you wouldn’t be able to sleep. People usually have a hard time of it, sleeping in strange beds.”

True enough. Hermione hadn’t been able to fall sleep on her first night at Hogwarts, stomach all caught up in giddy knots. She hadn’t been able to sleep all that well on her first night back home, either, having got used to her tower dormitory and her cozy four-poster.

Hermione crossed her arms. Her foot twitch as she contemplated kicking him. “Well, unless you’ve brought me a Sleeping Draught, you can shove off.” Not that she’d have accepted it if he had brought one.

Tom dipped his free hand into his robes. When he withdrew it, his fingers were clutched around a phial of what was unmistakably Sleeping Draught.

“A Sleeping Draught, was it?”

Hermione’s crossed arms coiled tighter still. “I’m not exactly keen on being drugged to sleep by you, thanks.”

Tom’s expression went flat. “I can’t do anything right in your eyes, can I?”

Hermione’s lower lip trembled, but she firm it. She was unnerved at the thought of falling into a drugged sleep in front of Tom, yes, but there was more to it than that.

Did he really mean nothing nefarious by it? Was this actually some sort of—God—some sort of considerate gesture?
No. Couldn’t be.

Tom’s sigh was heavy. “I’ll just leave it here, then, should you change your mind.” He tilted forward to set the phial down on Hermione’s bedside cabinet, but in doing so, he was forced to lean into her.

He went still. His breath washed warmly across her skin. His eyes traced her face, lingering on the shape of her mouth, and Hermione’s cheeks burned under the scrutiny.

More alarming still, a warm pressure began to build in her abdomen.

The glass of the phial tapped against the wood of the cabinet, but even after Tom had set it down, he didn’t retreat.

The hand on her leg tightened. His long lashes drooped.

The heat in Hermione’s abdomen stoked.

Just as she had done to him in that alcove a month ago, Tom leaned in to graze his mouth against Hermione’s.

His teeth gripped her lower lip. Squeezed it hard enough to bruise. Tugged.

Hermione’s arms uncoiled. Her hands framed his neck.

She deepened the kiss.

It left her lightheaded, this kiss, as all their kisses had done before, and the swipe of his tongue across her taste buds made the room like it was spinning on its axis. Hermione felt as if she was falling slowly backwards, and when her head hit the pillow with a thwump, she realized that she had been. Tom had pushed her down, down to lay prone against the mattress.

Her eyes had drifted shut, but now they sprang open, and she tilted her head to break the seal of their lips. Her fingers convulsed against his neck. She met his eyes.

He was leaning over her, fingers flexing against her leg. The fingers of his other hand were snarled in Hermione’s hair where it was haloed across her pillow.

He wasn’t quite lying on top of her, not yet. His feet were still on the floor. His torso was twisted at an awkward angle. It would be easy enough to push him off, to put a stop to this before it spiraled out of control.

Giving her Occlumency another testing prod, Hermione tightened her hold on Tom’s neck and dragged him back down, down into another, wetter kiss.

The bedframe creaked as Tom shifted around until he was lying beside Hermione on the mattress, half hovering over her. The hand on her lower leg drifted up to cup her knee, and Hermione stopped kissing him yet again to fix him with a wary look.

His face was unreadable, if flushed. The hand on her knee retreated and sought out the soft rise of her stomach. His palm was oven hot through the thin cotton of her nightgown. There was a tugging sensation, and Hermione realized that he was toying with one of her buttons.

Oh, God.

His fingers crept, spiderlike, from the last button in the line to the first, and unhooked it. When she didn’t push him away, he unhooked the next, and the one after that, until all ten buttons were
He shifted his weight. Parted the halves of her nightgown to expose her from collarbone to navel.
His eyes flickered down.

Hermione was hot all over and growing hotter still. Her breath rattled in her lungs. She didn’t have to
look down to know that her nipples were tight and peaked, that her breasts were bumpy with
gooseflesh, that her stomach had gone concave with the breath she’d sucked in and held.

But then Tom was cupping her right breast, and her held breath was whistling out. It felt strangely
heavy, her breast, almost swollen, as Tom tested the weight of it in his dry palm. His fingers gripped
her, denting the mound of tissue, and his thumb circled her stiff nipple. It felt nothing at all like her
own hand. No, not even close.

He kissed her again, harder than before, tongue parting her lips to force them jaw-achingly wide. His
hand had left her breast to rest on her naked stomach, fingers curling and relaxing against her skin in
the same rhythm as their kiss. Hermione’s knickers had flooded with a sticky warmth, and there was
an itch, an itch that she badly wanted to scratch—

She grabbed Tom’s wrist, and he broke the kiss to study the look on her face.

She looked away. She looked away, but she pulled his hand lower, beneath the rucked-up skirt of
her nightgown. She pulled his hand between her legs and pressed his palm against the damp crotch
of her knickers.

Tom’s breath caught. Hermione was flushed all the way to her ears, and she wondered if she’d done
something wrong, if she’d miscalculated, if she was being, what, too forward—if he didn’t like the
feel of the rough stubble coating her inner thighs—if he didn’t like the feel of her—

Tom’s hand moved. His two longest fingers traced the swollen outline of her sex through her
knickers.

They were ugly, her knickers, the loose cotton sort with a stretched-out waistband that she liked to
wear to bed or during her period. They weren’t anything close to sexy, but Tom didn’t seem to care.
No, his breath was labored and his fingers were pressing harder against the outline of Hermione’s
cunt like he could phase them through the cotton and press them up into the dark, wet hollow of her.

*Cunt.* Had she really just thought of it like that? It was obscene. It was *dirty*. It was a nasty word that
boys liked to call girls when they couldn’t think of anything else rude to call them, and she shouldn’t
have used it, not even in her head, but—

But it was fitting, in a way. A dirty word for this dirty thing they were doing.

Tom tilted his palm, withdrawing his fingers from the hot, sticky space between Hermione’s thighs to
catch them in the waistband of her knickers. Caught, and curled, and tugged. Tugged them down her
legs and left them loose around her knees.

He cupped her thigh. Urged it farther away from its twin. The hard heel of his palm bumped one of
her bruises, and she hissed.

He hesitated at the noise, as if he suspected that she was having second thoughts. And she was. She
was having second thoughts and third thoughts and even fourth thoughts, but—

The hand on her knee crawled up her inner thigh. His fingernails grazed the crease of her hip. His
fingertips brushed the thickened outer lips of her cunt.

Her hips arched, and it was reflexive. It wasn’t like touching herself, and it was strange, to feel fingers not her own toying with her cunt. How did it feel to him? Fleshy? Sticky, certainly. Did he think it strange, the way she swelled under his touch? Did he think it odd, that her outer lips were shorter and less prominent than the inner ones? Did he notice how wet she was getting, even though he was hardly doing anything at all but finger searchingly at her lips?

She’d released his wrist, but now she grabbed it again. Still not looking at him, still staring at the bedside cabinet and the phial that sat on top of it, she changed the angle of his hand and pressed his fingers up against her swollen clitoris.

His fingers flexed, and her clit drew up hard and tight. It was tingling, her clit, rushing with blood and singing with agitated nerve endings. She wanted to rock her hips against his hand but couldn’t bring herself to do it.

He changed the angle of his hand himself, this time. His thumb circled her clitoris even as his fingers pressed against her slit, dipping shallowly into the tight clench of her cunt.

Hermione made a noise—not quite a moan, not quite a grunt, and slapped her hand over her mouth, appalled. Tom huffed out a noise of his own—a laugh? Whatever it was, he smothered it against her hair and breathed hot against her ear.

His thumb was moving faster, tracing circles against her clit, and Hermione’s legs were sawing through the sheets, drawing up to plant her feet against the mattress, then going limp again when her knickers got tangled around her knees. She got one leg out of her knickers but not the other, and used her foot to push them down around her ankle.

The backs of her thighs were tingling, now, and her breath was growing faster in her chest. There was a clenching in her womb, but it wasn’t the same as the rhythmic contractions that came with an orgasm—no, it was the tension that came before an orgasm, winding tighter and tighter until she thought she wouldn’t be able to bear it, till she thought that she’d die if she came and that she’d die if she didn’t, and Tom was kissing her throat, now, sloppy, open-mouthed kisses, and he was grinding his thumb so hard against her clit that it hurt, and it would have certainly chafed if she wasn’t so wet and growing wetter—

She was holding onto him. She was squeezing the wrist of the hand between her legs and gripping him by the nape of his neck, fingernails catching in his sweaty hair. She was probably hurting him. She didn’t care.

She’d been trying to hold her hips still, but they’d started moving in short little thrusts of their own accord. They rode up against his fingers, hard, and her body went bowstring tight.

Her breath shuddered in her chest. Her toes clenched, and her teeth snagged her lower lip, and her cunt contracted hard, hard enough to hurt, and a dizzying rush of endorphins flushed through her body. Even after the first clench of orgasm, her sex still throbbed with aftershocks, pulsing against Tom’s fingers.

Tom wouldn’t stop touching her even after she came, and it was too much, sensory overload. Making a weak noise of protest, Hermione dragged his hand away from her swollen cunt.

Propping himself up on his elbow, Tom glanced down her body. Absently, he wrapped his mouth around his fingers—the fingers that’d been touching her—and Hermione made a shocked noise.
Her eyes flickered from his face to his hips where they were pressed against the bed. Did he want—?

Haltingly, she said, “Um—do you want me to—”

Tom’s flush spread and climbed all the way to his hairline. Looking away, he mumbled something to the effect of, “That won’t be necessary.”

Hermione frowned, but then her face smoothed out with shock. Oh. *Oh.*

At a loss for what else to do, Hermione pressed her sticky thighs together and set to doing up her buttons.

Tom braced his hands against the mattress, and Hermione could smell herself on his fingers.

God, how *mortifying.*

He sat up.

“I ought to be getting back,” he said.

Hermione’s fingers stilled. “You’re not staying?” she asked, and her voice was a sex-wrecked rasp.

Oh, God. They’d had sex. It hadn’t been intercourse, no, but broadly speaking, they’d definitely had sex. They’d had sex, and Tom was going to ditch Hermione while her cunt was still rippling with the aftershocks of what he’d done to her.

She didn’t know why she was surprised.

Tom’s face seemed to soften at Hermione’s outburst. He brushed her hair back from her sweaty forehead and leaned in to kiss her cheek.

“Don’t want Pomfrey to catch me out of bed, do you?” he asked, petting her hair. “Don’t fret, darling; I’ll come and get you in the morning.” Glancing sidelong at the cabinet, he said, “And take the Sleeping Draught, would you?”

Hermione grimaced, communicating without words what she thought of *that* plan.

Tom’s lips twisted to one side, a sour half smile. He stood up, and Hermione couldn’t help but notice that he adjusted his trousers as he went.

“Sleep well,” Tom said. He gave her hair one last stroke, and then he was on his way out.

Hermione waited for him to leave before giving the Sleeping Draught a long, considering look. But, no. She’d better not, even if he really *didn’t* mean anything sinister by it. Better safe than sorry.

Slowly, she pulled her knickers back up around her hips, although the press of damp cotton against her wet cunt wasn’t what she’d call *comfortable.* She drew the sheets over her legs. She resumed her contemplation of the ceiling.

She prodded at the walls she’d built around her brain.

It changed nothing, what they’d done. *Nothing.* She was still set on unearthing his secrets. On *tearing him down.*

Tomorrow, she’d start her hunt for the meaning of the word *horcrux.*
And she thought she knew where to begin.
20 December 1996

“It’s no use, Crooks. Whatever I do, I end up looking like a sad excuse for a clown.”

From his kingly perch on her pillow, Crookshanks treated Hermione to a disdainful look. It was a far cry from the soothing purr he usually offered her in times of emotional distress, and it compelled Hermione to pull a sour face of her own.

“Oh, piss off, then,” she muttered. She knew why he was in such a snit, too: earlier, he’d tried to climb into her lap, only for her to push him off because she hadn’t wanted him to shed long ginger cat hairs all over her new dress. From the way he was acting, though, you’d have thought she’d flung him into a tub of ice water.

Temperamental little thing.

But Hermione had more pressing concerns than her cat’s hurt feelings: Professor Slughorn’s Christmas party was due to start in half an hour—closer to twenty-five minutes, now—and she still wasn’t ready. Oh, she’d got herself all dressed in short order, had practiced walking in high heels until her ankles no longer wobbled, and had given her hair one hundred strokes with the brush, but she’d hit a wall with her makeup. Which was to say that she didn’t know how to properly apply it.

She supposed that this was what she got for refusing to wear cosmetics for most of her adolescent life.

Having finished wiping the last traces of her fifth failed attempt at making herself over from her face, Hermione picked up the tube of lipstick as gingerly as she might a crate of Weasleys’ Wildfire Whizbangs. Her skin was smarting from being scrubbed clean five times in the last hour, and to say that she was not looking forward to her sixth try was to say that the ocean was wet.

Perhaps she was better off going to the party with a bare face. No one had said that she absolutely must wear makeup to be presentable. Yes. Yes, she’d just go without it. Besides, the beauty industry was misogynist and predatory and Hermione oughtn’t to buy into its arbitrary standards—

The door swung open, then, wrenching Hermione out of her internal debate. She gave a guilty start, hiding the tube of lipstick in the folds of her skirts and feeling rather a lot like an adolescent boy who’d been caught with his hand down his underpants.
Lavender and Parvati paused at the threshold and gaped openly at Hermione, who flushed under the scrutiny. What was their problem? Hadn’t they ever seen a girl in a dress before?

Parvati was the first of the pair to recover her senses, shaking off her shocked daze to exclaim, “Oh, Hermione! You look beautiful!”

Galvanized by the sound of her best friend’s voice, Lavender rushed forward to invade Hermione’s personal space, gushing, “What a pretty dress! Where on earth did you get it?”

Hermione hunched where she was sat on the edge of her bed, white-knuckling the tube of lipstick like a lifeline. God, she’d been praying for this not to happen.

She couldn’t begrudge her dormmates their enthusiasm, though, not entirely. It was quite a pretty dress, possibly the prettiest Hermione had ever owned: the snug bodice hugged her torso and flared out into a fluttery, knee-length skirt, and the lightweight fabric had been dyed a rich crimson. By pairing the dress with glittery golden heels, Hermione had put together an outfit made up of her House colors. Gryffindor colors.

She’d been trying to complement her outfit with matching makeup—red lipstick for the dress, sparkly gold eyeshadow for the heels—but, well. It went without saying how well that had gone.

“Er,” Hermione hedged, smoothing out her dress’s skirt where it was draped across her knees. “I got it in Hogsmeade. I thought—I thought the two of you were doing your Potions homework down in the common room.”

Throwing her schoolbooks down on her four-poster with little care for the state of their spines, Parvati said airily, “Oh, we finished it ages ago, didn’t we, Lav? We’ve just come up from the kitchens, actually. I’ve got some fairy cakes in my bag—would you like some, Hermione? They’re probably a bit squashed, but—”

Cutting Parvati off, Hermione said, “Er, no, thank you. I expect there’ll be catering at Slughorn’s party, so—”

“Of course!” Lavender squealed, and Crookshanks shot her a dirty look. "I completely forgot about all that—Hermione, is that makeup?"

Lavender’s eyes were fixed on Hermione’s bedside cabinet, and Hermione could have cursed herself on the spot. She’d hidden the lipstick in the folds of her skirt, yes, but she’d completely forgotten about the array of tubes and pots on display on her cabinet, all ringed around the vase of flowers that still hadn’t wilted after all these months.

“Well, yes.” Caught out, Hermione set the lipstick down beside its compatriots. There was no use in hiding it now, was there? "But I don’t think I’ll be wearing it to the party—I’m useless at this sort of thing, so—"

"Well, we’re not," said Parvati, as if Hermione could miss her kohl-lined eyes and glossy pink lips. "We could help you put it on, if you’d like."

No. No, Hermione wouldn’t like that. Her stomach was all in knots, and the thought of Tom seeing her dressed like this had her palms breaking out in a sweat. Her nerves were stretched thin, and she didn’t need Lavender and Parvati fussing over her on top of all the rest.

“No, thanks,” Hermione said with as much civility as she could muster, which wasn’t much at all.

Parvati’s smile curved into a frown, but Lavender must not’ve read Hermione’s tone. Clasping her
hands like a supplicant, she said with a bit of a whine to her voice, "Oh, but Hermione, don't you want to look pretty for Tom?"

The thin thread of Hermione’s patience gave with an almost audible snap.

No.

That was quite enough.

“No,” Hermione said, voice harsh enough to make Lavender flinch. She really ought to’ve felt bad about that, but she didn’t, not right now. "No, I don’t, because I'm not some doll for him to play with—and, really, I wish the two of you would nose out of my personal life for once. Not that you ever cared to hear about it until Tom started showing interest in me.”

Hermione’s voice had risen gradually as she’d talked, until she was almost shouting by the end of it. Lavender was hunched in on herself like a puppy expecting to be hit, eyes wide and wounded, and Hermione felt a pained twinge in her chest to see her that way.

“Oh, Lavender.” Hermione stood up, hands extended like a peace offering, but Lavender only backed up a wobbling step. "I didn't mean to—"

"No. No, I think you did mean to."

Gaping, Hermione swiveled to face Parvati, who was positively incandescent with something like—something like fury.

"Wh-what?” Hermione’s cheeks were stinging as though Parvati had reached out and physically struck her across the face, and she couldn't think of anything else to say but that. What? What was—" "You heard me.” Where Lavender had retreated, Parvati had stormed a couple of feet closer until she was standing in front of her friend like a wall, like a shield. "Do you think we’re stupid? No, don’t answer—I know that you think we’re stupid. Just a pair of stupid giggly gossips you’re forced to tolerate because we happen to share a dormitory.” "I don’t think you’re stupid—"

But Parvati had gathered steam, and she wasn’t inclined to listen to Hermione’s defense. “It’s not what you think, it’s how you act. And if you act like the people around you aren’t worth your time, like they’re beneath you, then they’re going to think that you don’t like them!”

Hermione’s heart was a hard lump in her chest. She looked at Lavender, who was staring at the floor and not protesting a word of what Parvati had said. Was this what they truly thought of her, then? Anger boiled in her veins, and she wanted nothing more than to shout Parvati down, to refute all the silly things she’d said—

Silly. She’d thought that about them before, hadn’t she? In her more uncharitable moments, yes, and she’d rarely truly meant it, but—

But.

“I don’t think you’re beneath me,” Hermione rasped.

And she didn’t. She really, truly didn’t, but the way she’d acted around them—well, she couldn’t blame them for thinking that she looked down on them, could she? She’d been dismissive of them at times and condescending at others, all because they were different from her, with their giggly voices
and their perfumed skin and their smooth, styled hair. And they weren’t the only people she’d treated that way, either: there was Luna, and Fred and George, and even Harry and Ron—

She’d been cruel without meaning to be, hadn’t she?

“Maybe you don’t,” Parvati conceded, but her arms were still crossed defensively, closing Hermione out. “And maybe we’ve been unfair to you—I know I have, and I’m sorry, really—but we’ve been trying to be your friends all year, Hermione, and I don’t know if we can keep trying if you’re going to carry on acting as if we’re not worth your time.”

Hermione fisted her hands in her skirt, crumpling her dress’s fine fabric. “I didn’t mean to act that way,” she said. It was a weak defense, but it was all she had.

“It doesn’t matter what you meant to do, don’t you get it? All that matters is how you’ve acted.”

Hermione wanted to argue. It was always her first instinct, arguing. But Parvati was right. She was right, and all Hermione could do was apologize and try to correct her behavior from here on out.

“I’m sorry,” Hermione said. “Really, I am. I’ll try—I’ll try and be better.”

Parvati hesitated, then said, “Thanks.” Her voice was no longer icy, but it wasn’t exactly warm, either. “But you know, an apology’s useless unless you mean what you say about being better. And I can’t trust that you mean it until you start showing it.”

Hermione licked her lips. She untangled her fingers from her skirt. “Yeah,” she said. “I know.”

There was an awkward beat of silence, then, one that Hermione didn’t quite know how to fill. Her eyes bounced from Lavender and Parvati to Crookshanks to her bedside cabinet with its clutter of cosmetics.

She took a steadying breath.

“Lavender,” Hermione said, and when Lavender looked up at Hermione, her eyes were damp and rimmed with red. “Would you—er—would you mind helping me with my makeup? I meant it when I said that I was useless at that sort of thing.”

Lavender’s lips parted, forming a soft pink O. She exchanged a long look with Parvati, then turned to Hermione.

“Sure,” said Lavender, a tentative smile forming on her mouth. “Yeah, I s’pose that’d be all right.”

"...and this might be nothing more than hearsay, mind you, but there're rumors going around that Eldred Worple brought an actual vampire along as his plus-one."

A year ago, hearing as much would’ve given Hermione pause. Not so now, and it spoke to how desensitized she was growing that her only reaction was to sweep a critical eye from Tom’s tidy dark hair to his porcelain-pale skin and say, tartly, “Relation of yours?”

Tom’s practiced smile flickered. "Ha, ha," he said, flatly.

Hermione suppressed a smirk. Giving Tom’s hand a conciliatory pat, she said, “Oh, don’t get your
wand in a knot; I was only teasing you.”

Tom’s expression wavered again, and no matter how hard Hermione strained to, she couldn’t quite read it.

She was given an inkling as to what the look on his face meant, though, when he leaned in to breathe warmly across her mouth and say, "Were you, then? Tell me, darling—in what other ways do you intend to tease me tonight?"

Hermione froze, pulse beating rabbit quick in her throat. What an idiot she was, teasing Tom Riddle as if their relationship wasn’t a farce, as if he wasn’t as dangerous as any fanged viper.

"Only I hope you don’t intend to tease the actual vampire in the room the way you’re teasing me," Tom went on, grazing his fingertips across Hermione’s throat, scratching her skin with his blunt nails. "You may not enjoy his bite as much as you enjoy mine."

Fine tremors were racing up Hermione’s legs, and she clamped them tightly shut in hopes of staving off the heat building at the apex of her thighs. They were in public. They were in public, and Tom was five seconds away from feeling her up, and, God, she wouldn’t stop him. She wouldn’t stop him.

Clinging to rational thought with both hands, Hermione blurted, "Well, perhaps ‘teasing’ wasn’t quite the word I was looking for. ‘Criticizing,’ maybe. Black’s not your color, you know; it washes you out."

Tom straightened his posture, fingers withdrawing from Hermione’s throat. Thank God.

"Does it, now?" he asked.

Hermione gritted her teeth and refused to answer. Tom had an uncanny knack for sniffing out lies even when he wasn’t actively using Legilimency, and she’d rather not press her luck.

Because she had been lying. She’d been lying because black was his color, and his dress robes suited him all too well. They were almost plain, his robes, with little to distinguish them from what half of the other boys at the party were wearing but for the silver embroidery at his cuffs and collar, but they suited him. Anything more ostentatious would’ve distracted the eye from his natural good looks.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve, haven’t you, Granger, running off at the mouth about what other people are wearing when you look as if some great furry animal crawled on top of your head and died.”

Tom’s expression darkened, and Hermione’s shoulders drew up. God, what was it with Slytherins and their persistent habit of skulking up behind people unnoticed? Did they have to practice at it, or did it come naturally?

Draco Malfoy had materialized on Tom’s other side, and he was looking rather washed out, himself, in his black, high-collared dress robes. So washed out, in fact, that if Hermione hadn’t known any better, she might’ve mistaken him for Eldred Worple’s vampire.

Turning up her nose, Hermione said, rather prissily, “Shove off, Malfoy.”

Malfoy’s rejoinder was characteristically theatrical; staggering back a step and pressing a hand over his heart as though wounded, he said in a carrying voice, “What a clever retort that was. Really witty. Been taking lessons from Weasley, have you?”

“That’s enough of that,” said Tom, and although his carefully neutral expression didn’t once flicker,
the warning in his voice was as ominous as a bank of thunderheads. “There’s nothing wrong with Hermione’s hair, Draco, although I can’t help but wonder how you’d react if yours were to spontaneously and mysteriously fall out.”

What little color Malfoy carried in his thin cheeks drained at Tom’s insinuation, and Hermione bit down on her tongue to keep her laughter in check. Malfoy was a prat, yes, but she couldn’t allow herself to sink down to his level.

At any rate, she’d been prepared for someone or another to make a rude comment about her hair, seeing as how her otherwise put-together appearance drew still more attention to the thick, coarse riot of it. She had, in fact, briefly considered styling it—treating it with Sleekeazy, perhaps, or at least plaicing it—but had eventually decided to leave it loose around her shoulders in an act of quiet rebellion.

Malfoy could just take his unsolicited commentary and shove it.

“How have you seen Professor Slughorn yet?” Tom asked Malfoy, changing the subject as easily as if he hadn’t just threatened to sneak something unsavory into Malfoy’s shampoo, and Hermione tried not to perk up too obviously at the mention of Slughorn’s name.

Hunching his narrow shoulders and shoving his hands into his pockets, Malfoy shook his head and said, “I mean, yeah, I have, but good luck getting a word in edgewise if you’ve anything to say to him. The old bastard’s never alone; last I saw, he was smarming up to Celestina Warbeck.”

Tom wrinkled his nose, and Hermione squashed the impulse to stroke her finger down the bridge of it. “Celestina Warbeck, was it? I do hope she isn’t here to provide live entertainment.”

Now Hermione wrinkled her nose. Why didn’t they just come out and say that their disdain for Celestina Warbeck and her soppy love songs was rooted in toxic masculinity and fragile male sensibilities? Boys, honestly.

Of course, there was more to Hermione’s consternation than her disgust with boys in general. She’d expected that it wouldn’t be easy to get Slughorn alone, but having her qualms confirmed by a third party was still disheartening.

Whatever a horcrux was, Hermione was certain that it was something rare and something awful if Tom hadn’t been able to read up on it in Hogwarts’s library. It had to be quite nasty indeed if it hadn’t even turned up in the Restricted Section, which was known to house books on subjects as revolting as the Polyjuice Potion. And if it was as bad as all that, then surely Slughorn would be reluctant to divulge the details of it to Hermione.

Which was why Hermione had eschewed cornering him after class in favor of holding out until the Slug Club’s annual Christmas party. It would be too easy for Slughorn to make excuses about having places to be should she confront him in his dungeon classroom during school hours, but he’d have no such excuses tonight. If Hermione cornered him now, he wouldn’t be able to shrug her off.

That was what she hoped, anyway.

Hermione’s arm was linked with Tom’s, and now he gave it a gentle tug. Startled, she met his eyes, praying that her walls would hold up under the pressure of his probing look.

But all he said was, "Would you like to dance?"

He indicated the center of the room with a nod, and Hermione saw that enough space had been cleared to form a sort of dance floor beneath the twinkling fairy lights. Daphne Greengrass was
dancing a waltz with a bored-looking Blaise Zabini, and at least five other couples were partnering up to join them.

"Dance?" Hermione echoed. "With you?"

Tom's lips twitched. "Would you rather partner up with Draco, then?"

"God, no," said Hermione, even as Malfoy snapped, "I'd just as soon cut off my own hands, thanks," only for the two of them to break off talking to scowl at each other.

Tom barked out a laugh—a genuine laugh, even—and then gave Hermione’s arm another tug. "You haven't answered my question."

"Oh." Hermione fought not to squirm. "No. Thanks. Not right now."

Tom didn’t insist, at least, only saying, "Would you like me to go and fetch you something to eat, then?"

Hermione opened her mouth to decline, only to change her mind at the last second. "I’m not hungry, but I’d like something to drink, actually. If that’s all right."

"What is he, a bleeding house-elf?" Malfoy grouched, but retreated into sullen silence at Tom’s quelling look.

Uncoiling his arm from around Hermione’s, Tom said, “All right, then. I’ll be back in a moment.” He didn’t leave straightaway, though: rather, he cupped Hermione’s hand in his and pressed a soft parting kiss to her knuckles, staring into her eyes all the while.

Hermione’s fingers twitched. Her cheeks were burning, but she decided to chalk it up to the stuffiness of Slughorn’s crowded office.

Malfoy pulled a face at Hermione over Tom’s shoulder, probably frustrated by his inability to make gagging noises of disgust without calling down Tom’s wrath. And then Tom was walking away, leaving Malfoy and Hermione to size each other up in tense silence.

If she was obnoxious enough, would that convince him to leave, or would it only incite a row? Hermione was optimistically willing to bet on the former, but then Malfoy did all her work for her, shaking his head like an agitated horse and saying, “Merlin’s balls, what am I doing hanging round here? Excuse me, Granger, but I’ve got drying paint that needs watching. Try not to break your ankles tottering round in those heels of yours—or do. It’s not as if I care one way or the other.”

And with that, he was off, and Hermione allowed herself a sigh of relief. Two down.

She couldn’t allow herself to get too comfortable, though—Tom would be back any second now. All she could really do was take comfort in knowing that a crowd this dense would be as much a deterrent to him as it would be to her.

Slughorn’s office was packed to the gills; whichever way Hermione looked, there were walls of people blocking her path, and even with her heels giving her a modest boost in height, she still had to crane her neck to see over the heads of all but the shortest of guests. And if seeing past them was an exercise in futility, then moving through them was all but impossible. Twice, she nearly knocked over a couple of house-elves laden down with heavy trays, mumbling apologies that were met with wide-eyed shock that she’d bother to apologize to them at all, and once, an older witch deep in her cups nearly spilled pale gold champagne all over Hermione’s dress.
Despite all that, something like luck saw fit to take mercy on her, because seconds after escaping the witch’s profuse and slurred apologies, the crowd before her parted a crack, and she spotted Slughorn off to one side of the room, munching on crystallized pineapples.

He wasn’t alone—he was talking quite enthusiastically to a witch who might’ve been Celestina Warbeck, and Hermione nearly swore out loud. But then she had a thought—a thought inspired by the drunk older witch and her champagne—and, pulling out her wand, she sent Celestina Warbeck’s drink spilling across the bodice of her glittering dress.

Celestina Warbeck made an appalled noise, and at first, Hermione feared that she’d stand there fussing over her ruined dress all night—but then she was excusing herself, and Hermione was barreling forward with her elbows turned out against the churn of the crowd and stumbling to a halt at Slughorn’s side.

Slughorn beamed at the sight of her, and she decided to take that as a good omen, for all that she put little stock in such things.

"Ah! And here’s the fairer half of our happy couple! Tell me, dear girl, where has your beau got off to? Care for a bit of crystallized pineapple?"

He said this all in one breath.

“Er, no, sir, thank you.” Smoothing out the wrinkles in her skirt, Hermione went on, haltingly, “Tom—Tom went to fetch me something to drink, actually, only he was taking a little while, and I went off to look for him, but it seems—it seems I’ve lost him in the crowd.”

“Oh, but we can’t have that!” Slughorn exclaimed, dusting crumbs of pineapple from his fingers and offering Hermione his arm. “How are you to dance with your young man if you can’t find him?"

“Er, no!” Hermione said loudly—too loudly, so that it gave Slughorn pause. “I mean, no, sir, that’s quite all right; we’ll find each other eventually. Actually, I—I wanted to talk to you, sir.”

“Did you, now?” said Slughorn, pleased. “Only it’s a shame that you didn’t find me sooner; I was just talking to my dear friend Celestina Warbeck—quite the sparkling talent, that one, and her songs are quite popular with young ladies your age—only she was having a spot of trouble with her dress—but what was it that you wanted to talk to me about, my dear?”

“Well, sir,” Hermione prevaricated, fighting not to twist her fingers in her skirt, struggling not to let her nerves show and put Slughorn on alert. “I was only wondering if I could ask you about a bit of magic that I’ve been researching—I’ve considered going to Professor Lupin or Professor McGonagall, but really, sir, you were my first choice.”

Her bit of blatant flattery worked: Professor Slughorn puffed up like a preening bird, pressing a hand to his cheek as though to cover up a modest blush.

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Right. So far, so good. Exhaling a bit shakily, Hermione pulled her mouth into a smile—the same smile, she hoped, that she’d seen so many times on Tom’s face. The smile that’d charmed everyone and anyone but for her.

She doubted that it’d be as effective on her face as it was on Tom’s, but there was no harm in trying.
Pressing her fingertips to Slughorn’s forearm, Hermione spoke in a voice that was soft and cajoling and syrupy sweet, not unlike the voice Tom used whenever he was trying to get something that he wanted.

“Well, sir, it’s quite rare, this bit of magic—or at least, that’s what I’ve gathered, as there’s hardly any mention of it in any of the books in our library.”

“Oh, that won’t do,” said Slughorn, and the charmed twinkle in his eye told Hermione that, against all odds, her mimicking of Tom’s mannerisms was working. “Hogwarts is famed for its extensive library, and we can’t have Durmstrang or Beauxbatons going round boasting that they’ve books on subjects we haven’t. I’ll put in a word with Madam Pince, my girl, and see to it that this deficiency is corrected.”

Very much doubting that, Hermione smiled wider and said, “That’s very kind of you, Professor, thank you.”

“No trouble, my dear, no trouble at all,” said Professor Slughorn. Over his shoulder, Hermione watched Cormac McLaggen stuff fairy cakes into his mouth at an alarming rate, then forced herself to focus. “Of course, I can’t very well help you out if I don’t know what sort of magic you’re asking after, can I?”

“Yes, sorry; I’m beating round the bush, sir, aren’t I?” God, please let this work. “Well, I don’t know much about it at all, which is why I’m asking you, sir, but—but to my understanding, it’s called a—”

Hermione had braced herself for the fallout, but even that couldn’t’ve prepared her for the curious change that stole over Slughorn’s merry features.

It was—

Whatever Hermione had been expecting—for him to evade the question, for him to dismiss her or chide her—she hadn’t been expecting this.

Because Slughorn’s face, as round and ruddy and genial as Father Christmas’s, had gone white as chalk, fat beads of sweat springing to the surface of his skin. His pupils contracted. His lips parted, worked silently, and then quivered. He looked as if he’d faint at any moment, now.

Tightening her grip on his arm as though she were strong enough to stop him falling right over—she wasn’t—Hermione said, “Professor? Professor, are you feeling all right? You’re not going to be sick, are you?”

Slughorn shook her off—and rather roughly, at that. Hermione gaped.

“Yes, well,” he stammered, eyes darting wildly about the room. “Had a few too many sweets, I suppose—my constitution’s not what it was, you understand, and I really ought to watch what I eat—”

“Right,” Hermione said carefully, as though speaking to a skittish animal, but Slughorn was backing away from her, backing away as one might from a fanged monster. “Professor, I—”

“What?” With the jerky, erratic movements of a marionette pulled about on a string, Slughorn dug his index finger into his ear canal as though to scoop out an excess of wax. “Sorry, my girl, but I couldn’t quite hear you just then—music’s rather loud—really ought to talk to the band about that—”

“Professor—”
But Slughorn was moving farther and farther away from her, and short of chasing him down and causing a scene, Hermione couldn’t do a thing about it.

“So sorry, Miss Granger, but I nearly forgot, I’ve urgent business with dear Eldred—you’ll have heard of him; he’s the fellow who brought along a vampire—Sanguini, I think was his name—sorry, but I really must go—”

And so he went.

Hermione stared after him, mouth agape, blood running cold.

Oh, God.

She’d thought that this horcrux, whatever it was, must be a nasty bit of business, indeed, but she hadn’t been prepared for this. Slughorn had been positively petrified.

Just what was this thing?

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were trying to ditch me.”

Not for the first time since properly making Tom’s acquaintance, Hermione very nearly jumped out of her skin. As it was, she spun rather clumsily on her heel and nearly crashed onto her backside. Damn shoes. When she got back to her dormitory, she was going to snap the spiked heels right off the bloody things.

Tom grabbed her upper arm, holding her steady until she could balance herself properly. In his other hand, he held a glass of what was probably butterbeer.

“Ditch you?” Hermione stuttered, shaking Tom off the way Slughorn had shaken her off not moments ago. “Why on earth would I do that?”

Her pulse was pounding in her throat. What did you do? she wanted to ask, to scream. What sort of vile magic are you toying with?

Tom arched his brows, oblivious—hopefully—to Hermione’s churning thoughts. “I don’t know; you tell me.” Craning a look over her shoulder, he said, “Is that Slughorn? In a bit of a hurry, isn’t he? What did you do, set his trousers on fire?”

“Yes, I did, and you should watch your back if you don’t want me to do the same to you.” Tom’s brows arched higher still, but aside from that, he reacted not at all to Hermione’s overt hostility. Taking a calming breath, Hermione went on, “He’s feeling a bit under the weather, that’s all. Had too much crystallized pineapple, I suppose.”

“I see,” Tom murmured. His eyes were boring holes in Hermione’s skull. She clung to her nascent Occlumency with both hands.

God, this was exhausting.

Tom tipped the glass of probably-butterbeer at her. “Still thirsty? Or would you rather take me up on my invitation to dance?”

Was he still on about that? On the one hand, Hermione would have really preferred not to—but on the other, it might make for a decent distraction. Possibly. Maybe. If she was being optimistic.

She supposed there wasn’t any harm in trying.
“All right,” she said, holding out her hand. “All right, fine, one dance. Just the one.”

“How magnanimous of you, Your Highness,” Tom drawled.

Hermione scoffed, turned up her nose, and wiggled her fingers impatiently. Was he going to wait around all night, then?

Tom’s mouth curled into a smile, probably one of amusement at Hermione’s expense. Setting down the glass of butterbeer on a passing house-elf’s tray with a murmured thank-you, he took Hermione’s dangling hand and led her towards the makeshift dance floor just as the band struck up a waltz.

It took them a moment to get their hands all sorted—well, it took Hermione a moment to get her hands all sorted, anyway. She’d danced before, yes, at weddings and the like, but that didn’t mean she was good at it. As for Tom, he’d already moved smoothly into position with one hand on Hermione’s waist and the other wrapped around hers while she was still trying to sort out where to put her feet.

Exhaling a sharp, impatient sound, Tom said, “Just focus on me; I won’t let you trip.”

“I think you’d trip me just for the fun of it,” Hermione muttered, but then they were moving, and she was forced to drop the thread of conversation in favor of keeping up with him.

It took her a couple of minutes to settle into the rhythm he’d established—and even after she’d mostly got the hang of it, she still had to extend some effort towards not tripping over her own feet. Between that and keeping a stranglehold on her Occlumency, you’d have thought that she wouldn’t’ve noticed the awkward quality of the silence that was building between them, but she did, and it made her itch.

Eyes on their feet, Hermione said, “Nice party.”

Tom made a vaguely affirmative noise.

“What are you—” Hermione nearly turned her ankle over, but Tom tightened his hold on her waist and kept her steady. Biting her lip, she forged on to say, “What are your plans for the Christmas holidays? Will you be spending them at Hogwarts, or—?”

Tom didn’t answer straightaway, and Hermione thought that he was intent on ignoring her question, but then he said, “No. I’ll be spending the holidays with Draco’s family at their second home in the South of France. What about you? Any plans?”

Hermione could have goggled. Was he—was he really expressing interest in the minutiae of her life? Clearly he was so deeply sunk into his Head Boy persona that he was confusing his fiction with reality.

“Er, yes,” she said after a too-long beat. “I’ll be spending Christmas morning with my parents, but then I’ll be staying with the Weasleys for the remainder of the holidays.”

Tom scoffed, and Hermione looked up from their feet to scowl at him—but then she realized that his disdain hadn’t been meant for her. No, he was looking at Daphne Greengrass—or rather, at Greengrass’s new dancing partner.

It was Cormac McLaggen.

It was Cormac McLaggen, who had a rather clumsy grip on Greengrass’s narrow waist and dainty hand. He stepped on the poor girl’s feet twice in the five seconds Hermione spent watching them,
and she couldn’t help but wince in sympathy.

Resting her cheek lightly on Tom’s shoulder, Hermione said in an undertone, “I wonder how she convinced him to part from his fairy cakes. Last I saw, he was stuffing them five at a time into his mouth.” Call her petty, but she still held a bit of a grudge over the series of events that had resulted in her broken leg.

Talking of her leg, Hermione was still waiting for the other shoe to drop—it had been six days, after all, and violent tragedy had yet to befall McLaggen. Which wasn’t to say that she thought McLaggen had been spared a terrible fate; it was quite likely that the delay was deliberate on Tom’s part, possibly because he reveled in fostering Hermione’s paranoia.

Lifting her head off Tom’s shoulder, she saw that his mouth had curved into one of his more genuine smiles. “You say that as if it wasn’t him who bullied her into a dance. Relentlessly badgering hapless girls until they’re worn down enough to accept him seems to be his modus operandi.”

Hermione swallowed a laugh. “You’re not wrong,” she allowed, and returned to watching their feet.

Apropos of nothing, Tom said, “I’ve been remiss.”

One, two, three—one, two, three—“Remiss in what?”

“In telling you that you look beautiful.”

Hermione’s heels skidded across the floor with a screech that she felt in her teeth, and she’d have absolutely fallen on her bum if Tom hadn’t squeezed her waist and held her steady. They’d fallen out of step, but Tom shifted them back into triple time smoothly enough.

Heart hammering in her throat—it’s the exertion, just the exertion—Hermione stammered, “It’s the makeup.”

But Tom’s eyes were intent on her face, and they were hungry.

“No,” he said quietly, “it isn’t.”

Hermione stared at him.

She couldn’t believe it. He was lying. He had to be lying.

Only, she couldn’t help but think of how this was the closest they’d been, physically, since that night in the hospital wing, when he’d pressed his fingers between her legs and made her come harder than she ever had in her life. It had been better, so much better, than the sullen little pulses she’d managed to wring out of her body with her own fingers, and now that she’d had a taste of it, she was uncertain of her ability to go on without it, without him.

His hand was heavy on her waist, burning like a brand.

“You don’t believe me,” he said. “And here I thought that Draco’s reaction would be proof enough.”

“What do you mean, Draco’s reaction? He insulted me.”

“He insulted your hair,” Tom said, twirling them into a sprightly turn. “Just your hair. Mostly because he couldn’t think of anything else to insult. I’d bet anything that he thought you looked quite pretty.”
Hermione pursed her lips. “Legilimency?” she guessed.

“No. I’ve known him since I was twelve. I don’t need Legilimency to read him.”

Hermione’s eyes thinned. “Whether it’s true or not, I don’t care. I don’t give a damn what he thinks of me, and I never have.”

Tom cocked his head. His smile softened. Was that fondness in his eyes? For her?

“No,” he said. “I suppose you don’t.”

And he leaned forward to press a soft, fleeting kiss to Hermione’s lips. When he withdrew, there was a splotch of bright color on his mouth, a trace of Hermione’s red lipstick.

Without thinking too hard about what she was doing, Hermione lifted her hand from Tom’s shoulder to wipe that smear of color away with her thumb.

His lips parted under her touch, and he nipped at her with his sharp teeth. Hermione took a breath and held it, held it till she felt quite dizzy.

She couldn’t say what would’ve happened next—if she would have allowed him to drag her off to some secluded corner and—well—but she never found out, because in the next second, there came a great flurry of movement to their left, followed by the unmistakable sound of someone being violently sick.

Hermione fell out of step, but Tom was stopping, too. Everyone around them was stumbling to a halt as Cormac McLaggen vomited on a shrieking Daphne Greengrass’s shoes.

Hermione slapped a hand over her mouth, over her nose, afraid that she’d get sick if she tasted the reek of vomit on the air.

Giving her an affectionate squeeze, Tom said lightly, “Had a bad fairy cake, I suppose.”

Hermione’s fingers contracted, nails scratching her skin. Her eyes traveled slowly from McLaggen to Tom, who was assessing the scene with an air of—satisfaction.

Hermione went still.

Public humiliation, was it?

He’d done this. Somehow, he’d fixed it so that McLaggen ate a batch of tainted fairy cakes, and Hermione—

A noise was bubbling up out of her throat, and at first, she thought it was a precursor to a round of retching. Seeing people vomit, smelling them vomit, was often more than enough to get anyone sick—but then the noise rising in her throat pushed past her lips and rattled off the cage of her fingers, and she recognized it immediately for what it was. She choked it off before it could grow into anything more than a hiccup, but Tom heard it. He heard it, and he darted dark eyes to her face.

He’d heard her. He’d heard her laughing at McLaggen’s pain.

He smiled.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Hello! JD_Sparks drew an amazing sketch of a lightning era Tom that was loosely inspired by this fic, so please take a look at it! He's so beautiful and sinister and so much like how I picture him that it's almost uncanny! I'm in tears, tbh.

25 December 1996

Hermione appeared in the Weasleys’ front yard with an eardrum-popping crack, and she might have stumbled and fallen had Mr. Weasley not squeezed her arm against his side. From inside his wickerwork basket, Crookshanks spat and hissed.

"Sorry, Crooks," Hermione muttered, thinking of February's upcoming Apparation lessons and hoping that normal Apparation was at least slightly less harsh on the senses than side-along. Probably not.

Untangling their interlocked arms, Mr. Weasley gave Hermione's shoulder a bracing pat and said, "All right, Hermione?"

Not trusting herself to give him a convincing affirmative, Hermione mustered up a stiff smile and a mute nod. Mr. Weasley appeared to believe her, though, if only because he was in a hurry to return to his family in time for Christmas dinner and loathe to waste precious minutes on interpreting Hermione’s expressions.

"Excellent, excellent—ah, and there's Harry and Ron." Raising his voice to be heard clearly across the snow-dusted yard, Mr. Weasley said, “Bit nippy for a late morning stroll, isn’t it, boys?”

Hermione had been peering into Crookshanks’s basket and poking her fingers through the wickerwork to scratch his chin, but now she looked up to see that Harry and Ron were, in fact, loitering by the Burrow’s front door. They were bundled up in heavy winter coats and stamping their feet to keep their blood flowing, and Hermione remembered that they weren’t allowed to use magic to keep themselves warm, as they were still underage.

Catching Hermione's eye, Ron gave a decidedly glum little wave.

What was going on?

Mr. Weasley was starting up the path to the front door with Hermione’s trunk in tow, and Hermione broke off frowning at Harry and Ron to catch up, mumbling apologies to Crookshanks when her uneven stride jostled his basket.

"...Wouldn't go in there if I were you," Ron was saying to his father while Harry nodded his resigned agreement.

Having caught up, Hermione asked, rather crossly, “What’re you talking about?” The cold was biting at her cheeks and stopping up her nose, and she was eager to get inside and warm herself by
Harry and Ron exchanged a look, and Hermione's stomach gave an anxious little flip. Had something happened to one of the Weasleys? No. Surely not. Harry and Ron wouldn’t be out here if it was as bad as all that.

She’d just managed to talk herself down from a panic when Harry spoke up.

"Fred and George got their hands on a Muggle radio,” he said, pained, “and they've memorized the lyrics to 'Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go.'"

That...wasn't good. To put it lightly.

"Mum's on the warpath," Ron put in, shoulders hunching up till they were level with his ears, which were bright red from the cold. "It's like a battlefield in there, I'm telling you."

Blinking, Hermione said, "I don't understand. Where on earth would they have got hold of a—"

But she cut herself off before she could complete that sentence, turning slowly on the spot to look at Mr. Weasley, who had gone pale under the flush that the cold had put in his cheeks.

Best not to ask questions that had obvious answers.

"Hmm, right," Mr. Weasley said, and dropped Hermione's trunk with a graceless thunk. "Sorry, kids, but I've got some violations to write up—misuse of Muggle artifacts always goes up during the holidays, you know—never a day’s rest in this department, I tell you—well, I'll be—right."

Having made his clumsy excuses, Mr. Weasley set off at a brisk pace for the relative safety of his garage and its mountains of decidedly misused Muggle artifacts.

"Coward," said Ron. "Think the Sorting Hat botched up, placing him in Gryffindor."

Fisting her hand on her hip, Hermione squinted at Ron and said, "That's a bit hypocritical of you, don’t you think? You're the ones who've been driven out of doors by a spot of familial conflict."

Ron shook his head. “You don’t understand, Hermione. They've enchanted the wireless so it never plays anything but that one song, and you can't turn the bloody thing off just by fiddling with the dial. It’s a nightmare."

"'Least they haven't discovered ABBA, yet," said Harry, glumly.

Oh, no. Not ABBA. Hermione actually quite liked ABBA, and if Fred and George Weasley ruined their songs for her, she’d never forgive them.

Still. It was either stay out here and grow icicles or go inside and face the literal music.

“'Well,” said Hermione, moving forwards as though to step around Harry and Ron, “I'm not about to spend Christmas Day out in the freezing cold, so if you don’t mind, I’d like to go inside and put away my things. I trust I'll be rooming with Ginny this year as well?”

Brightening, Ron said, “Hey, Hermione, you're allowed to use magic outside of school now, aren’t you? We can hide in—er, I mean, hang out in Ginny's room with you, and you can soundproof it, can't you?"

Hermione had half a mind to refuse him out of sheer spite, but relented in the end, giving a grudging nod.
“Excellent,” Ron said, grabbing hold of Hermione’s trunk with a quiet grunt. "I’ll carry this in for you, shall I? Hey, Harry, get the other end for me, will you?"

As expected, a cacophony of sugary pop music and distant shouting assaulted Hermione’s ears as soon as she eased the Burrow’s front door open, and she nearly gave in to the impulse to join Mr. Weasley in his garage. Gritting her teeth, she mustered up her valor and charged as quietly towards the stairs as she could, Harry and Ron trailing in her wake. They had a hard time of wrestling Hermione’s trunk up the narrow staircase, but, blessedly, Ginny’s room was on the first floor, and they hadn’t far to carry it.

Hermione was the first of the three of them to push into Ginny’s room—Ginny wasn’t in it—and Harry and Ron heaved the trunk onto the camp bed that’d been set up for Hermione’s use. Shutting the door, Hermione cast a charm on it to muffle the intertwined sounds of music and shouting, and then crouched to let Crookshanks out of his basket. He shot out of it as soon as she’d finished undoing the straps and streaked for the dark space beneath Ginny’s bed, nearly tripping Ron as he went.

“Fucking cat,” Ron grouched, but without any real heat; he’d grown rather fond of Crookshanks since their first inauspicious meeting in the summer before third year, although he’d never admit to it out loud. "Honestly, Hermione, why couldn't you have got yourself an owl like the rest of us?"

There wasn’t any room left to sit on the camp bed, not with her trunk taking up the lion’s share of space, so Hermione sat down on the foot of Ginny’s bed and crossed her legs primly at the ankles. Her nose had begun to run a little from coming in from the cold and into the toasty-warm Burrow, and she sniffled discreetly.

“Owls are sweet,” she said, “but you can’t very well curl up with them in bed on a cold night, can you?”

But instead of firing off a cutting retort as Hermione would’ve expected, Ron just shuffled his feet and exchanged a long, unreadable look with Harry.

“Say, Hermione,” Ron said, then trailed off, scratching at the nape of his neck. Harry had taken to staring—no, scowling—at the floor, and Hermione knew an awkward, grudging buildup to a difficult conversation when she heard one.

Hermione’s stomach soured with mild alarm. “What’s the matter?” Harry and Ron exchanged another silent look, and, irked, Hermione snapped, “Come on, out with it. You’ve got something you want to say to me, and you’re not doing any of us any favors by dragging your feet.”

Harry scrunched up his nose and slowly opened his mouth, but Ron beat him to whatever it was he’d wanted to say, blustering, “We know that someone clubbed you over the head and dumped you in the Forbidden Forest.”

All the breath left Hermione’s lungs at once like steam being let out of a tea kettle, and the only sound she could manage to make was a small, airless, “Oh.”

Harry’s bright eyes went thin and flinty behind his round glasses.

Well.

That wasn’t good.

“Yeah, oh,” he mimicked, storming forward to loom over Hermione, and there, there was that awful temper of his, that deep-seated, slow-burning anger. “When were you going to tell us that someone
—that someone tried to bash your fucking skull in, exactly? Because, I don’t know about you, but I like to let my friends know when I’ve been put in mortal fucking peril, Christ.”

Shrinking back against the bed—God, she hated it when Harry got angry—Hermione said, far more weakly than she’d have liked, “I wasn’t—I wasn’t in mortal peril, for God’s sake—”

“Weren’t you?” Harry flared, and Hermione flinched. “Then what the bloody hell d’you call being left for dead in a forest full of things that want to eat you?”

Coming up next to Harry, Ron gave his best mate’s shoulder a rough nudge and mumbled, “Hey, lay off her a bit, would you?”

“You lay off,” Harry snapped, and returned the nudge, although this time it was more of a shove, if the distance Ron stumbled back was any indication, and Hermione knew, with the certainty of someone who’d been best friends with these two for most of her adolescence, that they were minutes if not seconds away from getting into a fistfight.

God, Mrs. Weasley would never forgive Hermione if she allowed her youngest son to black his best friend’s eye on Christmas Day.

Leaping up from her seat on Ginny’s bed, Hermione half shouted, “Okay, that’s enough!”

Harry and Ron stopped shoving each other at once, mouths popping open, but, no, Hermione wasn’t finished.

“You’re acting unforgivably juvenile, the pair of you! Yes, a person or persons unknown hit me over the head and gave me a concussion, and, yes, they dumped me in the middle of the Forbidden Forest, but obviously I’m okay, so you can stop working yourselves into a lather! And where, for that matter, did you even hear about what’d happened to me? Was it Hagrid? It was Hagrid, wasn’t it?”

Harry shut his mouth with an audible click, and Ron said, haltingly, “Er, no. We heard it from Ernie Macmillan, actually, who got it from Hannah Abbott, who got it from—a seventh year Slytherin, I think? Iunno.” Shaking his head, Ron went on with a trace of bad temper, “But, Hermione, it doesn’t matter that you’re okay now—I mean, it does matter, and thank Merlin nothing happened, but—but that’s not the point! The point is—”

“The point is,” Harry said, soft voice belying the anger glittering in his eyes, “that you didn’t tell us what’d happened to you. I mean, Merlin, Hermione, are we your best friends, or aren’t we? Something like this happens to you, you tell us. How would you feel if we kept this sort of thing from you?”

Hermione clenched her fingers against her palms, clenched them so hard she could feel her own heartbeat. Her breathing hitched, then hitched again. Something was bubbling up in her chest and spilling up her throat. A hot pressure was building behind her eyeballs.

No.

She couldn’t take it any longer.

She burst into tears.

Harry and Ron goggled at her, and she couldn’t even fault them for their shock, not really; one second, she’d been spitting with righteous indignation, and the next, her eyes were leaking like a faulty tap, but it was just too much, all of it. This—hysteria—had been building inside her for weeks, months, a contained pressure that’d been bound to explode, and now it was exploding, and Hermione
The restless paranoia that’d plagued her for all of September until the end of October in the shape of Tom Riddle’s smiling mouth; the grate of his cold laugh along her spine like sharp nails on a blackboard; the doubts she’d had as she’d wondered whether she was reading too much into things, after all. Hallowe’en and the horrifying proof that she’d been right, that she’d been right about everything; the contained hysteria that’d suffocated her as she’d bargained for her life with a cruel, beautiful, evil boy. Getting knocked out and left for dead in November and letting the one person she hated more than any other touch her intimately in December. The restlessness of having to constantly look over her shoulder. The weight that came with keeping it all to herself. God. God.

It was too much, all of it, and it’d finally found its release in the form of a violent crying jag. Sucking in a wet breath, Hermione stumbled where she stood and landed on her bum on the foot of Ginny’s bed. God, she was crying so hard she couldn’t even keep her balance, and it was the ugly sort of crying, too, face all scrunched up and snot trickling out of her nose and drool gathering at the corners of her mouth, and she couldn’t stop. She couldn’t stop and she couldn’t breathe and she was going to —

"Fuck, Harry, get out of the way."

The bed dipped as someone sat beside her, and a pair of arms—warm, gangly, a little sweaty—wrapped around her shoulders and tugged her into someone’s chest. It was Ron, and she knew it because she’d know his hugs anywhere, and he was tucking her head beneath his chin and patting her hair and making vague soothing sounds that he’d probably picked up from his mother.

"Shhh, 'Mione, it's all right. What's the matter, huh? C'mon, tell us. Merlin’s balls, Harry, don't just stand there!"

Blinking through her tears, Hermione peered up at Harry, who was gaping at Hermione with the air of someone who’d been thoroughly Confunded. He gave a little start at the sound of Ron’s voice, and even through the wreck of her emotions, Hermione felt a bit sorry for him; he’d always been rather useless around crying people.

Still, he deserved points for trying because, visibly steeling himself, he wasted no more time in moving forward to sit on Hermione’s other side. After a moment of hovering his hands awkwardly in midair, he began to rub circles across Hermione’s back, shaping the curve of her spine with his fingers.

"C'mon, 'Mione, breathe." Ron tightened his arms and swayed them back and forth as though rocking a colicky baby. "C'mon, it's all right, you're all right."

Between Ron’s touch and Harry’s, Hermione found that the worst of her crying was gradually tapering off into a series of unsteady hiccups. At some point, Crookshanks came out from under Ginny’s bed to leap into Hermione’s lap, purring soothingly and kneading his paws against her legs. Eventually, Hermione’s head went limp and heavy against Ron’s bony shoulder, and her eyes drifted shut.

She must’ve dozed off, then, exhausted and drained from crying so hard for so long, because the next thing she knew, she was jolting awake at the sound of knuckles rapping on wood.

Her eyes were puffy and sensitive from crying, but she peeled them forcibly open to see Ginny standing in the open doorway with her fist pressed against the frame.

“I’m not interrupting anything, am I?” Ginny asked, and her deliberately lighthearted tone suggested
that she’d heard Hermione’s crying even through the Muffling Charm.

Harry squirmed, but Ron’s arms tightened defensively around Hermione. “Shove off, Ginny.”

Ginny pressed her fingertips to her chest as though wounded. "Now, is that any way to talk to your beloved little sister? Why, less than two weeks ago, you were in absolute hysteria over my broken arm!"

"Keep that up and I'll break it again, myself," Ron muttered against Hermione's hair.

"What was that?" Ginny snapped, eyes going flat and hard like a shark’s, and Ron subsided.

In a voice that was rough and nasal from crying, Hermione said, "Hey, Ginny. Was there something you wanted?"

Flicking her hair over her shoulder, Ginny said, "Who says I want anything? This is my room. Maybe I just want to kick these two oafs out of it."

Hermione’s head had that clear, lightweight feeling that came after a good cry, and there were tear tracks drying into salt trails on her cheeks. There was also a headache building in her temples, and she wasn’t in the mood to referee a bout of sibling bickering.

"Ginny," she pressed, wondering distantly why it was suddenly so stuffy in here.

Ginny rolled her eyes but relented.

"Draco Malfoy's owl is here," she said, "and it's brought a parcel addressed to you, Hermione."

Perhaps she hadn’t woken up from her doze, after all, because those words made sense separately, but not when they were all strung together.

“I don’t—that can’t be right.” Why was it so hot in here? Perhaps they should open a window.

"That's what I said," Ginny told her. "But I've checked the mailing address twice, and it's definitely for you. There's no return address, though. Mysterious."

Scrubbing her palms against her cheeks, Hermione nudged Crookshanks gently out of her lap and stood up, wobbling only a little, and then wiped a patch of sweat from her throat. Now that she was standing, she realized that she hadn't shed her coat; a glance at Harry and Ron told her that they must’ve removed theirs while she was dozing.

"I'd better go and see what this is all about for myself, then, hadn't I?" she said to no one in particular, and squeezed past Ginny to take the stairs two at a time.

There had to’ve been some sort of mistake. Probably Ginny had confused someone else’s owl for Draco Malfoy’s. The only thing Draco Malfoy would ever want to send her was a Howler, and Ginny had said that the owl had brought a parcel, not a letter. Unless it was Malfoy's owl, but not him who'd sent it. Unless—

When Hermione set foot in the Weasleys' warm, cluttered kitchen with Harry, Ron, and Ginny trailing behind her, there was no owl to be seen; it must have gone in the interim. But there was a parcel placed dead center on the kitchen table, wrapped in shimmery blue paper with a letter taped on top.

And all five of Ron’s older brothers were gathered round the table and staring at the package as
though it might have contained a live bomb.

Hermione must’ve made an involuntary noise, because in the next second, five pairs of eyes had fixed unblinkingly on her. She looked desperately around for Mrs. Weasley, but the sounds drifting from the scullery told her that she wouldn’t be getting any help from that quarter.

Drat.

"Erm," said Hermione.

Fred Weasley was cradling a Muggle radio in his lap, but it was silent, so at least Mrs. Weasley had spared Hermione that particular Hell. Perking up in his chair, Fred gave his twin brother a nudge, but neither of them said anything, which was alarming in its own way.

Possibly taking it as his duty as the eldest brother to break the silence, Bill Weasley gave a little cough and said, "Package for you, Hermione."

"Er, yes." Hermione shuffled forwards a little, then went still when all five of those pairs of eyes focused on her more sharply than before. "Yes, Ginny's told me as much. Then I'll just, er—"

Bravely, Hermione took another step, hands reaching out to scoop up the parcel, but George said, "I wouldn't if I were you, Hermione. Didn't you hear from Ginny that Draco Malfoy's owl dropped it off? It's probably hexed."

Fred brightened at that. "D'you think we should send him a little thank-you gift, then? Maybe a couple of Puking Pastilles wrapped up to look like normal sweets?"

"No," said Bill, Charlie, and Percy all at once.

Taking advantage of their distraction, Hermione leapt forward, snatched up the parcel, and clutched it to her chest like a prize.

"No," she said. "No, that won't be necessary. A-­anyway, I doubt it's from Malfoy; it's probably from Tom, as he's holidaying with Draco's family."

"Tom, who?" Fred demanded. "The barkeep at the Leaky Cauldron's sending you parcels?"

"Why, Hermione, you minx," George drawled. "Got a thing for older men, have you?"

Eyes glittering alarmingly, Fred leaned an elbow on the table and said, "Because, if you have, I should tell you that I'm single and ready to mingle."

Rearing up out of his chair—its legs teetered precariously—Percy snapped, "That is quite enough—"

"Tom Riddle," Hermione blurted, and Percy's teeth clicked together, cutting off his tirade. "It's from Tom Riddle. You know him, Percy, Fred, George; he's in the year ahead of me. He's Head Boy and an—­an excellent student. He and I...are going out. We've been dating since late September, actually."

George, who’d been about to take a swig of pumpkin juice, dropped his glass onto the table, where it rolled several feet before falling off the edge with a tinkling crash and a wet splatter. Charlie, who’d been about to pour himself his own glass of juice, misjudged the distance between cup and pitcher and poured it all over the table because he was busy goggling at Hermione.

Right.
Okay.

Now was the time beat a calculated retreat.

Hermione groped blindly for Ginny’s wrist, tugging her out of the kitchen and all but sprinting for the stairs.

“Run,” Hermione muttered, clutching Ginny with one hand and the package with the other. “Run, run, run—”

A buzzing uproar was building in the kitchen, but Hermione had already slammed shut and locked Ginny’s bedroom door. She felt rather bad about leaving Harry and Ron to deal with the Weasleys’ questions, but, well, better them than her, and they should’ve moved faster if they’d wanted to get away in time, anyway.

Maybe she was still a little bit cross with them for shouting at her earlier.

Collapsing onto the floor by the foot of Ginny’s bed—Crookshanks had taken over one of Ginny’s pillows and curled up for a nap—Hermione pressed her forehead against her updrawn knees.

Sitting down beside her and crisscrossing her legs, Ginny said mildly, “You know, you’ll have to deal with that—” She jerked her head at the locked door to indicate all that encompassed that “—eventually. Sooner rather than later, too.”

“Perhaps I won’t,” Hermione muttered. “Perhaps I’ll call my parents and ask them to come and pick me up.”

“No phone,” said Ginny, and rather gleefully, too. “Dad accidentally destroyed the last one. Think he was trying to waterproof it or something.”

Rather than ask why anyone other than the merfolk would want to make a call underwater, Hermione lowered her legs and smoothed out the parcel. It was soft and rather squishy. Was it a dress? A jumper?

“Then I’ll ask one of your parents to Apparate me back to my house,” she said, but without any real conviction, as she was too preoccupied with sussing out the package’s contents.

Rather than acknowledge Hermione’s idle threats, Ginny just nudged her and said, “Aren’t you going to open it? Go on, let’s have a look.”

Unsticking the letter from the package, Hermione tore neatly into the envelope with her thumbnail and removed the enclosed sheet of parchment. Ginny shifted closer to read over her shoulder, close enough that Hermione could smell her shampoo.

The letter was short, and barely qualified as a note, but Hermione still read it over five times, brow furrowing harder with each read-through.

Dear Hermione,

If I remember correctly, this was one of your favorite childhood films. Hope you’re having a safe and happy holiday.

Love, Tom

Hermione spent an inordinate amount of time staring at that one word, at the elegant stroke of the L,
at the sharp point of the v. Love. She’d signed her letters to Harry and Ron and Ginny in that exact same way dozens of times—in a different context, of course. It was a normal way to sign off on a letter, but it made her angry and almost sick to read it in Tom’s handwriting. Love. He didn’t know the meaning of the word.

And what had he meant by saying this was one of her favorite films? The parcel was far too soft to be a videotape.

Forcing herself not to crumple the letter and chuck it in the bin—that would look odd, wouldn’t it?—Hermione set it aside, and, taking a breath through her teeth, tore into the parcel’s wrapping paper to reveal a swatch of fabric. Shaking it out, she held it up in front of her face.

And stared.

It was a long-sleeved t-shirt in her favorite shade of periwinkle blue, and printed across the chest in looping letters of a deeper blue were the words The Babe with the Power.

Ginny leaned in closer, cheek bumping Hermione’s. “What’s that mean?”

As though from a distance, Hermione heard herself say, “It’s from a movie I like. You know, the—

the moving pictures that Muggles like to watch.”

“Oh? What movie?”

But Hermione didn’t answer her, which was rude, only she couldn’t seem to get her tongue to work properly. Something in her chest had clamped up tight like a fist. Her head felt curiously light, but not in the same way as it had after crying.

This wasn’t anything to be happy about. It wasn’t as if she’d told Tom that she loved Labyrinth because they were friends, because she’d wanted to. He’d plucked this out of her unwilling brain just as he had her pathological fear of failure and her year with the Time Turner and the history of her ugly fights with Harry and Ron.

It meant nothing. It was a part of his act. How would it look, after all, if the loving boyfriend neglected to send his cherished girlfriend a Christmas present?

And yet.

And yet, if there was nothing more to it than his perfect boyfriend act, then why not send her jewelry or a dress or even a book? Why go to the effort of choosing something that held sentimental value for her, something produced by the Muggles he so despised?

Hermione scrambled to her feet, clutching the t-shirt to her chest. Ginny swayed out of her way to avoid a collision, goggling at her.

“Hermione,” she said. “What’re you—”

“I’m going into town,” said Hermione, and then, “D’you think Percy would let me borrow his owl?”

“Probably?” said Ginny, still staring. “Hermione, what—”

“You know what, never mind, I’d rather deliver it in person, anyway.” She was still wearing her boots and coat, so at least she didn’t need to get herself dressed for a trek outdoors. If any of the Weasleys caught her on her way out, she’d make some excuse.
Hermione stopped to fold the t-shirt up and set it on top of her trunk, then headed for Ginny’s bedroom door. “D’you want to come with me?”

“Come with you where?” Ginny asked, exasperated, but scrambled to her feet, snatched up her own coat and boots, and trotted off in Hermione’s hurried wake.

Hermione pushed the Weasleys’ front door open with some trepidation, only for the tense set of her shoulders to relax when she saw that the living room wasn’t full of Weasley brothers intent on hounding her with invasive questions concerning her love life. Honestly, if this was what it was like to have brothers, she was glad to be an only child.

No, the Burrow’s cozy living room was mostly empty, its sole occupant being one Sirius Black, who was lounging in Mr. Weasley’s armchair with one ankle propped on the opposite knee and a heavy hardback book open in his lap.

Sirius glanced up at Hermione and Ginny at the sound of the door creaking shut, and his sharp, haughty features immediately softened into a smile, one that Hermione couldn’t help but to automatically return. Sirius tended to have that effect on people, when he wasn’t pissing them off.

Marking his place in his book and flipping it shut, Sirius said, “Hullo, girls. Been doing some last-minute Christmas shopping?”

“Er,” said Hermione, wondering if her spurt of relief had come too soon. “You could say that.”

“Well, Hermione has,” Ginny said, stamping snow off her boots and unwinding the Holyhead Harpies scarf that Harry had given her as a Christmas present. “I got dragged along for the ride—not that I minded getting out of the house,” she added in an undertone, and Sirius barked out a laugh.

Then, as if Ginny had jinxed herself by saying so—more likely, Mrs. Weasley’s sharp ears had simply caught the sound of her daughter’s voice—there came a shout from the kitchen.

“Ginny, dear, is that you? Come and help me peel these potatoes!”

Ginny flinched. “Drat.” Looking at Hermione, she said, “Think it’s too late to do a runner?”

Hermione was going to lecture her, but Sirius beat her to it, saying, “Now, Ginny, that wouldn’t be very Gryffindor of you, would it?”

Ginny scowled at Sirius with enough heat to wilt any of their schoolmates; unfortunately for her, her glares were not yet intimidating enough to cow most adults.

“That’s rich,” Ginny said, “seeing as you’ve done nothing but sit around on your bum since arriving here this morning.”

Sirius spread his fingers in a gesture of helplessness. “What can I say? I’m a guest, and your mother won’t hear of it.”

“Oh, I’m sure she won’t,” Ginny muttered, but shucked off her coat and kicked off her boots and left them all in a pile by the door before storming into the kitchen.

It was Hermione’s first instinct to offer to help Mrs. Weasley with dinner preparations as well, but
she knew she’d be rejected, being as she was a guest.

And, okay, fine, she wasn’t all that eager to face Ron’s brothers again, either. So much for Gryffindor courage.

Shedding her own coat and boots—but hanging the coat on the rack and pushing the boots up against the wall rather than leaving them all in a heap because she wasn’t a savage—Hermione dithered for a moment before wandering over to sit down on the sofa with her parcel in her lap.

Sirius had gone back to reading. “Who’s the parcel for?” he asked, absently, as he turned a page.

“Er,” said Hermione, trying not to fidget. “A school friend.”

Sirius made a noncommittal noise, eyes intent on his book, and Hermione relaxed, fractionally.

But then the silence stretched, and although it was companionable, it made Hermione restless. She had nothing to read, herself, and only her small parcel with which to fidget, fingers picking at the taped edges of the plain brown wrapping paper. Curious as to what Sirius could be reading, she leaned forwards a little and squinted at the title running across the top of the page: Anna Karenina.

Leaning back against the sofa, Hermione thought of Sirius’s mild affection for Muggle things, less manic than Mr. Weasley’s but still very much a key element of his personality. She knew that it was rooted in a lifelong desire to anger his dreadful family—the family of which he and his cousin Andromeda were the sole white sheep, disowned for their refusal to buy into blood prejudice as well as their mutual distaste for Dark magic.

Hermione sat up straighter, fingers going still against her parcel.

Sirius wanted nothing to do with Dark magic, yes, but that didn’t mean that he hadn’t been exposed to it as a child. What was more, he was skilled enough at Defense Against the Dark Arts to give Professor Lupin a run for his money. What if—?

“Did you want to ask me something?”

Hermione jumped—way to look guilty, Granger—and tore her eyes away from the parcel in her lap to stare Sirius in his face. There was a smile lurking at the corners of his mouth, and he’d shut his book and set it aside.

“Pardon?” she squeaked.

Propping his cheek against his raised fist, Sirius said, “You’ve been sneaking looks my way for the last five minutes, at least. Either there’s something on my face, or you’ve got something you want to ask me.”

Damn. Sirius always had been dangerously clever, although it wouldn’t’ve taken an especially observant person to notice the way Hermione had been fidgeting.

Well, now that she was caught out, she might as well ask, mightn’t she?

“Actually, yes. There is something I wanted to ask you, if you don’t mind.”

“I can’t very well say whether or not I’ll mind if you never ask the question.” But he softened the barb with another smile. “Go on, sweetheart. If I can’t answer, I’ll tell you so.”

Hermione flushed at the casual endearment. She hadn’t had a crush on Harry’s adoptive father for
years, now, but that didn’t change the fact that he was young and handsome and even charming when he wanted to be. And tall. And dark.

…Perhaps she had a type.

“Er, well.” Hermione twined her fingers together and then pulled them apart again. “It’s not something that I’m interested in, really. A friend of mine has expressed some interest in a rare bit of magic, and I’m. Concerned for them, I suppose.”

“A friend, is it?” Sirius asked, skepticism coming across loud and clear despite his mild tone.

Hermione frowned. “Yes, a friend. Really. I assure you that I have no personal interest in this—whatever it is. I don’t even know what it is.”

Sirius held his hands up in surrender. “All right, all right, I believe you. It’s not the same friend that you went Christmas shopping for, is it?”

“No,” Hermione lied at once, not wanting Sirius to trace this back to Tom, although the sharp look he gave her told her that she hadn’t been especially convincing. “No, it’s not the same person, but I’m…worried for them. Whatever sort of magic this is, I’m certain that it’s not something to be messed with.”

Slughorn’s reaction at the Christmas party had convinced her of that much.

“Hermione. Stop beating round the bush, would you?” Hermione looked away, gnawing on her bottom lip. “Hermione,” Sirius pressed, voice uncharacteristically gentle, and that, more than anything, coaxed Hermione into looking him in the face. “What’s this magic called? Come on; I promise not to get angry with you. You’re only trying to help.”

“You can’t promise me that when I haven’t even told you what it is, yet,” Hermione said, dredging up a weak smile, one that Sirius returned encouragingly. “I don’t know how to spell it, as I’ve never seen it written down, although I can make a good guess—but it’s called—it’s pronounced horcrux.”

She was prepared, this time, for the fallout, for the anger and the evasion, but Sirius hardly twitched, and his sharp intake of air was the only indication that he knew what she was talking about.

Well.

Not the only indication.

He wasn’t sweating or shaking as Slughorn had done, but he had gone pale. Pale as a ghost, and his grey eyes looked black as pitch in his suddenly white face. And then he was leaning forward to seize Hermione by the shoulders, making her gasp.

“Hermione.” Sirius squeezed her shoulders as though to communicate his urgency, as though the look on his face and the wavering quality of his voice weren’t enough to make her blood run cold. “Listen to me. Whoever this friend of yours is—you need to get away from them immediately, do you understand? Get away from them and go to Remus—better yet, go straight to Professor Dumbledore.”

“But,” Hermione stammered. “I don’t understand. What is a horcrux—?”

“Don’t.” Sirius gave her a gentle shake, and her teeth clicked shut. “Don’t. Say it. Now, Hermione, I am going to ask you a question, and you must answer it truthfully. Have they made any yet?”
“I don’t—”

_Made,_ he’d said. A horcrux was something you could _make_. Not a spell, then, or not _just_ a spell. An object?

“I don’t think they have,” she whispered. God, please let her be right.

Sirius pressed his eyes shut, fingers easing their grip on Hermione’s shoulders. “Thank Merlin,” he whispered, then opened his eyes to search Hermione’s face. “All right. Even if they _haven’t_ made any yet, that they’re interested in them at all is a warning sign. You need to cut off your friendship with this person, Hermione. Now.”

God, if only it were that easy.

“I still don’t understand. Please, Sirius, what _are_ they—”

“Er…what’s going on in here?”

Sirius immediately released Hermione’s shoulders and sat back in his armchair, leaving Hermione to look dazedly towards the foot of the staircase, where Harry had appeared.

Smiling convincingly at Harry, Sirius said, “Hermione here wasn’t feeling all that well—spent too much time out in the cold, I s’pose. I was checking her for signs of fever.”

“Oh,” said Harry, visibly relaxing. “Yeah, okay. D’you want me to go and fetch some blankets, then?”

_God._ Sirius was lying to Harry—Sirius _never_ lied to Harry. He was lying to Harry, and it was all Hermione’s fault.

“No,” said Sirius, all but leaping out of his chair. “No, Harry, that’s all right, I’ll go and get them. You just stay put and keep Hermione company, all right?”

“Sure,” Harry said, rounding the sofa to sit beside Hermione and wrap an awkward arm around her shoulders as though to warm her up with his own body heat.

Hermione watched Sirius go and refrained from pointing out the obvious, which was that an adult wizard in possession of his wand and his senses could’ve simply Summoned the blankets.

Although she couldn’t blame him, could she, for wanting to extricate himself from this tense situation if only for a moment.

“So, er,” said Harry. “Feeling all right?”

He wasn’t talking about the cold Hermione had supposedly caught. No, he was talking about earlier.

“I’m fine,” Hermione said, leaning her head against Harry’s shoulder so he couldn’t look her in the eyes while she lied. “Where’s Ron?”

“Cleaning out Pig’s cage. He’s not very happy about it, but he says it’s better than helping out in the kitchen with the others.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose. “I fail to see how scraping owl droppings off the bottom of Pig’s cage is a more attractive option than peeling a few potatoes.”

Harry’s shoulder shook with muffled laughter, and after a beat, he said, “Say, Hermione?”
“Hmmm?”

“About what you said before—about, er—Daphne Greengrass—”

Hermione lifted her head off Harry’s shoulder to fix him with a glare. “You can’t be serious. Why’re you asking me about Daphne Greengrass when you clearly fancy someone else?”

Harry gave a little jump and scanned the room in a panic, as though he expected Ginny to leap up from behind one of the armchairs at any moment now.

“She’s with Dean,” Harry whispered once he’d confirmed that Ginny was not, in fact, lying in wait with the intent of catching him out.

“Not for much longer, if things continue as they are.” Shaking her head, Hermione said, “If you want to go out with Daphne Greengrass, I can’t stop you, but if I were you, I’d have a little patience and wait for Ginny’s relationship with Dean to reach its natural conclusion.”

“When you put it like that,” Harry muttered, “it sounds a bit creepy, doesn’t it?”

Hermione gave that some thought. “A little, I suppose,” she said, and dropped her head down on Harry’s shoulder again.

This was nice. Normal. They were just two friends discussing unimportant things like crushes the way anyone else their age would.

Hermione could almost forget about the growing pit in her stomach.

*God, Tom,* she thought. *What are you doing to yourself?*
Platform Nine and Three-Quarters was teeming with the usual start-of-term rush, and Hermione observed the chaos of it all through the compartment window as her schoolmates hurried to hug their families goodbye and heave their trunks onto the train before all the good spots were taken. They needn’t have been in that great of a hurry, though; the Hogwarts Express wasn’t due to pull out of the station for another thirty minutes, and the prefects’ carriage, at least, was nearly deserted.

_Nearly_ being the operative word, here.

Shoulders curving into a disconsolate slump, Harry said, for the fifth time in as many minutes, “Can’t we at least go and sit with Ron and Ginny until the train’s pulled out of the station?”

Hermione tightened her hold on Tom’s Christmas gift, pressed her eyes shut, and counted backwards from ten. When she reached _one_, she opened her eyes and said, “_You_ are free to go and visit with Ron and Ginny whenever you wish; I certainly won’t stop you. But _I_ am staying put.”

Harry made a wordless noise of discontent and slumped lower still in his seat but made no move to get up and go and visit their friends. Just looking at him made Hermione want to pull her hair out. She nearly did.

If she’d thought that Harry and Ron had been cloyingly overprotective back in November, that was _nothing_ compared to how they’d been acting since Christmas Day. Hermione could scarcely walk a step these days without tripping over Harry or Ron or sometimes even Ginny, and while she appreciated the concern—really, she did—she’d have liked to have a pee without someone lurking on the other side of the door, straining their ears just in case she slipped and cracked her skull open on the toilet bowl.

How was she to uncover the truth about horcruxes with her friends breathing down her neck?

Which wasn’t to say that she was any closer to uncovering the truth now than she’d been in December; Sirius had spent all of Christmas keeping a sharp, watchful eye on Hermione while simultaneously avoiding being left alone in a room with her, and had departed from the Burrow on Boxing Day, leaving Harry in the Weasleys’ care (he was an Auror, after all, and Aurors couldn’t simply sit around on their bums for a fortnight just because it was a holiday).

And what if Sirius didn’t intend to keep quiet about what Hermione had asked him? What if he told Professor Lupin?

God, what if he told _Dumbledore_?

A nudge to her shoulder stirred Hermione from her thoughts, although it did nothing to dispel the nausea that was mounting in her stomach. When she turned wide eyes to Harry, he indicated the parcel in her lap with a jerk of his chin.

“What have you got there, anyway?” Squinting at it, he went on, “Isn’t that the parcel you were
holding on Christmas Day? You know, when you were talking to Sirius?”

Drat. If she told him it was a present for Tom, would he or wouldn’t he accidentally set it on fire with a muttered Incendio? She didn’t want to find out.

But then a wave of obstinacy broke over her—if she wanted to give her boyfriend a belated Christmas present, she bloody well would, and damn Harry Potter anyway.

…Fake boyfriend. Give her fake boyfriend a Christmas present.

Hermione cleared her throat, then rushed out, “It’s a Christmas gift for Tom; I forgot to get him one in time for the holiday—you know me; I’m not used to having a boyfriend. And on that note, how’re things coming along with Ginny? Or have you decided that Daphne Greengrass is the one for you?”

Harry blinked rapidly as he struggled to adjust to Hermione’s rapid-fire change of subject. It didn’t take him too long to recover, however, as one couldn’t survive a friendship with Hermione Granger without fast learning how to keep up with her way of talking.

“Er.” A deep red flush was climbing Harry’s throat, starting at his collarbones and ascending towards his Adam’s apple. “I dunno? I mean, you saw Dean and Ginny just now—they looked pretty friendly to me.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “If by ‘friendly’ you mean, ‘Ginny pushed Dean out of the way when he tried to hold the compartment door open for her,’ then, yes. I suppose they looked friendly enough.”

Harry’s blush had now reached his jawline and was still climbing steadily higher. “I just—I dunno if I can do this, Hermione. It’s just—it’s not a great deal of fun, is it, waiting around for the person you like to give you the time of day.”

“Now you know how Ginny felt for all those years,” Hermione said, not unkindly.

Harry pulled a face and looked away, fingers working restlessly against his legs. Feeling rather bad for having put that look of abject misery on his face, Hermione threaded her arm through his and rested her head on his shoulder, letting him know without words that she’d still be here to listen to him if and when he felt like venting his romantic woes.

But while Hermione didn’t mind sitting quietly with Harry, exactly, as the seconds ticked by, she found herself fighting harder and harder against a bout of the fidgets. She’d left Crookshanks and her school trunk back in Ginny and Ron’s compartment, but she was beginning to wish that she’d brought along something to read to the prefects’ carriage. Ron had given her a lushly illustrated edition of The Tales of Beedle the Bard for Christmas, and it would have made for a nice bit of light reading. She could have passed the time annotating it. Perhaps she’d go and fetch it—

The compartment’s door rattled open along its tracks, and Hermione’s head jerked up from its place on Harry’s shoulder as all the restlessness drained from her body to be replaced by a sort of giddy agony. Oh, God. She wasn’t excited to see Tom, was she? That would be—that would be absolutely mad—

But Tom was here—he was here—and all it took was one look at his face for Hermione’s pulse to speed up. It rather felt as if an agitated hummingbird had somehow got caught inside her ribcage and was now furiously beating its wings as it struggled to find a way out.

He’d already changed into his school robes, Head Boy pin fixed firmly in place, lips curled into a warm smile. Hermione could almost pretend that he was just a normal boy, a normal boy who really cared for her, who wouldn’t ever dream of hurting her or the people she loved.
Snap out of it, you idiot.


Oh, God. What was wrong with her?

Tom’s smile flickered and died, and Hermione was put instantly on alert.

“Hello,” he said to Hermione, and rather shortly, at that. Hermione had just enough time to frown—it wasn’t like Tom to be rude to her in front of other people—before Tom’s dark eyes were flickering to Harry.

Specifically, to Harry’s arm, which was still linked with Hermione’s.

Tom’s smile returned, but this time, there was an edge to it, a threatening gleam of teeth. Hermione went still, sensing danger like a rabbit sensing a snake in the grass.

“Tell me, Potter,” Tom drawled. “D’you make a habit out of cuddling up to everyone’s girlfriends, or is that an honor you reserve for mine?”

Hermione clenched her jaw to stop it dropping. What? What—

Harry’s reaction wasn’t quite as delayed as Hermione’s; untangling his arm from hers, he leapt to his feet, but he didn’t immediately swing a fist for Tom’s face as Ron probably would have done. No, unless he was really, terribly angry, Harry tended to snark first and punch later.

“Hermione’s my friend,” said Harry coolly. “But, Riddle, if you’re that insecure, I reckon you ought to hold off on dating until you’ve matured a bit. Girls don’t like blokes who throw jealous fits.”

Tom’s eyes widened fractionally, and Hermione pressed her fist to her mouth, waiting for him to—to do something. Hex Harry, perhaps. Curse him, maybe, if he was feeling particularly irked.

But, no. That wouldn’t be Tom’s style, would it?

And as if to prove her right, Tom pulled his lips into another smile and said, “That’s a bit rich coming from you, isn’t it, Potter? But I suppose you would have to stoop to poaching other blokes’ girlfriends, wouldn’t you, as Ginny Weasley’s finally come to her senses and ditched you for greener pastures. She’ll probably dump Thomas soon enough, but I doubt you’ll even make the list of potential rebounds.”

Harry’s hand clenched into a fist, veins standing out in pale green ribbons, and, no. As much as Tom deserved to be hit across the face, Hermione wouldn’t allow Harry to be the one to do it. Not when Tom could and would do so much worse than simply hit him in return.

Hermione was on her feet. She couldn’t remember how she’d got there, but her hands were on her hips, and she was steaming.

“Tom Riddle!” Her voice warbled a bit, but she made up for that with sheer volume. “You will shut your mouth right now and comport yourself like an adult, or I will make you regret it.”

The silence that followed Hermione’s outburst was so absolute that her ears rang with it. Harry was gaping openly at her, his own anger forgotten for now, and Tom—Tom wasn’t gaping, necessarily, but he was certainly staring. Possibly because no one else had ever dared to talk to him like that for all his adolescent life.
Oh, God.

You will shut your mouth right now and comport yourself like an adult, or I will make you regret it.

Merlin’s balls, but had she really just said that to Tom bloody Riddle?

All in all, though, Tom’s delayed reaction to Hermione’s threat was remarkably…restrained.

“Is that right?” he said, looking only mildly interested. “And how do you intend to do that, exactly?”

How did she intend to do what?

Or I will make you regret it.

Oh.

Right.

That.

Hermione faltered, then rallied herself to say, “I—I won’t give you your Christmas present, for one thing.”

Hermione’s parcel had rolled out of her lap and onto the seat when she’d jumped up to confront Tom, and she indicated it with a wave of her fingers. Tom’s brows climbed higher before drawing together in something like a frown. Oh, no. That wasn’t good. Hermione scrambled for a defensive strategy—a Shield Charm? But, no, no spell could block the Killing Curse—but Tom wouldn’t actually dare to murder anyone aboard the Hogwarts Express, would he—would he—?

Tom’s face smoothed out.

“Well,” he said lightly, “when you put it like that, I suppose I’ve got no choice but to behave myself, haven’t I? Sorry, Potter—I’m the jealous sort, and I got carried away, there. I hope you can forgive me.”

Harry started, stared, then scowled. He opened his mouth—almost certainly to say something rude—but Hermione stepped forward and circled his wrist with her fingers, stopping him short.

“Harry,” she said, putting on her best pleading eyes, “would you mind giving Tom and me a moment alone? Please?”

Now Harry was scowling at her. “You can’t be serious—”

Hermione gave his wrist a squeeze. “C’mon, Harry, don’t be—”

“Don’t be what? What, exactly?”

“Harry James Potter, I swear—”

Harry shook her roughly off, and Hermione shrank back a little, stunned by his blatant disgust.

“You know what? Fine. Forget it. I don’t care anymore.”

Harry made to storm off, then, only to draw up short: Tom had shifted to block the compartment’s open doorway with his body, and he was looking down his nose at Harry with the attitude of someone who didn’t mean to get out of the way any time soon. And Harry had sprouted up over the
last year, yes, but Tom was still significantly taller than him. Taller, and about a hundred times more dangerous.

But either Harry didn’t sense that danger, or he didn’t care. “Move,” he said.

Tom raised his chin. “Apologize to Hermione.”

Hermione’s fingers had been wringing the hem of her coat, but now they went still. What?

“Riddle, I swear to God—”

“Apologize.”

“Fuck off.”

Tom arched one eyebrow. “Colorful language there, Potter. Shall I take points now, or should I wait until term’s properly started?”

“Tom!” Hermione said, strained, and Tom gave her a sharp look over Harry’s tensed shoulder. “Just let him go. Please.”

Please. She had just begged him, and it made her skin crawl, but she’d do it again. She’d do it again, if it meant keeping Harry safe. If it meant keeping everyone she’d ever loved safe from him.

Tom’s face softened with something like shock. Had he not been expecting that, then? Had he thought that her pride meant more to her than Harry?

He should’ve known better.

He should have known better, because he’d been the one to point out that she’d do anything for her friends, even bargain with a monster like him. He’d been the one to weaponize them against her in the first place.

Hermione had no pride, not when her loved ones’ lives were on the line.

But then Tom stepped aside.

Tom stepped aside, and Hermione’s clenched stomach eased—only for it to bind itself back into knots when Harry hesitated, hesitated as if he was contemplating picking a fight with Tom despite his mute surrender.

But then Harry shook his head, once. Not looking at either of them, he stormed out of the compartment and down the carriage corridor.

Brilliant. What a perfectly excellent way to start the term off.

Exhaling hard, Hermione flopped backwards onto her seat. After a too-long moment of mute staring, Tom shut the door behind him and joined her, sitting so close that they were pressed together from hip to knee.

Squirming a few inches to the side so they were no longer sitting together quite so intimately, Hermione scowled at Tom and said, “I hope you’re pleased with yourself. All of this is entirely your fault. Term hasn’t even started yet, for God’s sake.”

“I wouldn’t say it’s entirely my fault,” Tom said as he toyed with the lapel of Hermione’s coat. “Even if I’d been perfectly civil to him from the start, he’d have found some excuse to pick a fight
with me.”

Hermione grit her teeth. What could she even say to that? Tom was right, as much as it rankled her to admit it, because Harry really did hate him that much. Possibly even more than he hated Draco Malfoy, these days, and that was certainly saying something.

Gripping Hermione’s other lapel, Tom pulled the two halves of her coat apart, eyes zeroing in on her chest. Hermione straightened up, flushing.

“And just what d’you think you’re doing—?”

“You’re wearing the shirt I got you for Christmas.”

Hermione went mute. There was a curious little smile lurking at the corners of Tom’s mouth, and it made her want to squirm.

It took her a moment to find her lost voice, and when she did, she prevaricated, “Yes, well. It would be a waste if I didn’t wear it, wouldn’t it? After you went to the trouble of getting it for me—I sent you a thank-you note but I don’t know if you got it—”

“I did,” Tom said. “And it was nothing, really. Far be it from me not to encourage your puzzling infatuation with David Bowie and his horde of deranged Muppets.”

Hermione scowled and tugged her coat shut. “Keep that up and I really won’t give you your Christmas present.”

Tom leaned in to bump his nose against Hermione’s cheek, breath fanning warmly across her jaw and leaving goosebumps in its wake.

“Hand it over, if you please,” he said from a very, very negligible distance.

His breath smelled of spearmint chewing gum, and his long lashes were tickling her cheek. Had he no concept of personal space? At the end of her tether, Hermione leaned away from Tom, groping blindly for the parcel and throwing it at his chest, off which it bounced, once, before landing in his lap.

Pity it hadn’t caught him in the balls.

“Open it, then,” Hermione said, crossing her arms protectively in front of her chest, eyeing Tom the way one might a wild animal.

Tom was smiling sidelong at her—it was a genuine smile, because nearly all his genuine smiles came from amusement at someone else’s expense—but set to neatly tearing into the parcel without further delay. When he got down to the small leather case, he flipped it open at once.

And stared.

The silence swelled, and stretched, until Hermione began to pick at the skin around her nails from the sheer anxiety of it. She’d made a mistake, hadn’t she? She’d cocked it all up.

“Ottery St. Catchpole’s a Muggle village,” she rushed out, anything to break the silence, but Tom didn’t so much as glance up at the sound of her voice. “But there’re a couple of Wizarding shops if you know where to look. A-and I didn’t know if you’d already received a watch for your seventeenth birthday—that’s tradition, but you probably knew that—but I thought perhaps not, as you—as you don’t, well—” Don’t have any parents.
“I did,” Tom said neutrally, shaking back his sleeve and tilting his wrist to show Hermione the watch in question, the watch she’d seen him wearing before on occasion. She hadn’t noticed just how it expensive it looked until now, though. “Draco’s parents got it for me, as I haven’t any living relations of my own.”

Of course they had.

“Oh,” said Hermione, deflating like a popped balloon. “Oh, well, if you don’t want it, then, I suppose I’ll have it back—perhaps I can return it the next time I visit the Weasleys—”

“No,” said Tom at once, pulling the box out of Hermione’s reach and eyeing her like a child who feared she’d take his toy away before he could finish playing with it. “No, it’s mine. I’m not giving it back.”

Hermione blinked at him. “You sound like a four-year-old.”

Tom paused to sneer at her, then set to unclasping the wristwatch the Malfoys had given him and replacing it with Hermione’s, placing the discarded watch inside the case and snapping it shut. The new watch was nice enough, with a moving depiction of the Milky Way on its face, but Hermione was no Malfoy, and she could only afford to spend so much on expensive gifts.

Tom didn’t seem to mind the discrepancy in quality, though, tilting his wrist and angling his head as though to admire his new watch from all angles.

“I quite like it,” he said. “And it’ll double as a birthday present, as well.”

“Oh,” Hermione said, exhaling hard with relief. “That’s nice—”

Wait a moment.

Hermione’s head spun, she turned it so quickly. “What d’you mean, it’ll double as a birthday present?”

Tom tapped the watch’s face lightly with his fingernails. “It’s exactly as I said: my birthday was on the thirty-first of December. I suppose it’s rather nice, actually, having a birthday that falls during the holidays.”

Hermione clenched her fists against her thighs. “You never told me when your birthday was!”

“You never asked.”

That…was true, but.

But.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “You’re trying to make me feel bad on purpose, aren’t you?” And, damn him, but it was working.

Tom’s eyes creased into half-moons when he smiled. “No, I’m really not. I actually don’t care one way or the other about my birthday, or else I would’ve dropped hints.”

If he’d been anyone else, she’d have believed him, but he wasn’t anyone else.

Still, she said, grudgingly, “All right. Happy belated eighteenth, then, I suppose.”

“Hermione.” Tom nudged her, and she looked deliberately away. “I really do like the watch. Thank
you for thinking of me.”

And Hermione’s heart clenched so hard she feared she was having a coronary. God, she couldn’t take this. She couldn’t. She was going to—

Turning in her seat, Hermione buried her face against Tom’s chest and shoved her arms around his middle, hugging him. Clinging to him.

Tom went stiff as a board—but then, almost cautiously, he wrapped his arms around Hermione’s shoulders, pulling her into his chest. She pressed her face against his throat, hoping to God that he couldn’t feel the hot flush in her cheeks.

She had to admit to it now, if only to herself. If only ever to herself.

There was more to what she felt for him than physical attraction.

God help her, but she was actually starting to—starting to like him.

And that—that was the stupidest thing she could possibly do, stupider than getting herself trapped in the Chamber of Secrets, stupider than trying to dig up information on horcruxes, but Hermione couldn’t help herself. She couldn’t help herself, and she was so, so terrified that, one day, she’d catch a whiff of Amortentia during Potions class and, what—smell Tom’s soap or his hair or his skin, and then.

Then, as Ron would put it, she’d be absolutely and unequivocally fucked.

“And Hermione?” Tom tugged at her shoulders as though to coax her into looking at him, but, God, she didn’t want to. “What’s the matter, darling?”

Darling. He kept calling her that, and at first, she’d taken it as a taunt, but what if it wasn’t? How much of this was for real and how much of it was for show?

Darling. Apologize to Hermione. I really do like the watch. Thank you for thinking of me.

Hermione’s breathing hitched, then hitched again. Was she going to have an anxiety attack like she’d had on Christmas Day? Was she about to crack up again? How many times was she going to do this in less than one month?

“Hermione.”

Tom finally succeeded at prizing Hermione away from his chest and pinned her gently back against her seat. His eyes were wide and—concerned?

No.

No, no, no—

“Hermione,” he pressed, thumbs rubbing circles against her shoulders. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

He didn’t sound anything like Ron had when he’d asked her that. Ron had sounded panicked. Tom sounded cool and collected and a trifle irritated, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t more churning beneath the surface.

Even she had fallen for the masks he’d worn, on occasion.

Hermione licked her lips, and Tom watched her do it. “You frighten me,” she said, truthfully.
“Yes, we’ve already established that. But I think I’ve made it quite clear that I’m perfectly content to keep you alive so long as you don’t make too much of a nuisance of yourself. You needn’t be frightened of me; not right now.”

Hermione didn’t mean to say what she said next. She didn’t, but the words pulled themselves out of her throat of their own accord.

“That’s not what I meant.”

It was strange. One second, Tom was looking at her like he wanted to peel the thoughts out of her skull and turn them over in his hands, and the next—

The next second, he was still looking at her like that, but now, he was also looking at her like he wanted to eat her alive.

Tom licked his lips, and this time, Hermione watched him, watched the pink tip of his tongue flicker out, stared at the wet gleam it left behind on his full lower lip.

“Then what did you mean?”

Hermione’s heart was knocking against her ribs like a fist against a door. She remained silent.

Tom’s dreamy-long lashes lowered to shutter his eyes. One of his hands dropped from Hermione’s shoulder to grip her by the thigh, fingers burning hot through the denim.

His fingertips scratched her inseam.

Hermione’s entire body twitched. She grabbed his wrist, breath coming heavy and labored. She was a wreck, and he hadn’t even done anything to her yet.

Yet.

He tilted his head. His fingers curled away from the crotch of her jeans. “No?” he asked.

“Tom,” she whispered, pleading. “Not here.” Not yet, was what she didn’t say. Not yet, but eventually.

She didn’t say it, but Tom caught it anyway, either because her Occlumency was wavering or because the subtext had just been that obvious.

He pulled his hand away from her thigh to card his fingers through her hair, then leaned in and licked a hot wet stripe across her upper lip. She could have died on the spot.

“When?” he asked.

Hermione’s lips were tingling. She didn’t answer him.

As soon as possible, was what she wanted to say, because she wasn’t the brightest witch of her age. No, she was an absolute idiot, and, actually, she’d changed her mind, and she would let him do whatever he wanted to her right there, but then the compartment door was rumbling open once more, and the spell broke.

Hermione jumped as though electrocuted and pushed Tom away—rather clumsily, at that. If she’d been trying to look like someone who hadn’t just been caught in the act of being groped by their boyfriend in a public forum, she was failing miserably.
Draco Malfoy’s sneering face confirmed her misgivings.

“Merlin,” he said, revolted. “I’ll never forget that for as long as I live unless someone does me a massive favor and fucking Obliviates me.”

Tom adjusted his tie. His cheeks were flushed, but he looked otherwise unmoved.

In tones that suggested that Malfoy wouldn’t have to live with the memory for much longer, after all, Tom said, “Shut it, Draco—and do save the dramatics for someone who gives a bloody damn.”

Looking perfectly miserable, Malfoy slouched into the compartment and took the seat opposite Tom. In the next moment, he was followed by Harry, who wouldn’t look at any of them, but who still sat on Hermione’s other side—if only because he’d rather not sit beside Malfoy.

Hesitantly, Hermione nudged her fingers against Harry’s, a silent sort of apology. He continued to avoid direct eye contact, but he gave her hand a fleeting squeeze as if to say, I’m not as angry as all that, so don’t wind yourself up over it.

Despite herself, Hermione smiled.

6 January 1997

“Hermione, could you pass the marmalade?”

“Hmmm?” Hermione had been cradling her cheek in her hand, staring idly off into space, but now she sat up straight and cast Ginny a questioning look. “Sorry, what was that?”

Ginny’s cheek hollowed, suggesting that she’d bit down on the inside of it, and her shoulders shook with what might’ve been repressed laughter.

“You know what?” she said, reaching around Hermione to retrieve the marmalade, herself. “Never mind. Carry on.”

Frowning, Hermione said, “Carry on with what?”

“Oh, you know,” Parvati said briskly, not looking up from the complicated task of buttering her toast. “Mooning after your boyfriend; that sort of thing.”

Hermione blinked rather rapidly. Mooning? Who was mooning? She was only—

“Really, Hermione,” Lavender chimed in, “if you want to go and sit with him, why don’t you?”

Focusing her eyes for the first time since breakfast had begun, Hermione realized that her seat at the Gryffindor table gave her an excellent view of the back of Tom’s head.

Oh.

“Merlin fucking spare me,” Ron grumbled, and Harry nodded his pained agreement.
“Shut it, the both of you,” Hermione snapped, and Ginny and Parvati snickered behind their hands. Frowning at the pair of them, now, Hermione said waspishly, “Oh, yes, I’m sure this is all terribly funny.”

Ginny and Parvati tried to muffle their amusement without much success, but Lavender just shook her head so her beribboned plaits swung across her shoulders and repeated, “I don’t understand why you can’t just go and sit with him. Why pine from a distance when you’re already together?”

“Pining?” Hermione squawked. “Who’s _pining_—and, anyway, I couldn’t do that. It’s not—er—it’s not healthy for a couple to spend too much of their free time together, not if they don’t want to get sick of each other.”

But Lavender wasn’t paying Hermione any attention. Squinting towards the High Table, she said, “Huh. I wonder where Professor Slughorn’s gone?”

Hermione turned her head so quickly she nearly gave herself whiplash, eyes scanning the High Table until they came to rest on Slughorn’s usual seat.

Which was conspicuously empty.

Ginny took a swig of pumpkin juice then said, “I don’t think he was at dinner last night, either, come to that. Weird. It’s not like him to miss a meal, let alone two.”

He hadn’t been at dinner last night? Hermione hadn’t noticed. _How had she not noticed?_

Hermione’s ears had started to ring, even as she told herself to calm down. This was nothing to work herself into a lather over. Hogwarts professors sometimes chose to dine privately; Professor Trelawney _almost never_ came down from her spindly tower to eat with the rest of them. But Professor Slughorn was a sociable person, and he _liked_ communal meals. It wasn’t like him to isolate himself.

Still, Hermione probably would have dismissed the situation entirely if not for the way Slughorn had looked at her at the Christmas Party when she’d asked him what a horcrux was.

Hermione stood up. She stood up, and she heard herself say, “Excuse me; I want to pick something up from the library before classes start.”

Her friends were all looking at her oddly.

“How?” said Ginny, cautiously.

“Excuse me,” Hermione repeated, and started to trot off, only to pull up short and rush back to the table for her bag, which she’d forgotten in her daze. “Sorry, I’ll just—I’m in a bit of a hurry.”

And she was off again, leaving her friends to gape after her the way they would a madwoman on the loose. Hermione ignored their looks and ducked her head, praying that Tom wouldn’t notice her on her way out.

She dithered when she reached the entrance hall. Slughorn was most likely to be in one of two places: his office, or his dungeon classroom. At this hour, either was equally likely, but the dungeons were closer.

Squeezing her bag’s strap till her knuckles went white, Hermione made up her mind and rushed for the descending set of stairs.
I’m being ridiculous, she thought as she hurried down the freezing dungeon corridor. It’s probably nothing. It’s probably nothing at all.

Still. It wouldn’t hurt to check, would it? Unless it made her late to class. That would hurt quite a bit. But it was too late to turn back now.

Short of breath, she stopped in front of the heavy door to the Potions classroom. It was shut. Slughorn usually left it open during school hours.

He was probably still in his office. He was probably still in his office, and Hermione had made a massive mistake by coming here at all.

Hermione hovered her hand in midair, then cursed herself for hesitating. Now that she was here, she might as well check, mightn’t she? And if Slughorn wasn’t here, Hermione could always come back during break and check again.

Nodding to herself, Hermione flattened her palm against the door and pushed it open.

The classroom wasn’t empty. There was one person inside, sitting behind the desk, but it wasn’t Professor Slughorn.

It wasn’t Professor Slughorn, unless he’d taken a dose of Polyjuice for a practical demonstration of its effects.

The person behind the desk looked up sharply at the creak of hinges, peering at Hermione through a curtain of greasy black hair. It was a man. It was a man, and he was frowning at her.

“Yes?” It was a question that invited an explanation as to what she was doing here, but the tone—cool, clipped, unfriendly—suggested that she keep it short.

“Er.” Hermione wavered. “E-excuse me—sir? I was looking for Professor Slughorn, Professor—?”

The man drummed his fingers against the desktop. “Snape,” he said. “And, as anyone with a pair of functioning eyeballs could see, Professor Slughorn is not here.”

Professor Snape had a curious way of talking: the deliberate pauses he took between words forced Hermione to pay attention to everything he had to say, and his voice might’ve been pleasant to listen to if he hadn’t looked so unfriendly. He’d make for an effective lecturer, if nothing else.

“O-oh,” Hermione said after a too-long pause, one in which Professor Snape’s frown grew ten sizes. “A-and I suppose you’re filling in for him, then? But where exactly has he gone?”

Snape’s lips compressed. “Professor Slughorn has taken an extended leave of absence.”

Hermione’s heart rose in her throat and nearly choked her. “Do you—excuse me, sir, but do you happen to know how long he’ll be gone—?”

Snape braced his palms against Slughorn’s desk and stood slowly up.

That probably wasn’t good.

“Miss—?”

“Granger, sir.”

“Miss Granger. I see you are in Gryffindor. It wouldn’t reflect well on you, would it, if you were to
lose your Housemates points before term has had a chance to properly start?”

Hermione’s cheeks stung. A teacher had never spoken to her quite like this before.

“I—”

“Silence.” Hermione’s mouth snapped shut, teeth lightly clipping her tongue. “Where your professor has gone is no business of yours, do you understand? Now, if you’ve nothing else to say, I suggest that you leave immediately before I’m forced to take points for tardiness.”

Hermione should have walked away, then. She should have apologized and rushed off to her first class of the morning, but. But she couldn’t stop staring at Snape, couldn’t stop staring at him quite blankly as she wondered where Slughorn could have gone.

Wondered where he could have gone, and whether Tom had had anything to do with his abrupt and unannounced hiatus.

The churning in her gut told her that he probably had.

Chapter End Notes

¯\_(ツ)_/¯
Hello! mercurialobsession/brokenbell made a beautiful moodboard for this fic which I absolutely adore. Take a look!

This chapter is, um, deeply NSFW, so watch out for that.

6 January 1997

“Sir, I’m sorry, but are you certain you can’t tell me where Professor Slughorn has gone?"

Professor Snape sat back down behind Slughorn’s desk and set to scribbling something on a sheet of parchment.

“Ten points from Gryffindor,” he said.

Hermione’s mouth popped open. She couldn’t quite process what she was hearing. “Excuse me?”

“And another five,” said Professor Snape, sounding at once spiteful and bored, “for your insolence.”

Hermione snapped her mouth shut and curled her fingers into fists. Insolence, was it? She’d show him insolence—

Before Hermione could say something she’d regret, though, Professor Snape looked up from his parchment and drawled, “May I help you?” He said help the way most people would say throttle or disembowel.

It took Hermione a beat too long to realize that Professor Snape was no longer talking to her, and by the time her brain caught up to reality, the newcomer was already speaking.

“Sorry, sir.” A warm palm curled over Hermione’s shoulder, making her jump. “I didn’t mean to disturb you; I was only looking for Hermione, here—and, sir, I don’t mean to pry, but do you know where Professor Slughorn has gone?”

Professor Snape’s lips thinned; clearly he was tired of being asked that question.

“I shall tell you what I’ve already told Miss Granger: your instructors’ personal lives are none of your concern. I’ll thank you to keep your curiosity to yourself, Mister—?”

“Riddle, sir.” Hermione glanced sidelong at Tom and saw that the polite, unwavering smile he always wore in front of teachers was fixed firmly in place; only the subtle tightening of his fingers on Hermione’s shoulder gave his true feelings away. “Tom Riddle. I apologize for prying, but Professor Slughorn and I are very close—he’s almost like a grandfather to me, you could say—”

But Snape cut Tom off. “Tom Riddle,” he said, almost contemplatively. “Yes, Mr. Riddle, I’ve heard a great deal about you already. Your other professors positively sang your praises. You’re Head
Boy, are you not?"

Tom’s polite smile warmed with what Hermione knew to be pride. Still, when he spoke next, his tone was humble. Almost shy.

Hermione scowled at her feet. What a load of rubbish this all was.

“Yes, sir, I am, and my professors are too kind. Really, I’m only paying them back for all their hard work by doing my utmost best in my classes—”

“Quiet,” said Snape, and Tom’s eyes widened fractionally as his mouth snapped automatically shut. He wasn’t the only one who was in a state of shock; Hermione could feel her own eyes bulging in their sockets.

“I’ve little patience for false modesty.” Snape tapped the tip of his quill against his sheet of parchment, and the tack-tack-tack of it was overly loud in the quiet dungeon, echoing off the stone walls. “You must be well aware that your perfect marks and your position as Head Boy do a great deal of credit to your House. I, myself, was once in Slytherin.”

Tom brightened at that, saying earnestly, “Is that right, sir? I expect you’ll be taking over as Slytherin Head of House in Professor Slughorn’s absence as well, then—”

“But you ought to know,” said Snape, cutting Tom off for the third time, “that I’ve no intention of favoring you the way Professor Slughorn had simply because you are Head Boy and a member of my own House. If you want to impress me, Mr. Riddle, you will have to work at it.”

Tom’s shock was muted, but it was there, widening his eyes and parting his lips, and Hermione—Hermione felt a curious tickling in her chest. She knew this feeling. If she stood here for much longer, she was going to—

“I’m—sorry?” said Tom, visibly struggling to save face. The hand on Hermione’s shoulder had gone slack.

Professor Snape smiled. It was not a pleasant smile.

“I believe I made myself perfectly clear, Mr. Riddle. If you intend to excel in my class, you’ll have to pay better attention than that.”

Hermione’s shoulders quivered, and Tom shot her a sharp look. She bit down on her lip and held her breath, but she knew, viscerally, that she wouldn’t be able to hold out for much longer.

But then the bell rang, signaling that students ought to start making their way to their morning classes and giving Hermione a viable excuse to remove herself from this situation before she lost her tentative grip on her self-control.

Snape returned his attention to his sheet of parchment. “And that will be ten points each from Gryffindor and Slytherin, for your tardiness.”

The hand on Hermione’s shoulder gave an almost spastic squeeze. “Sir,” Tom said, looking distinctly flustered, “I’m sorry, but that wasn’t even the late bell—”

“Another five from Slytherin.” Snape flicked his fingers at Tom and Hermione, indicating that that was the end of that. “Get out, the both of you.”
Hermione’s eyes were watering, and she was finding it harder and harder to breathe past the noises that wanted to bubble out of her throat. Not daring to open her mouth, she bobbed her head at Snape, hooked her fingers in Tom’s sleeve, and fled the Potions classroom, dragging the door shut behind her.

The dungeon corridor had yet to fill with the usual morning rush of students on their way to classes, and Tom dropped his mask at once, rounding on Hermione.

“What,” he all but snarled, “was that—” But then he cut himself off, eyeing Hermione dubiously. “What,” he repeated, but whatever he meant to say next was lost to Hermione’s gales of laughter.

And Hermione couldn’t, for the life of her, remember the last time she’d laughed this hard, couldn’t remember the last time her hilarity had bent her double and forced her to brace her hands against her knees. Maybe she was cracking up—maybe this was the other side of the anxiety attack she’d had on Christmas Day—but the way Snape had treated Tom—the way Tom had reacted to being treated that way by a Hogwarts teacher—it was just too much, oh, God.

Tom waited for Hermione’s laughter to trail off into unsteady hiccups, and then said, crisply, “And just what is so funny?”

Hermione straightened cautiously up and struggled to explain the cause of her hysterics. “It’s just—the look on your face—” But then Tom pulled a face not dissimilar to the one he’d worn when Professor Snape had treated him like just another troublesome student, and Hermione burst into fresh peals of laughter.

Patience having worn thin—God, she’d probably worn it to tatters, and why was that so funny?—Tom snapped, “Yes, all right, you’ve had your laugh. Now do us both a favor and shut it before I abandon what scruples I have and cast a Silencing Charm on you.”

Hermione gave a weak little hiccup and choked off the last gasps of her laughter. Oh, God, she’d laughed so hard she’d nearly peed.

“Sorry,” she said, wiping away the tears of hilarity that’d sprung up in the corners of her eyes. “Sorry, it’s just—God, a Hogwarts professor hasn’t ever treated you quite that way before, have they?”

Tom scowled. “I don’t know about that,” he said. “Professor Dumbledore could give that greasy-haired git in there a run for his money.”

There he went again, implying that his relationship with Professor Dumbledore wasn’t as genial as people would have expected it to be. Hermione would have asked Tom to elaborate on what he’d said, but as her amusement drained, she remembered why she’d rushed to the dungeons in the first place.

Remembered why she’d been so intent on finding out what had happened to Professor Slughorn.

Eyes narrowing, Hermione pointed her finger and jabbed it against Tom’s sternum. “Why did you follow me down here?”

Tom swept Hermione’s finger aside, looking perfectly bemused. “You’re the one who ran out of the Great Hall like your knickers were on fire. I was curious.”

Hermione flushed. “Leave my knickers out of it, if you please.”

Tom smiled a rather nasty smile, and Hermione immediately regretted bringing attention to his choice
of words. “Not to be crass, but you seemed eager enough for me to bring your knickers into it back in December.”

Hermione shoved at his chest, and he staggered back half a graceless step. Pity he hadn’t fallen right over, but unfortunately, Hermione hadn’t enough upper body strength to pull that off.

“Quit it,” she hissed. “Quit trying to distract me—and tell me why you pretended to want to know where Slughorn’s gone when you’re the one who’s responsible for his disappearance!”

Hermione’s palms positively tingled with the urge to give him another shove. She wanted to shout at him, but she couldn’t; people had started to filter down the stairs to the dungeons, and she couldn’t.

“Don’t play stupid,” she said, strained. “And tell me what’s going on.”

Tom’s eyes went half mast, and he regarded Hermione from beneath his lashes for a protracted moment before snatching her wrist and starting up the corridor.

“What—” Hermione tried to wriggle free, but Tom only tightened his fingers; if he kept that up, he’d cut off the blood flow to her hand. “Let me go! We’ll be late to our lessons!”

“Your professor won’t say anything to you if you tell them you were with me,” said Tom, dismissively. His long stride was forcing her to trot after him lest she trip over her own feet, and it was rather undignified. “Now quit making a fuss; you’ll draw the wrong sort of attention.”

Shoulders pulling up around her ears, Hermione scowled at Tom’s back but said in a modulated undertone, “Where’re you taking me, then?”

Mounting the flight of stairs to the entrance hall, Tom said, “Somewhere you can have your tantrum in private.”

Hermione bristled. “Tantrum—?”

Giving her a fierce look over his shoulder, Tom hissed, “Don’t make me follow through on my threat to hit you with a Silencing Charm, you absolute weapon.”

Enraged—the absolute nerve of him—Hermione renewed her attempts to wriggle free, and she didn’t care if the other students saw them and thought them weird; in fact, she’d leap at the chance to embarrass Tom. But Tom only slid his hand down Hermione’s wrist and laced their fingers together instead, making it look as if they were just a normal couple holding hands, when in reality, he’d just made it that much more difficult for Hermione to struggle free of him.

Hermione had never been subjected to weaponized handholding before, but she supposed there was a first time for everything.

Tom didn’t appear to be in any particular hurry—was he that confident that his professors wouldn’t punish him for truancy?—but his stride was naturally longer than Hermione’s, and he wasn’t taking pains to slow his pace to match hers as he usually would have done. Because of this, Hermione devoted most of her attention to making certain that she didn’t trip over her own feet, and didn’t notice where they had gone until she caught a flash of clashing puce and vermilion in her periphery.

“What’re you doing?” she shrilled, but Tom had already twitched the tapestry aside and tugged her into the dark, cramped alcove by the time she’d finished talking. He let go of Hermione’s hand at once—she cradled it to her chest and attempted to rub the feeling back into her fingers—but he
planted himself between her and the tapestry, blocking the only way out.

Her question had been mostly rhetorical, but Tom answered it anyway, possibly to make her feel stupid. “Hesitant though I am to call attention to the obvious, I’ll say it again: I’m giving you a private forum in which you may air your grievances without calling unwanted attention to yourself. No need to thank me.”

Hermione scoffed, refusing to dignify that with a response. “And as much as I dislike pointing out the obvious, there are people out in that corridor—people who probably saw us go in here. They probably think that we’re—that we’re—”

“Getting in a quick snog before classes?” said Tom, unmoved, and Hermione prayed that it was too dark in here for him to see her blush. “Well, it’s to be expected, isn’t it? I don’t know if you’ve been paying any particular attention to the rumor mill—I understand that your dormmates are the school gossips—but apparently, the two of us are madly in love.”

Hermione’s heart gave a painful little pang, and the hand she’d cradled to her chest curled into a fist. She wanted, suddenly and badly, to punch him right in the teeth for daring to even say the word love, for daring to write it on the note he’d sent her on Christmas, for taking what should have been her first proper relationship and turning it into a parody of itself.

She breathed hard through her nose. She relaxed her fist.

She didn’t hit Tom in the face.

Maybe he’d seen the impulse to do violence flash across her face, though, because he looked at her with a new wariness when he said, “Now, what’s this about Slughorn?”

Right.

That.

Hermione crossed her arms, closing herself off from him, and said, “Teachers don’t just disappear for no apparent reason. You had to’ve had something to do with it. You must’ve chased him away.”

Tom examined his fingernails, disinterested, and the impulse to hit him flared anew before Hermione forced it down.

She wasn’t a violent person. She wasn’t, but, God, Tom was turning her into one.

“I didn’t,” he said. “I was just as surprised as you were to see him gone, actually.”

“Liar,” Hermione accused, and Tom looked up from his fingernails to scowl at her.

“I’m not,” he ground out, “lying.”

Hermione could’ve laughed. “You lie about everything.”

Tom’s eyes glittered in the dark. “Not everything,” he said, softly.

Hermione’s cheeks burned. She looked quickly away from his face, eyes landing by chance on his wrist.

He was wearing her watch. He was wearing the watch she’d given him on the Hogwarts Express.

God, how stupid had she been, to pretend, if even for a moment, that he was just a normal boy, that
his Christmas gift to her had meant anything, that she could treat him like she would anyone else.

Tom exhaled hard through his nose, sounding as longsuffering as Hermione felt, and wasn’t that a laugh.

“I don’t understand you, Hermione,” he said, and did he sound frustrated? “You get angry when I tell you the truth and you get angry when I lie. What the bloody hell do you want from me?”

Hermione’s breath hitched. He was talking as if they were having a normal lovers’ spat, as if he cared to mend this broken thing between them.

No. He’d only grown tired of her prodding at him. That was all.

Ignoring the knot of pain in her chest, Hermione said, quietly, “I want you to leave me alone.”

Tom didn’t answer straightaway. When he did, his voice was quiet and free of all emotion.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

Hermione hugged her arms to her chest to stop herself from hugging him. He’d hold her, if she wanted. She knew he would.

She didn’t want that. Couldn’t want it, at any rate.

“Oh, God.

She’d been so stupid. So bloody stupid. She hadn’t thought; she’d only reacted—bloody buggering hell, but it looked as if the Hat had been right not to place her in Ravenclaw, after all, because it was so very Gryffindor of her, wasn’t it, to go charging in half-cocked, to let her rage mute her logic.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Not meeting his eyes, she gave a weak stab at plausible deniability. “I don’t know what you—”

“Don’t,” said Tom, “play stupid, Hermione. If you were a fool, I wouldn’t have bothered keeping you around, so don’t start acting like one now.”

Oh, but she had been a fool. She’d been a fool not to mind her own bloody business from the start.

She hitched in a steadying breath. “How did you know?” she asked in a voice that was remarkably steady, all things considered.

Tom made a noise low in his throat—laughter or disgust or both—and stepped closer, and then closer still, until he was looming over her, until she had no choice but to back herself into the wall opposite the tapestry. And still Tom kept coming, bracing his hands against the wall on either side of her head, boxing her in.

“Again,” Tom drawled, right in her ear, “I must entreat you not to pretend to be stupider than you are. You can’t actually be so arrogant as to think that your fledgling Occlumency would be enough to keep me out forever. Certainly, it took a bit more prodding than it usually would have done, but it was only a matter of time before I chipped away at those fragile little walls of yours. You knew that, Hermione. You knew it from the start.”

Through the rushing in her ears, Hermione heard the final bell ring. She was officially truant, but she couldn’t bring herself to care. She pressed a shaking fist to her mouth as if she could keep all her rioting emotions in check by doing so.

Tom’s cheek brushed hers, and his pillow soft lips grazed the shell of her ear. It was a parody of the genuine moment they’d shared aboard the Hogwarts Express, and it made Hermione’s hair stand on end.

“All right,” Tom cupped her cheek and stroked his thumb across her chin. “What have you learned about horcruxes?”

Just hearing him say that word out loud made Hermione want to heave. Perhaps it was only her impression of the thing informing her reaction to it, but even the name sounded wrong. Filthy, in a way. Unnatural.

Against her fist, Hermione mumbled, “Why don’t you pluck it from my mind, if you’re as curious as all that? Clearly my Occlumency is no match for your Legilimency.”

Tom was silent for a moment—a second, really. Some negligible unit of time that seemed to last for hours.

But then he said, “I think I’ll take you up on that,” and tightened his grip on her chin, tilting her head so he could get a good look at her eyes.

Hermione went still as a hunted rabbit in the grass. She wanted to shut her eyes—she had to shut her eyes—but she couldn’t. All she could do was brace herself against the leeching cold of the wall at her back, waiting for the undertow of Tom’s Legilimency to drag her down.

It never came.

Tom’s lips quirked.

“Oh, Hermione,” he said. “Why can’t you understand that I don’t want to hurt you? Why can’t you make it easier for me to keep you alive?”

Irritation pierced Hermione’s fear, and she very nearly scoffed.

“If you didn’t want to hurt me,” she said through her teeth, half tempted to frame the words with air quotes, “you wouldn’t’ve tricked me into the Chamber of Secrets.”

Tom’s smile didn’t waver. “You say that as if you wouldn’t’ve found your way down there on your own, eventually. You’re too clever by half, and too curious for your own good. And if you have any sense of self-preservation at all in that little Gryffindor head of yours, you’ll forget you ever heard the word horcrux.”

Hermione shouldn’t have said what she said next, but never let it be said that her mouth wasn’t in the bad habit of running ahead of her brain.

“It could ruin you, couldn’t it? If I were to find out more about horcruxes, I could ruin you.”
Tom’s fingers squeezed her jaw, hard enough to bruise—but then they relaxed, and his tight hold turned into a forgiving caress that made her skin tingle with a rush of blood.

_Oh, hell._

“You could,” Tom acknowledged, and Hermione’s heart gave a hard thump, fueled by something like excitement. There was a way to hurt him, then, and he wasn’t indestructible or infallible, and she could—she could—

“But I don’t think you will,” he finished, and Hermione scowled.

“Oh?” She was poking a sleeping dragon, but she was just Gryffindor enough, just _Hermione_ enough, that she couldn’t quite help herself. “And why’s _that_ then? It’s not as if I’m loyal to you.”

Tom’s smile grew, unfurling across his face, and it was a thing of beauty. _He_ was a thing of beauty.

“Oh, but I think you _are_,” he said, and leaned down to kiss her.

Hermione stiffened, lips parting automatically—not to make room for Tom’s tongue, but to bare her teeth and _bite_ him. The nerve of the little bastard, kissing her at a time like this, being so conceited as to think she’d welcome his advances when she was half blind with anger—but then _he_ sank _his_ teeth into her lower lip and _pulled_.

Hermione’s back bowed away from the wall, and her breasts grazed the flat plane of his chest, and her hands came up to snarl in his robes, and she was so _warm_, heating up _right there_, right at the apex of her thighs—

Tom unclasped her lip, slicked his tongue across the shallow indents his sharp teeth had left behind, and dived back in to kiss her like he wanted to suck the very air from her lungs, the very soul from her body.

Perhaps he did.

One of his hands came up to cradle the crown of her skull, pillowing it so it didn’t collide with the wall as she kissed him frantically back, and his other hand dropped down to squeeze the soft round jut of her hip. He pressed his pelvis flush to hers, warm and heavy, and she could feel something stirring in his trousers, something hot and hard and stiff. She wanted to part her legs for him. She wanted to _fling_ them around his waist and _climb_ him—

_Oh, but she was still so _furious_ with him. She wanted to hurt him with her kiss, with her clutching fingers. She wanted to _take him apart_.

_His_ hand released her hip and curled around the hem of her skirt. Hermione’s mouth stilled under his. Waiting. Wondering.

He drew his mouth away from hers, trailing a thread of saliva that broke when he licked his lips. _Hermione’s_ lips, which had been alight with stimulated nerve endings only a second ago, felt cold and almost dead. Her lungs were too full of air she didn’t need. She wanted to share her breath with _him_.

Tom pulled away from her, away from her grasping hands. He let go of her. He dropped to his knees. He dropped to his knees in front of her.

Seeing him like that—neat hair out of place, lips red and swollen, cheeks flushed with feverish color, dark eyes too intent on her face—it was too much. Seeing him kneel in front of her like a supplicant,
like all he’d ever wanted was to worship her—it was far, far too much, and she couldn’t stand it. She brought her empty hands to her face and covered her eyes, blocking out the sight of him.

Tom clicked his tongue. His tongue, which had only a moment ago been crawling across the roof of Hermione’s mouth.

“None of that,” he said. “Look at me.”

Hermione squeezed her fingers closer together, cutting off what little light there was in this dark alcove, and shook her head no.

“Hermione. Look at me.”

Was this a compulsion? Had he cast the Imperius Curse on her without her noticing? Whatever the cause, his voice was as soft and coaxing and intimate as his fingers on her cunt had been. She felt it like fingers on her cunt, like a thumb on her clit, and her thighs twitched convulsively.

It was too hypnotic, too compelling, for her to deny a second time, and she dropped her hands to look at him from beneath her shuddering lashes.

He smiled at her when their eyes met. It was a gentle smile. Sweet. It even looked genuine, and perhaps it was. She was giving him what he’d wanted, after all. And Tom so loved getting what he wanted.

He skimmed his warm palms up her thighs, stopping just beneath her skirt. His hands were under her skirt, but nothing obscene happening, not yet. The touch was practically chaste.

He tongued his lower lip, and a wet rush filmed Hermione’s already sticky knickers. Her knees knocked together. A weak but noticeable pulse started up in her cunt, throbbing like a bruise.

No. Not chaste at all, not really.

Tom’s smile widened, showing teeth.

“Lift your skirt, would you?” he asked, thumbs rubbing circles across her outer thighs, and Hermione could have died right there, she was so embarrassed. He was asking her to—he couldn’t possibly be planning what she thought he was planning—Tom would never—

“Hermione,” he said, and there was that compulsion again, the compulsion to do exactly as he said so long as he continued talking to her in that voice, in that way.

Hermione exhaled Shakily, looking away from him, looking at the back of the ugly, sheltering tapestry. She knotted trembling fingers in her skirt and drew it up once agonizing inch at a time, feeling Tom’s eyes on every revealed bit of skin like a physical touch. By the time she’d bunched it up around her stomach, she was so flushed her skin felt seared, and she was shaking like someone who’d been hit with a Cruciatucus Curse.

“You know,” said Tom, and was his voice just the slightest bit unsteady? “I never got a proper look at you, back in the hospital wing. I can’t help but want to correct that oversight. I don’t like to do things by half, you understand.”

Hermione nearly laughed. No, she supposed he didn’t.

But then he dug his fingers into the flesh of her thighs and pulled them slowly apart, and Hermione no longer felt like laughing. No, she only felt as if she would’ve fallen over if not for the wall at her
Light was filtering through the tapestry, if only weakly. Her peers were beyond that tapestry, attending their lessons as responsible students should, and Hermione was in here, alone in the dark with Tom Riddle, letting him do whatever he wanted to her.

Tom’s hair brushed the exposed lower half of her stomach, almost ticklish, and she jumped. His cheeks grazed her thighs.

He kissed her. He kissed her between her legs.

No.

That wasn’t the word for it.

He pressed his open mouth against her cunt through her knickers, was what he did, and if Hermione had thought that she’d been about to fall over earlier, that was nothing compared to how she felt now. She couldn’t even feel her own bloody legs.

Hermione made a wounded noise, low in her throat. She braced herself against the wall and squeezed her eyes shut.

She felt flayed alive. She felt like a raw, exposed nerve, and Tom hadn’t even—

He pulled his mouth away from her, but only by centimeters, and his breath fanned warmly across her damp knickers—damp with arousal and damp with his saliva—when he said, hoarsely, “Don’t do that. I want to see your eyes when I touch you.”

Hermione made another noise, and this time, she didn’t sound wounded so much as she sounded like she was dying. And she was. She was dying.

But she opened her eyes. Opening them felt like ripping off her own skin, but she did it. She did it, and she looked Tom full in the face.

He pressed his cheek against her stomach and smiled at her. It was the same gentle smile from earlier. A flush was riding his cheekbones and painting the bridge of his exquisitely straight nose.

“That’s a good girl,” he said, and turned his face to press his mouth against her cunt again. It would’ve been chaste—his mouth was shut, and the pressure of his lips was gentle—had he been kissing her anywhere else but there.

Pressure. The pressure was too gentle, actually, and Hermione forced her hips still, forced herself not to ride his face—God, this was embarrassing, and what if he didn’t like it? What if he didn’t like the taste, or, God, the smell—even Hermione didn’t especially like the way she smelled, so what if Tom—what if he didn’t—

His tongue unfurled from his mouth and pressed up against her through her underwear. He changed the angle of his jaw and licked her from back to front, and the crotch of her knickers felt thinner when it was wet, and his warm, labored breath on the damp cotton felt—it was—oh, God—

Hermione slapped a shaking hand across her mouth, caging in the noise that wanted to crawl out of her throat.

Tom wasn’t finished with her, though. No, he tucked his fingers into the waistband of her knickers and drew them down her legs, leaving them pulled taut around her ankles.
He'd said he'd wanted to see her eyes when he touched her, but she had to squeeze them shut again when she saw him lean in, when she felt his damp lips graze her lips—

He licked her again, and she squirmed. It felt—funny. Ticklish, almost, and she wasn’t sure if she liked this, if this was—

He seemed to be mapping her with his tongue. Learning the sticky bumps and grooves of her by feel. And then his tongue found her clit, and he hesitated. He hesitated, and Hermione’s breath sawed in her lungs, and her nipples drew up tight and aching against the cups of her bra—and then Tom closed his lips around her slick, heavy clit and sucked.

Hermione’s breath froze in her lungs, and her hips gave a reflexive twitch.

But his mouth wasn’t the only thing he used on her; no, he pressed his fingers up between her legs to finger at the lips of her cunt while his mouth drew on her tingling clit. Her thighs were tingling, too, tingling with a rush of blood. Her stomach was warm and giddy. Her toes were clenched up so tight in her shoes it felt as if they’d never uncurl. She wanted to grab Tom’s hair and pull, but with his teeth so near some very sensitive bits, she didn’t dare, so she throttled her skirt until she’d ruined the pleats, instead.

He pressed his thumb against her clit, right next to his flexing tongue, and ground down hard, once. Hermione’s legs locked up, and her heart seized in her chest—God, it wasn’t even beating—and her breath locked up in her lungs, and her cunt—

Her cunt squeezed, once, then squeezed again, pounding like a second heart, throbbing like a wound, throbbing like release—oh, God, she was coming against his face, and he wouldn’t stop, and she squirmed to get away from him, away from his touch on her too-sensitized flesh. This was like dying and being born again all at once—

He pulled off her with a wet, obscene noise that she’d never forget, not for as long as she lived. When he broke the seal of his mouth, Hermione felt a nasty mixture of her come and his saliva drip off her cunt and trickle down the inner creases of her thighs, and, oh, God.

Tom stood up. Hermione thought she heard his knees pop—kneeling on that stone floor couldn’t’ve been comfortable, but he’d done it anyway, had done it for her. She half expected him to leave her while her cunt was still pulsing with sullen aftershocks like he had in the hospital wing, but he didn’t.

No, he pressed his body against hers, warm and heavy and loose, and Hermione opened her eyes. She opened her eyes and looked him in the face.

He was breathing hard through his parted lips, lips which were bruised such a dark red as to be nearly purple, purple like wine, and his chin was shiny. His chin was shiny from her.

He pressed his fingers against her mouth, into her mouth, the fingers he’d used to touch her, and she could taste her own musk on them. She wanted to swat him away. She didn’t.

“And that’s why you won’t ruin me,” he said, pressing his mouth to her cheek, scraping his fingers across her tongue. “You’ll never raise a hand against me, Hermione, because you are entirely mine.”
Hi, guys! Apologies for the short hiatus; I’ve had some stuff going on and had neither
the time nor the energy to write as a result. Thank you for your patience!

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6 January 1997

“Hermione, would you mind staying after for a bit?”

Hermione paused in the act of tucking her copy of *The Essential Defense Against the Dark Arts* into
her satchel, fingers clamping painfully tight around its spine. She didn’t need a mirror to know that
she was frozen in the precise attitude of a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car.

She’s suspected that something was seriously wrong when Professor Lupin had refrained from
commenting on her tardiness; obviously he hadn’t wanted to interrupt his lecture on Dementors on
her account and had decided to postpone her dressing down for after class. He was probably going to
take points—no, he was going to give her a week’s worth of detentions—no, he was going to talk to
Professor McGonagall and have Hermione *expelled*—

Someone cleared their throat, and Hermione started, unfreezing from her petrified state. Glancing to
her left, she saw that Ron’s face was pleated with some cross between confused and concerned.
When their eyes met, he raised his eyebrows expectantly.

Are you okay? he mouthed.

Hermione gave a jerky nod, moving as awkwardly as any marionette, and turned to face Professor
Lupin, who was sat behind his desk with a patient expression on his face. He didn’t *look* as if he
were about to rake her across the proverbial coals, but then, Professor Lupin was an even-tempered,
mild-mannered man who’d been known to keep his composure under more dire circumstances than
these. No, the look on his face *wouldn’t* be any indication as to what he had planned for her.

“As a matter of fact, there was.” To Hermione’s friends, Lupin said mildly, “Harry, Ron, you had
best be going. You’ll be late to your next lesson if you don’t leave in a hurry.”

Hermione tried not to flinch. Oh, yes, she was almost certainly in for it, and she didn’t even have a
proper defense to offer up. What *would* she say to Professor Lupin? *Sorry, sir, but I was too busy
being fondled in an alcove to arrive on time? You know how it is.*

God, no. She’d take expulsion over ever admitting to *that.*

Cheeks burning, Hermione dropped her gaze to the books peeking out of her open satchel as Harry
and Ron mumbled their goodbyes and shuffled out of the classroom. Even when she heard the door clap shut behind them, she still didn’t look up.

Was it possible for one’s blood to literally boil with shame? No, it wasn’t, but Hermione certainly felt as if she were burning from the inside out. God, when had she become this sort of person? The Hermione of a year ago would have been disgusted with her.

Professor Lupin’s chair scraped gratingly across the stone floor as he stood up, and the sound was reminiscent of nothing so much as nails on a blackboard. Hermione had to bite her lip to stop herself flinching.

The distance between Lupin’s desk and the first row of students’ desks was a short one, but it seemed to take him forever to traverse it. He stopped directly in front of Hermione, pressing his fingertips against her desktop.

“How are you, Hermione? Had a good holiday, I hope?” Hermione looked up instinctively, startled by the innocuous opener. Lupin’s smile was relaxed—friendly, even, in that caring teacher sort of way—but the skin around his eyes was tight and bruised-looking, premature crow’s feet cropping up around the corners.

Hermione squirmed with something like impatience. Lupin had a free hour coming up, so he needn’t have been in a hurry, but Hermione wasn’t quite so lucky. Presumably Lupin would write her a note explaining her tardiness to her next professor, but part of Hermione wanted to tell him to drop the small talk and get on with it. Of course, considering that she’d been tardy to Lupin’s class, she supposed she couldn’t demand as much without sounding like a hypocrite.

Releasing her lower lip from the clasp of her teeth—and trying desperately not to think of the last person who’d bitten it—Hermione said, “It was…all right, I suppose. And you, Professor? Did you enjoy your holiday?”

Professor Lupin’s smile flickered. “I enjoyed it as much as was possible, Hermione, thank you for asking.”

Hermione knew without asking for clarification that Lupin was referring to the full moon that had fallen on the early days of winter break.

Right. Of course. It had been stupid of her to ask.

Smiling weakly in mute apology, Hermione returned her gaze to the desktop, tracing the patterns in the woodgrain with her fingers. Perhaps she ought to get to the point, herself, and demand that Lupin punish her as he saw fit, if only to put an end to the suspense. She couldn’t take it any longer—

“Talking of the holidays,” said Professor Lupin, “Sirius came to visit me on New Year’s Eve.”

Hermione’s fingers stilled. For a second—just a second—her mind went utterly blank. But then something like a hunch broke through the fog, and she—

No. She was being ridiculous. Of course Sirius would’ve visited Lupin over the holidays; they were terribly close, and Sirius loved Lupin dearly. Of course Sirius wouldn’t have wanted Lupin to be alone over the holidays. Of course he wouldn’t have.

But.

But, if that was all there was to it, then why would Professor Lupin bring it up to Hermione, of all people? Surely a visit from Sirius was a commonplace occurrence. It wouldn’t be worth mentioning
unless Lupin was leading up to something else.

Hermione recalled the look that had bloomed across Sirius’s face when she’d asked him about horcruxes. Thought of how he’d pressed his fingers into her shoulders so hard that he’d left ten little bruises behind.

“Listen to me. Whoever this friend of yours is—you need to get away from them immediately, do you understand? Get away from them and go to Remus—better yet, go straight to Professor Dumbledore.”

Oh.

Oh, no.

Hermione’s palms broke out into a sweat, fingers slipping against the desktop. She rose from her chair, then sat back down when her head swam alarmingly. Was this another anxiety attack? It felt like an anxiety attack, or at least the start of one.

“Professor,” she stammered, but couldn’t think of what else to say. As for Lupin, his eyes had gone wide with—with alarm?—and he was hovering a hand over Hermione’s shoulder as though to push her back into her seat should she attempt to stand up again.

Had all the blood drained from her face? Was her distress that obvious? Perhaps it was; perhaps that was why he was looking at her like he expected her to break apart.

“Professor.” Her vision had gone blurry around the edges; her breath was thin in her lungs. Oh, yes, this was definitely the prelude to an anxiety attack. “I didn’t—I’m not—”

“Hermione!” Professor Lupin rapped out, and something about his sharp tone actually managed to snap Hermione out of it at the last second. Her teeth came together with an audible click, and she stared mutely up at him, wide eyed.

Lupin’s tone had been sharp, yes, but he didn’t look angry. Only tired—he always looked tired—and desperately concerned.

Seeing him look at her that way, as though she was to be pitied, turned Hermione’s stomach. After all, she’d got herself into this mess. She didn’t deserve anyone’s sympathy.

“Hermione,” Professor Lupin said again, gentler this time, and circled the long, two-person desk to pull out the second empty chair. He sat sideways in it, facing her. “You don’t genuinely believe that I would even for a second take you for a Dark wizard in the making, do you? If you do, then I haven’t done a very good job of earning your trust, now, have I?”

Hermione flinched, sliding her hands off the desk to clench them in her lap. She hung her head, staring at her bloodless knuckles with dry, itchy eyes.

“Sirius told you everything, then, didn’t he.” It wasn’t a question.

So much for plausible deniability.

Lightly, as though they were talking about some fluff piece in the Daily Prophet, Lupin said, “Did you ever expect otherwise?”

It was a rhetorical question, but still, Hermione considered it.
Had she expected otherwise? Had she wanted Sirius to go to Lupin or even Dumbledore? Had she wanted Harry’s godfather to alleviate at least some of the weight on her shoulders?

Of course she had. Of course.

Could anyone honestly blame her?

Her head drooped lower still as she tried to reconcile her mounting dread with the perverse relief that wanted to suffuse her every cell. This was a way out. She’d tell Lupin everything, and then he would go to Dumbledore, and Dumbledore would go to the Ministry, and then Tom would be chucked into Azkaban—he was over seventeen; he’d be tried as an adult—and then Hermione would be free of him. Forever.

Wouldn’t she?

Professor Lupin gently rapped his knuckles against Hermione’s shoulder, and she glanced up at him through the curtain of her hair, wondering if he could read the wild clash of emotions in her eyes. Probably he could. Lupin had always been remarkably perceptive for someone who wasn’t a Legilimens.

…That Hermione knew of.

“I haven’t spoken to Professor Dumbledore about this.” He hadn’t? That was a bit of a shock. “And I won’t, unless you ask me to—but that all depends on how this conversation goes.”

Hermione could scarcely breathe.

“Why not?” she rasped. “Why not go to Dumbledore straightaway?”

Lupin gave Hermione’s shoulder a bracing squeeze before retreating from her personal space. His smile was kind, if weary.

“Because I trust your judgment,” he said.

He what?

Hermione’s throat constricted around a hysterical giggle that she couldn’t afford to let loose. Had he really just said that? If only he knew—if only he knew why she’d been tardy, if only he knew that she was developing a genuine warmth of feeling for Tom bloody Riddle despite everything he’d done and would inevitably do.

“Now, Hermione,” Lupin was saying rather sternly, oblivious to Hermione’s growing hysterics. “I want you to be honest with me: has this friend of yours actually created any horcruxes to date, or have they only expressed interest in the theory?”

Sirius had asked her a similar question on Christmas Day, and Hermione had said that she thought Tom hadn’t created any horcruxes yet, but she hadn’t been certain. She hadn’t been certain then and she was even less certain now, but if she gave Lupin the wrong answer then he might not give her any answers, and—

And she lied.

“I don’t think they have,” she whispered. “Created any, that is.”

Lupin’s shoulders slumped.
“Right,” he breathed, relief giving way to a sharp sort of attention. Hermione forced herself to meet his eyes, praying that he wouldn’t read the lie in them, that he really wasn’t a Legilimens, and that, even if he were, he’d respect her privacy enough not to go poking through her brain without her consent.

“And you’ve no idea what a horcrux is?” he asked, but his tone implied that he already knew the answer.

“No,” Hermione said honestly. “I know that it’s—that it must be something really foul. And from what Sirius said, that it’s some sort of object.”

Lupin’s mouth curved into something that was decidedly not a smile. “Not so much an object as something contained within an object, but you’re not far off the mark. And it is foul. One might go so far as to say that it’s fouler than all three of the Unforgivable Curses put together.”

She wasn’t surprised. She wasn’t. Only something as vile as Lupin had described could’ve put that look on Professor Slughorn’s face, could’ve compelled him to flee Hogwarts rather than have any association with it and the students who asked after it. Still, her stomach dropped.

“But,” she said haltingly, “Professor Lupin, what is it?”

Lupin drummed his fingers against the desktop. “Hermione,” he said, “have you ever heard the story of Koschei the Deathless? Or Koschei the Immortal, to use a less literal translation.”

Hermione blinked rapidly as she struggled to link the non-sequitur back to the conversation they’d been having.

“Er,” she said, wracking her brain. “It’s a Slavic folktale, isn’t it? A Muggle folktale.” She was only mildly surprised that Professor Lupin was familiar with Muggle fairy tales; after all, he was a half blood, and had been best friends with a Muggle-born.

“That’s right.” Lupin nodded encouragingly but he did not elaborate, and Hermione realized that he was waiting for her to go on.

“Well, all right, then.

“He’s…an archetypal villain in Slavic folklore,” Hermione said, gaining confidence as the details of the story came back to her. “A sort of evil wizard, I think. As his name implies, he’s effectively immortal—he can’t die because he hid his—hid his soul?—inside a series of objects on the mythical island of Buyan…”

“That’s correct,” said Lupin, still nodding along.

Hermione frowned. “Professor, what has a Muggle fairy tale got to do with—?”

Lupin stopped nodding and leaned forward in his chair, reaching out to give Hermione’s wrist a fleeting squeeze.

“Think about it, Hermione. Quite a lot of Muggle fairy stories and folktales have roots in Wizarding fact. Where would the Muggles have got the idea for a sorcerer who can’t die? A sorcerer who hid his soul inside an object?”

And as though someone had pricked a hole in them with a viciously sharp needle, all the air whooshed out of Hermione’s lungs.
A sorcerer who couldn’t die because he’d hidden his soul inside an object. Horcruxes weren’t *objects*, precisely, but they were contained *inside* objects. Which meant—

Hermione had thought that all the air had left her lungs, but it turned out that she still had enough breath left to speak, if only unsteadily.

“A horcrux,” she said, “is a person’s soul contained within an object? How d’you—how d’you remove your own soul? That’s not possible; if a person could remove their own soul without rendering themselves catatonic, then there’d be no point to the Dementor’s Kiss—”

Lupin gave her wrist another squeeze, and she snapped her mouth shut. Was she hyperventilating? She thought she might be hyperventilating. And if she wasn’t, she would be, soon.

“No,” said Lupin. “No, Hermione, a horcrux isn’t a person’s *entire* soul, but a piece of it. A piece broken off from the rest.”

Hermione’s throat squeezed. She didn’t want to ask. She didn’t. She didn’t—

“How?” she rasped. “How does anyone—”

Lupin’s mouth curved once more into that bitter not-smile. It didn’t suit his kind, tired face. Just looking at it made Hermione want to break off her line of questioning, but she couldn’t. She had to know. *She had to know.*

“How else?” Lupin asked. “A great act of evil—the greatest act of evil. Something that would do enough damage to the soul, the moral center, to shatter it into pieces.”

Oh.

Of course.

“You’re talking about murder,” she said, hearing herself as though from a great distance. Hearing herself speak as though someone else entirely was speaking, as if she was little more than a mouthpiece.

Lupin’s sigh made his shoulders quiver. “You *are* the brightest witch of your age,” he said, and it didn’t sound like a compliment. Not really.

“But there’s more to it than that,” Lupin went on, and Hermione flinched, not wanting to hear it but knowing that she must. “There’s splitting one’s soul, and then there’s actually placing it within an object, and even I don’t know the exact details that go into creating a horcrux, only that they’re utterly repulsive.”

Hermione’s gorge rose, but she fought it back down. There was a question she needed to ask, but her brain couldn’t seem to tear itself away from the thought of something so disgusting that it couldn’t be put into words, that even someone as knowledgeable as Professor Lupin didn’t know the precise details because they were *just that awful.*

“Is there—I mean, can a person’s soul be restored to its original state after it’s been split?” No. That was the wrong question. “I mean, can a—can a horcrux be destroyed?”

Lupin frowned. “I don’t know if a person’s soul can be restored once it’s been shattered,” he said. “But, yes, a horcrux can be destroyed, if only in theory. It would have to be damaged beyond all repair, of course, from means both mundane and magical. It would be remarkably difficult to find something that could do that sort of damage.”
“Yes,” Hermione said. “I imagine it would be.”

Lupin sighed again, face softening for a moment before his eyes went sharp and flinty.

“I’ve told you all of this in confidence, Hermione, because I want you to understand the seriousness of your friend’s situation. There’s no going back from this sort of evil, do you understand? If your friend has already created a horcrux, they’re past saving.”

“That’s what Sirius said.” Hermione thought that she ought to be feeling something, anything, but she was entirely numb.

“And, Hermione,” Lupin pressed, leaning forward to look her in the eye. “If they do create one—if they go past the point of no return—then I will have to go to Dumbledore. Do you understand what I’m asking of you?”

Yes. Yes, of course she did.

He was asking her to go to him in the event that Tom created a horcrux.

If he hadn’t already.

“I—”

Hermione broke off. What was she going to say? That she wasn’t certain if she could do that, if she could get to Lupin before Tom found out and killed her or her friends?

She thought of that dark little alcove, of the things Tom had done to her. Of the confidence that had saturated his voice when he’d told her that she’d never do anything to hurt him, because she was his.

Hermione clenched her fists, nails cutting into her palms.

Tom had been wrong.

Hermione belonged only to herself.

“Yes, sir,” she told Lupin. “I understand completely.”

He was waiting for her when lunch break came round, standing to one side of the Great Hall’s open doors as though he’d foreseen that she’d want to talk with him.

Right. Talk.

That wasn’t quite the word for what Hermione had in mind.

He’d been studying his watch face—the watch she’d given him—but at the sound of her shoes clicking against the stone floor, he looked up, lips curling into a soft smile.

Seeing him look at her like that was almost too much. It made her want to spit.

But then he saw the look on her face, and his expression changed. His smile flickered, then died. His eyes cooled, something mean and reptilian flitting through them.
He knew. He knew that she knew. No Legilimency was required, not when the knowledge was stamped clear across her face.

“Hello, Tom,” she said. “I’d like to speak with you. Alone.”
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Hi, guys! Since my last update, eliamatrell made not one but two beautiful edits for NLtS, and tomionereads also made a stunning graphic set inspired by this fic. Thank you so much, guys!!!

Some exciting news: NLtS placed runner-up for Beyond the Book Fanfiction Nook's Favorite Tomione Romance! Thank you for loving my baby, guys. This fic wouldn't be the same without you.

Finally, please be aware that this chapter contains a non-graphic rape mention.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

6 January 1997

Well, Hermione thought, peering down the drafty chute that plagued her nightmares, I suppose it doesn’t get much more alone than the Chamber of Secrets, now, does it?

Locks of her hair had slid forward to graze her cheeks when she’d bent her head to look down the chute, and now she tucked them behind her ears with fingers that trembled ever so slightly. Straightening up, she retreated from the edge of the open pipe on careful feet, fearful of tripping over her own toes and falling down the chute like Alice down the rabbit hole.

Of course, Alice had come back from Wonderland, hadn’t she, no worse for the wear. If Hermione went down this rabbit hole, there was no telling whether she’d come back up alive or in a body bag.

Not that there’d be anything left of her to put in a body bag. In all likelihood, Tom would simply feed her remains to the basilisk and call it a day.

Licking her lips with a tongue that had gone dry as sandpaper, Hermione looked sidelong at Tom and asked him a very simple question.

“Why?”

Rather than answer Hermione immediately, Tom crossed his arms and regarded her with the same reptilian calculation that had flitted across his eyes when she’d approached him in the entrance hall not fifteen minutes ago.

Had it only been fifteen minutes? It felt like forever. This year had felt like forever, even as the months contrarily seemed to pass in flashes of rushed time, as if someone had hit the fast forward button on a VCR.

Eventually, Tom said, “You asked to speak with me in private, and I complied. As I’m missing a meal on your account, I reckoned it was only fair that I got to choose the venue of our conversation. Furthermore, you asked to speak with me alone.” With a jerk of his chin, he indicated the open pipe. “It doesn’t get much more alone than the Chamber, now, does it?”
Hermione flinched reflexively. Had he plucked that thought straight out of her head? But, no, he couldn’t have done; she hadn’t been looking him in the face when she’d had it, which left her to consider a much more terrifying notion. The notion that their thought patterns were alike.

That their minds were alike.

With difficulty, she compartmentalized that horrifying thought to be dealt with later—if there was a later. For now, she put on a brave front and said, “I’m not going down there. How am I to know that this isn’t another trap?”

Tom tapped his index finger against his bicep, projecting impatience. Well, let him be impatient. It was the least he deserved.

“Bit obvious for a trap, isn’t it?” he asked. “I like to credit myself with having more finesse than that. But I suppose I should have expected as much from a Gryffindor. Your lot aren’t known for their subtlety, are they?”

Hermione’s temper flared, whiting out the worst of her fear, and she held onto it with both hands. It was a stupid thing for her to get angry over, his insulting her House like it really mattered in the grand scheme of things, but she’d take it. Anger was better than fear. Anger was productive. Anger got things done.

“Why should you care if it’s obvious so long as the result is to your liking? You push me down that pipe, seal it behind me, and call it a day. It’s neat. Simple, but effective.”

To Hermione’s mild shock, Tom nodded, conceding her point without further argument.

“You’re not wrong,” he said. “But all the same, I’m going to have to ask you to trust me and do as I say.”

“Trust you!” Hermione barked, and Tom frowned, eyes darting toward the row of toilet stalls.

Hermione bit her lip, ears straining to ascertain that Myrtle’s gurgling sobs hadn’t cut off. She’d been nestled in her U-bend when Tom and Hermione had walked into the bathroom earlier, too caught up in her own misery to notice the intrusion, but if Hermione caught her attention now, it was all over. If Myrtle saw the entrance to the Chamber, Tom would kill Hermione and everyone she loved.

Talking of.

“If I—if I refuse to go down there—” Hermione cut herself off, took a bracing breath, and then forced herself to continue. “If I don’t go down there with you, will you make me regret it?”

She didn’t elaborate. She didn’t dare within Myrtle’s hearing, and more to the point, she didn’t have to. Tom would know exactly what she meant.

Tom picked an imaginary bit of grime out from under his thumbnail, infuriatingly nonchalant.

“Perhaps I will,” he said. “Perhaps I won’t. But I think I’m right in guessing that you’d prefer not to take that chance.”

Hermione slumped, defeated. Tom was right, of course. Hermione wouldn’t take that chance. Not with her friends on the line.

But just because she had no choice in the matter didn’t mean that she couldn’t rebel in certain small ways.
“All right,” Hermione said, and Tom’s lips began to curl into a smile. “I’ll go. But you go first.”

The smile disappeared at once. “No.”

Hermione stuck out her chin and looked him in the eyes. They were beautiful, his eyes, dark as treacle and framed with long, sooty lashes. Hermione wanted to scratch them out.

“I’ll follow right after,” she said. “I swear.”

“Sorry, Hermione, but I’ve got trust issues. You know how it is.” But he tilted his head and looked at her from beneath those long lashes, considering. “I propose a compromise. We’ll jump down together.”

And he held out his hand, palm up, fingers loosely curled. Hermione regarded it the way she might a steel beartrap.

After a protracted moment of indecision, Hermione took Tom’s proffered hand, allowing him to wrap his long fingers around her clammy palm.

With a gentle tug, Tom walked them forward until they were both standing at the edge of the chute, looking down the dark length of it. Under the persistent smell of damp stone, Hermione thought that she could detect a hint of rot, of old bones, of things long dead.

Her gorge rose, but she forced it down. She forced quite a lot of things down.

“Together, then?” Tom gave Hermione’s hand a bracing squeeze, a parody of camaraderie, and when his fingers loosened once more—

When his fingers loosened, Hermione wrenched her hand out of his grasp, reeled back, pressed both of her hands to the small of his back, and shoved.

If he’d been expecting it, he probably would have been able to maintain his balance and stay put; Hermione was much smaller than him, after all, and while Tom was no Quidditch player in terms of muscle tone, his upper body strength was still superior to hers.

But he hadn’t been expecting it, and Hermione had the distinct satisfaction of watching his arms pinwheel as he struggled to regain his balance. It was far too late, though; his toes had already gone over the edge, and he had only enough time to give Hermione a brief, furious look over his shoulder before he was falling down the chute with an involuntary cry.

Hermione pressed her knuckles against her mouth, eyes wide, ears straining. After a prolonged moment, she heard a faint thump, which was followed shortly by the sound of distant cursing.

A hysterical giggle tore free of her throat. Had she—oh, God, she really had—

Swallowing back her hysteria, Hermione dropped her hand from her mouth and tangled her fingers in her skirt, torn. Should she leave him down there? Leave him there while she went and fetched a teacher? But, no. Even if she could get to an authority figure in time, she’d have no way of proving that Tom had been the one to open up the Chamber; he’d probably spin the story so it looked as if Hermione was in the wrong, and he wouldn’t have to try very hard at all. She had pushed him down that chute.

What else could she do, then? Wait for him to calm down? Perhaps she should. If she went down there right now, he’d probably snap her neck.
If she waited for him to come back up, he’d still probably snap her neck.

Hermione exhaled hard through her nose. What an idiot she’d been, signing her own death warrant out of sheer petty impulse.

Never let it be said that she wasn’t the sort to cut off her nose to spite her face.

Hermione sat down on the edge of the open chute, legs dangling freely, the cold of the bathroom floor leaching through her woolen skirt to freeze her bum. She counted slowly to ten, drew her wand, and pushed off.

The ride down seemed shorter than it had the first time, either because she knew what to expect or because she knew what was waiting for her in the form of an enraged Tom. Regardless, she landed in a heap on the tunnel’s floor in short order, scraping the backs of her knees and bruising her tailbone.

Wincing, she pushed clumsily to her feet and looked up.

Tom was waiting for her, as expected, his lit wand throwing his handsome face into sharp relief.

His face, which was tight with barely suppressed fury.

Oh.

Shit.

Hermione pointed her wand at his chest, for all the good it would do her. It made her feel a little better, if nothing else.

“I suppose,” Tom said through clenched teeth, “that you must be quite pleased with yourself.”

He sounded like an angry parent, of all things, a tone that was at odds with his filthy, disheveled appearance.

Hermione bit back the mad urge to giggle.

“Well,” she said, and she knew that she hadn’t entirely managed to eradicate the laughter in her voice when Tom’s brow twitched, “it’s only fair, isn’t it?”

“Fair,” Tom echoed flatly.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “Fair.”

Tom’s glower faded, and he said, rather slyly, “You know, that’s rather Slytherin of you, wanting to take revenge for petty grievances.”

Hermione’s amusement died a swift death. “I’d hardly call being pushed into a death chamber a petty grievance.”

Tom shrugged, dismissive, and turned around.

“Come along, then.”

Hermione considered Stunning him while his back was turned just to make a point.

“Don’t even think of it, Hermione,” he said, still not looking at her, and Hermione jumped.
Scowling, she took one grudging step before something occurred to her.

“Where are you going?” she demanded, shrill.

Tom paused, regarding her over his shoulder. “The tunnel only goes one way, Hermione,” he said.

“I am not,” she said seethed, clinging to her anger as her fear threatened to rise, “going in there.”

Tom turned on his heel to face her properly. “And why not? You’re already down here; what difference does it bloody well make?”

Was he—was he seriously asking her that question? What was wrong with him?

Well. Aside from the obvious.

“The difference,” Hermione said, jaw clenched so hard it hurt, “is that there isn’t a basilisk out here.”

Tom had the audacity to roll his eyes at her. “The basilisk won’t hurt you.”


Tom pressed his eyes shut, and Hermione got the distinct impression that he was praying for patience.

“The basilisk,” he said slowly, as a professor might to a very stupid student, “may be a mythical beast, but it is only precisely that—a beast. It kills in self-defense and when it’s hungry, and it has no particular taste for Muggle-born flesh.”

That didn’t make her feel a whit better, but she said, “Right. Unless you point it at Muggle-borns.”

“I’m not,” Tom ground out, “going to set the basilisk on you, Hermione.”

Hermione laughed, and the sound was perhaps a little unhinged. “Why should I believe you?”

Tom breathed hard through his nose, and Hermione watched him do it, a little fascinated despite herself. It was…strange. He was always so composed in public, always kept a stranglehold on his self-control, but she had the power to drive him to visible irritation. He looked seconds away from tearing his hair out.

It was…terribly satisfying to watch.

“You have my word,” Tom said, visibly struggling to control his face, “that I won’t set the basilisk on you. Not today.”

_Not today._ That wasn’t very promising, and it gave him room to harm her in other ways, but somehow, it was more reassuring than a promise that he’d never hurt her at all. It was more believable, for one thing.

But not quite believable _enough._

“You’re lying,” Hermione said.

A muscle ticked in Tom’s jaw, but then the cool mask slipped firmly back into place, as easy as flicking on a light switch.

“I _am_ something of a habitual liar,” he said. “But I lie out of necessity. I have no reason to lie now,
and when I give my word, I keep it. For the duration of this little sojourn, you’re safe from the basilisk. And if you behave yourself, you’ll be perfectly safe from me as well.”

Hermione swallowed, and her throat was so dry that it clicked.

She’d have almost preferred to take her chances with the basilisk.

“Do I have a choice?” she asked.

Tom didn’t say anything, and he didn’t have to. He only gestured with his free hand as though to say, After you.

Hermione dug in her heels. “Oh, no. I am not turning my back to you. We either walk side by side or not at all.”

“Trying to cling to what freedom of choice you still have, Hermione?” Amusement curdled thick in Tom’s voice, and Hermione once again considered Stunning him. “I suppose I can respect that. Shall we hold hands as well?”

Hermione’s lip curled, and this time, she didn’t bother to answer him. She was quite sure that the look on her face spoke volumes.

Tom only grinned, the bastard, but then the grin parted around a hiss, and Hermione heard the sink a floor above them grind back into place, shutting them up in here.

Right. Hermione had never had a choice. Not for a while, now. Not since she’d first decided to defend Draco in Knockturn Alley.

But she fell into step with Tom, in the end, clinging so tightly to her wand that her knuckles went stiff and bloodless, hyperaware of the even cadence of Tom’s breathing, of the scent of his soap beneath the musty rot of the Chamber corridor.

And although every cell of her body wanted to cringe away from him, from the brush of his shoulder against hers as they walked, she forced herself to concentrate on him rather than on the crunch of tiny bones beneath her shoes, the stench of rot, the drip of water.

As the dead end came into view, snake carvings thrown into relief by the light of Tom’s wand, Hermione’s already unsteady breathing hitched violently. He’d lied to her. He had to have lied to her. He was going to wake up the basilisk and lock her up in there with it. He was going to—

Tom’s fingers touched her wrist, warm and dry and nothing at all like their cold, damp surroundings, and Hermione started.

“Calm down,” Tom said. “You’ll have an anxiety attack if you’re not careful.”

“I already had one over the Christmas holidays,” Hermione said, words skipping unsteadily as she struggled to control her breathing. “Because of you.”

Hermione saw Tom’s head turn in her periphery, but as she was determinedly not looking at his face, she couldn’t read his expression.

“Is that right.” It was a question, but he didn’t phrase it like one. “Then I’m sorry about that.”

Now Hermione looked at him properly, unable to believe what she’d just heard. “You’re sorry?” she echoed. Of all the things he’d done to her directly or indirectly, this was what he apologized for?
Tom had the nerve to *frown* at her. “Your mind is of great value to me, Hermione. I wouldn’t want to see it damaged.”

Hermione huffed and looked away. At least she was back to being too angry to feel properly afraid.

Not that she hadn’t plenty to fear, especially right *now*, because Tom was opening his mouth and speaking Parseltongue again, and while it still sounded like nonsense to Hermione’s ears, she was beginning to recognize the cadence of it. *Open*, was what he had to be saying. *Open up.*

And the wall did. It split down the middle like a cracked egg and pulled apart until there was nothing there but a yawning black hole.

A yawning black hole, and the distant sound of something breathing in the dark.

Hermione took a step back without meaning to. Tom’s fingers circled her wrist, holding her still, and she was too petrified to throw him off.

*Petrified.* Bad choice of words, that.

“Come along,” said Tom. “It won’t wake unless I tell it to.”

“That’s not especially reassuring,” Hermione snapped, but she allowed herself to be pulled into the Chamber, perhaps fifteen feet or so past the entrance. There, she dug in her heels and wriggled out of Tom’s grip.

He didn’t try to pull her farther in, at least. No, he only stopped and faced her, one hand loose at his side, the other holding his wand at waist height. Hermione mirrored him and tried very hard not to look at the great, shapeless mass coiled in the distance.

“So,” Tom said. “Talk.”

Hermione half wanted to keep her mouth shut just to thwart him, but the sooner she got out of here, the better. So she talked.

“Tom,” she said, and he inclined his head, indicating that she had his attention. “There’s this Muggle story—a fairy tale, really, about a man—a wizard—called Koschei. I wonder if you’ve ever heard of it?”

Tom’s face was perfectly blank. “It rings a bell or two.”

“Oh, God. Heart thumping against her ribcage, Hermione forced herself to go on, forced herself to speak with the voice she used when she was lecturing her friends, nice and steady.

“Right,” she said, licking her lips. “Then you’ll know that Koschei was called Deathless. He couldn’t die, you see, because he’d hidden his soul—his mortality—inside an inanimate object.”

“Fascinating,” Tom said. “But do get to the point, darling.”

Hermione set her jaw. “The *point,*” she stressed, “is that it’s true, what the Muggles say about legend being grounded in facts. Because while Koschei himself may be a fictional character, what he did to keep himself undying isn’t fictional at all. What Koschei purportedly created to make himself immortal isn’t unlike a *horcrux.*”

That one word—that ugly, vile word—hung in the air between them like a spell, like a physical thing, and Hermione expected Tom to cringe back. To at least flinch a little.
He didn’t.

No, he only said thoughtfully, “You know, I discovered horcruxes quite by accident. I was paging through a book I’d found in the Restricted Section—Secrets of the Darkest Art, I believe it was called—and while the author named it, he refused to elaborate on how to go about creating one. Too rich for his blood, I suppose. And then the book disappeared off the shelves the very next day—Dumbledore’s work, no doubt. You know, he’s always had an awful habit of thwarting me.”

Hermione struggled to breathe evenly. “Right,” she said. “So, you went digging for the particulars. Slughorn?”

“Is a fool and a coward, yes, but he’s also terribly susceptible to flattery, and he is rather well read. I think I frightened him a bit, though, when I asked him to tell me about horcruxes.” Tom grinned, a wolfish flash of teeth. “And when you came to him with a similar line of questioning, he must have felt as if he’d seen a ghost. I suppose he thought that the two of us were conspiring against him.”

Probably, but Hermione wouldn’t allow him to distract her.

“So you have made one already,” she said, the words falling like stones out of her mouth. “Haven’t you? You’ve created a horcrux.”

“You already knew I was a murderer, Hermione,” Tom said, revoltingly gentle. “Why is this the thing that finally makes you cringe away from me in disgust?”

It was as good as a straight yes. He’d done it. He’d made at least one horcrux.

Hermione’s blood roared in her ears. She couldn’t hear anything past it, but she could feel herself moving, could see Tom’s face as it grew closer, as she switched her wand out of her dominant hand and coiled back her arm—

She punched him. There was a brief flare of hot pain—hers—and then Tom staggered back, clutching his nose.

The blood rushing in Hermione’s ears sang with triumph. She wanted to do it again. She wanted to hit him again. She wanted to smash his pretty face in—

“Bitch,” Tom was snarling, voice thick with the blood pooling on his tongue, and Hermione stared at him, feeling unmoored from herself. Her knuckles were throbbing hotly; she’d almost certainly split them. They’d swell soon, making it difficult for her to hold a quill.

At least Ginny had taught her how to throw a proper punch. Otherwise, she might have broken her thumb along with Tom’s nose.

“You—bloody—idiot,” she ground out. “What have you done to yourself?” It was a stupid question; she already knew. But she couldn’t help but to ask, to force him to tell her why. Why he thought it was worth it.

It was hard to tell with his hand in the way, but she thought that Tom grinned at her. His eyes were still livid, yes, but his lips were smiling, coated in blood as they were. He straightened up and muttered, “Episkey,” and his nose snapped back into place with a wet crack.

“You’re beautiful when you’re furious, did you know?”

Hermione saw red, and then she was storming forward again to grab Tom by the ear and yank him down to her eye level, the better to scream in his face.
“Then I must be positively gorgeous right now, because I am absolutely livid.”

Tom’s fingers clawed at the back of her hand, tangling with hers and hurling her hand away from him.

“I’ll thank you not to scold me like a child,” Tom said, and something in his voice told Hermione that she was on very, very thin ice.

“Of course not,” she said, fighting back the shudder that wanted to spread through her body. “A child would have the sense not to do what you’ve done—stupid arrogant inbred purebloods, playing God—”

“I’m not a pureblood.”

Hermione cut herself off. “Wh—pardon?”

“I’m not a pureblood. I’m a half blood, like that friend of yours. An orphan too, but you already knew that. So you see, Hermione, my blood’s as filthy as yours.”

Oh. That was…mildly surprising.

“One of…one of your parents was a Muggle-born?” Hermione guessed, split knuckles straining as she clutched at her wand.

“Worse,” said Tom. “My father was a Muggle.”

Hermione exhaled hard. “Oh,” she said.

“Yes,” Tom agreed. “Oh. I suppose it must come as a bit of a shock—I’m quite good at acting like a pureblood, aren’t I? Of course, if my Housemates knew of my true ancestry, I’d be ostracized. Half bloods aren’t entirely uncommon in Slytherin, for all that most of us like to pretend otherwise, but none of them have Muggle parents. Distant Muggle-born ancestors, perhaps, but that’s all.”

“If that’s the case,” Hermione said, trying to work through it, to make sense of it all, “then how did you end up in Slytherin?”

Had he flinched a little when she’d said that with such patent disbelief? Good, then. Good. She wanted to hurt him. Longed to cause him pain that couldn’t be magicked away by a healing spell.

“Aside from my qualifying personality traits?” Tom sneered, no trace of that fleeting flinch in his face. “Half blood I may be, but I’m still the Heir of Slytherin.”

Right. That.

“How disappointed he would be,” Hermione drawled, channeling Draco Malfoy, “to know that his one living heir is only a filthy half blood.”

Tom’s jaw tightened when she called him filthy, veins standing out in his forehead. Odd. He’d been perfectly composed when he called his own blood dirty, but it would appear that he didn’t take it very well when someone repeated it back to him.

“You’re such a hypocrite, Tom,” Hermione marveled. “Befriending purebloods that hate people like you, twisting their ideologies for your own gain, killing Muggle-borns—”

“Hypocritical?” Tom smiled patiently, his earlier anger draining from his face. “No. As you said, I’ve twisted their ideologies for my own gain, but that doesn’t mean that I ascribe to them. I’m using
them, Hermione.”

Hermione’s wand hand wavered, her arm growing tired, but she held firm. Her eyes wheeled about the Chamber, from the great carving of Slytherin’s ancient face to the sleeping basilisk’s poison-green scales.

“Why?” she said, and Tom cocked his head, a mute request for clarification. “Why are you doing this to yourself? Why make horcruxes?”

Tom was silent, and for a long moment, Hermione thought he wouldn’t answer her.

But he did.

“My father was a Muggle,” he said, as dispassionately as if he were reciting text from a book. “He lived up north in a village called Little Hangleton with his wealthy elderly parents. My mother lived there as well, but she wasn’t a Muggle. She was a pureblood, but not a pureblood like the Malfoys. Her family was of a distinguished line untouched by Muggle blood, but her ancestors had gambled and squandered away all of their riches, and she and her father and brother lived like tramps in an old shack.”

His hands spasmed when he said tramps, and Hermione swore that sparks spat out his wand, but then he took a breath. Calmed himself.

“He was terribly handsome, my father, if terribly useless, and my mother would watch him from the window of her family’s shack as he rode down the street in some beautiful car or another. She was miserable, you see—my uncle and grandfather would abuse her with regularity—and I suppose she took comfort in watching handsome Tom Riddle, in imagining that someone like him could love someone like her.”

Something must have shown on Hermione’s face, because Tom broke off talking long enough to give her a bitter smile.

“Oh, yes. I inherited his name as well as his face. I suppose I should be grateful for the latter—it makes things easier on me, you know—but I could do without the former.” He shook his head, then, as if to remind himself to stay on track. “At any rate, my mother’s unrequited obsession with my father eventually grew to be too much for her to bear. She ran away from home, and she took my father with her.”

“They—they ran away together?” It would have been foolish of them if they had, but the little girl in Hermione thought it terribly romantic, and she pitied Tom’s mother, besides. Growing up in a house like that—it had to’ve been hell on earth.

“Technically, yes,” Tom allowed. “But what you need to understand is that my mother wasn’t much to look at—must have been all that inbreeding.” Despite herself, Hermione winced, and Tom watched her do it with satisfaction bright in his eyes. “Perhaps he would have come with her willingly if she’d been beautiful, even though she was poor, but she wasn’t, and he didn’t. I can’t be certain, but I suspect that she must have enchanted him somehow—an Imperius Curse, perhaps, or liberal abuse of a very strong love potion.”

Hermione’s heart turned to stone in her chest. Disgust curdled her stomach. The pity she’d felt for Tom’s mother died as fast as it had been born.

“You’re talking about rape,” she said.

“She probably didn’t think of it that way,” Tom said, the slight curling of his upper lip the only
indication that he was displeased with the circumstances of his conception. “Deluded as she was. But, yes. She raped him, but she must have grown tired of living a lie, because she lifted the enchantment once she was pregnant with me, thinking that my father would stay with her if only for his unborn child’s sake.”

“And he didn’t,” Hermione said. It wasn’t a question.

Tom inclined his head. “My mother, lovesick little fool that she was, lived only long enough to deliver me, and then allowed herself to die.”

Hermione blinked. “To—to die? Of complications related to childbirth? It—it had to have been the late seventies. Something like that—” Something like that could have happened, but the likelihood would’ve been terribly low.

Tom shrugged, the careless motion belying the strained look on his face. “She didn’t want to live without him, and so she left me to grow up in an orphanage, and then in the foster care system when the orphanage closed. She was born from a long line of pureblooded wizards—Slytherin’s own heirs—and yet she allowed herself to die from something as mundane as childbirth. If she’d gone to St. Mungo’s, she almost certainly would have lived.”

Hermione felt revelation itching at the back of her brain like a bug bite, and said carefully, “Is that why you don’t want to die? You don’t want to be like your mother?”

Tom scoffed. “No one wants to die, Hermione. Not really. Not in the end.”

Perhaps, perhaps not. But whether that was true or false was beside the point.

“It’s foul, Tom. It’s wrong.” Her eyes darted across his body, searching. “Where have you hidden it, then? Your horcrux?”

Tom’s lips curled. “And who’s to say that I’ve made only one?”

Hermione’s breath caught in her chest, and then started to come faster.

“You—you’re mad. One’s bad enough, but—where are they?” Her eyes landed on the gleam of gold at his throat, and she thought of the locket, of the way Tom had held it out for her inspection, of how he wouldn’t let her touch it. “Is it that locket? I—” Her fingers curled, but what would she do? Snatch it? Even if she could get a hold of it, he’d kill her before he let her escape with it. And even if she did escape, where would she go?

“Did you use Myrtle’s death for your horcruxes? Who else?” Something occurred to her, then, something that had been staring her in the face for months. “Did you use Evan Rosier to—”

“Evan,” Tom said, “thought of Muggle-borns as little more than animals, and you’ve no cause to mourn for someone like him, Hermione.”

Think, she had to think. “Tom,” she hedged. “I’m sorry for your parents, really I am, but—”

Tom laughed his cold laugh, and the hairs on Hermione’s body all stood on end.

“You’re sorry about my parents? At least my mother was a witch. Your parents would have burned you at the stake if you’d had the bad luck to be born five hundred years ago.”

Hermione felt as if she’d been doused in ice water. “No, they wouldn’t have done—my parents love me—”
“Love,” Tom said, foot scraping filthy stone as he took a step forward, “is circumstantial at best. Your parents would have loved you right up until they found out what you could do, and then they would have handed you over to the Church to be tried for witchcraft. You would have been found guilty, of course, and they’d have burned you alive before you could ever get your Hogwarts letter.”

“My magic would have protected me—”

“Might have. You and I both know that untrained magic is highly unpredictable. Even if it had saved you in time, you’d have had to run away before they could catch you again. You would have been an orphan of sorts.” Tom’s teeth gleamed like pearls in his grimy face. “Like me.”

Hermione had gone cold in ways that the freezing Chamber couldn’t account for, but she shook her head and kept shaking it. “No—no. This doesn’t matter; it’s hypothetical. I wasn’t born five hundred years ago, and my parents—”

“May be the tolerant sort, but do you truly think that all Muggles are as generous as your parents? They’re dangerous. They start wars and commit genocide and build nuclear weapons of mass destruction. You’re safer down here with me and the basilisk than you are up there with them.”

Hermione shook her head again, but she couldn’t convince her tongue to work. She couldn’t—

“And those friends of yours,” Tom went on, taking another step, and Hermione found herself retreating until her back hit the Chamber’s cold, slimy wall. “Potter and Weasley. Why do you love them so? They slow you down. Hold you back. You waste so much of your time and energy wiping their noses for them when you could be devoting yourself to greater things—”

Tears sprang up in the corners of Hermione’s eyes, hot and angry. “You shut your mouth. They’re my best friends. I love them—”

“Why?” He was close, too close, blotting out the world. “What about them is worthy of your love?”

Hermione’s tongue was thick and clumsy, but she knew the answer to this. Knew it in her bones, in the blood that Draco Malfoy called filthy. “Love isn’t about being worthy. It’s not a prize to be handed out. And let me ask you something.” Hermione forced iron into her spine, tried to look brave even though she was cornered like a rat. “Why am I worth keeping around? And don’t say public relations.”

Tom’s eyelashes swept down, the fire in his eyes banking to glittering coals. His lips were dark with drying blood.

“It’s true that you’re good for my reputation, Hermione, but I’ll admit that there’s more to it than that.” He cupped her chin in his hand, thumbed her lower lip. “It’s your mind, Hermione. I’ve seen it, and I want it. I want you.”

Hermione shuddered all over. Yes, she’d already felt that he wanted her, but hearing him say it—hearing him admit to it—it made her want to run away. Worse still, it made her want to clutch him closer.

Because she wanted him, too. Despite everything he’d done, everything he’d told her, she still wanted him so badly that she could have choked on her own longing. She could feel the heat emanating from his body in waves, was shaken by the violently intense memory of his hot tongue on her open cunt. She wanted him. She wanted him. She was going to go mad from wanting him, but—

Hermione banded her arms across her stomach as if to hold something in. She took a breath. Looked Tom in the face.
“We’re missing our classes,” she said. “I won’t become a truant on your account.”

Tom reared back, hand falling away from Hermione’s face. She suspected that she’d actually managed to surprise him.

“Unless,” Hermione said, “you lied, and you really don’t plan on letting me out of here alive.”

“No,” Tom said, thoughtful. “No, I suppose I didn’t lie.”

He turned his back to her.

And hissed.

Hermione saw it. She saw the great snake uncoiling in the seconds before she remembered to screw her eyes shut. She crouched down on the dirty floor and covered her head with her arms like a child hiding from a monster. He’d promised, but he’d lied. Of course he’d lied. Of course—

Gentle fingers combed through her hair, catching on knots and snarls.

“Hush, Hermione. It’s only going to take us up through the pipe and drop us off in the bathroom.”

“No,” Hermione heard someone saying. “No, no, no—”

Tom’s sigh stirred her hair. “You’re going to make this difficult for me, then, aren’t you?”

Difficult for him? Difficult for him?

Hermione dropped her arms and scowled into Tom’s face. “You absolute bas—”

“Keep your eyes shut, if you please,” Tom instructed, grazing his fingertips across her eyelids to coax them closed. “The basilisk won’t deliberately hurt you, but there’s nothing I can do for you if you look into its eyes by mistake.”

Hermione slammed her eyes shut, but she could still hear perfectly well. She could hear the scrape of a massive body as it uncoiled on the stone floor and swept closer, closer—

Tom had gripped her by the elbows, but when she refused to climb to her feet—her legs were so stiff with fear that she suspected she wouldn’t be able to stand even if she wanted to—he sighed again and slung her up into his arms. There was a steady swaying as Tom walked, and then the dry touch of scales against her inner thighs as he sat her astride the basilisk’s spine.

Hermione’s breath caught and didn’t release. Black spots danced across her shut eyelids as the oxygen depleted from her lungs—

Tom’s arms circled her middle, and he pressed his palms against the curve of her stomach.

“Breathe, Hermione.”

As though she’d been awaiting his permission, Hermione breathed, and then they were moving. The basilisk was moving.

If she tried very hard not to think about what was happening to her—if she ignored the scrape of scales on her skin, the way the giant body beneath hers exhaled and inhaled—she could pretend that she was aboard a rollercoaster cart, especially when Tom ordered the sink to open and the ground tipped upwards.
It had gone on forever, and yet it was over in a matter of seconds, and Tom was helping her to her feet. He hissed first at the basilisk, and then at the sink, which ground shut.

It was over.

“You can open your eyes, you know.”

Hermione knew, rationally, that the basilisk had gone, but she still squinted through her lashes to confirm that there wasn’t a massive bloodthirsty snake in the room before opening her eyes properly.

Tom was leaning against the sink that masked the Chamber’s entrance, perfectly clean, hair neat and tidy, lips unstained by blood. He must have siphoned off the mess while she wasn’t looking. She should probably do the same for herself, but she had to say something first.

“You,” said Hermione, “are never touching me again.”

Tom looked only mildly interested in her declaration, which only pissed her off more.

Hermione balled up her fist. “We—we can carry on pretending to date, but when we’re alone—no more doing what we did this morning, do you understand?”

“Really now, Hermione,” Tom drawled. “If we can’t even say it, we shouldn’t probably be doing it, now, should we?”

A blush scorched Hermione’s face. “We won’t be. Doing it, that is. Ever again, do you hear me? I’m done.”

“All right.”

Hermione pulled up short. “All right?” she parroted.

Tom shrugged and crossed his arms.

“Yes, all right. I may want you, Hermione, but I certainly don’t need you.”

Hermione felt as if she’d just swallowed something bitter, but she nodded. She didn’t need him, either.

“Good,” she said. “Good. I’m glad we’ve sorted that out.”

And, still covered in grime, Hermione did what she’d always done whenever she’d had enough of Tom Riddle.

She turned her back on him and walked away.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, again! I'm going to be on vacation for the next week and a half (well, technically my vacation doesn't start until this Thursday, BUT THE POINT STANDS) which means that I won't have my laptop with me, which means another short hiatus is imminent. I may drop by on tumblr every once in a while, but probably not often. Thank
you for reading, and I'm sorry for my recent inconsistencies in posting. And to think I once figured I'd be able to finish this fic before the end of the year. JOKES!!!

(Should I make a crack about Hermione riding Tom's basilisk? No? Okay.)

Works inspired by this one: [era appropriate](http://esotryc.devilrie) by [esotryc (devilrie)](http://esotryc.devilrie)

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