Birds of a Feather

by babylonsheep

Summary

In 1935, Hermione Granger meets a boy in an orphanage who despises fairy stories, liars, and mediocrity. He offers her a deal of mutual convenience, and soon a tentative friendship forms between them—if Tom would ever lower himself to call anyone a "friend".

But whatever they have, it's something special, and if there's anyone who can appreciate Specialness, it's Tom Riddle.

1930's-40's Childhood Friends AU.
Starlings

Chapter Notes

Inspired by slow-burner friendship fics featuring a realistic and sympathetic kid!Tom that keep him in character. Specific shout outs to Addendum: He Is Also a Liar by Ergott for the wonderfully developed pre-Hogwarts friendship, and If Them's the Rules by MayMarlow for a detailed, historically accurate fanfic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Tom Riddle knew his life was one of contradictions.

He was penniless and owned next to nothing. The things that belonged to him were not really his—not his room, his bed, his rickety wooden wardrobe, his schoolbooks or shabby grey orphanage uniforms with yellowed collars on the shirts and patches on the trousers. These material things had all been given to him, and had belonged to someone else before him, and would go to another nameless orphan once he'd outgrown them.

But there was one thing he had that was truly valuable, priceless, a thing that was his and no one else's, not a hand-me-down assigned to him from the communal linen cupboard by an apathetic matron, not a useless dolly or teddy or pennywhistle taken from a snivelling brat in a disciplinary action courtesy of Wool's Orphanage School of Life Lessons. (Tom Riddle was its schoolmaster, and all residents under the age of ten years old were his obedient disciples, whether they liked it or not.)

That thing of his.

The contradiction in his life that his schoolbooks said couldn't be real, because there were fundamental rules of the universe for things like that, because Newton said this, and Galileo said that... But his own eyes had confirmed the truth, as did the truths he found in the scared and tearful eyes of Eric or Billy or Dennis or whichever interchangeable orphan it was that had offended him that day.

The truth: that he wasn't mad. He was Special.

It was his Specialness that allowed Tom to break the rules of the universe and get away with it. No one had showed up at the doorstep—beyond picking up the empty milk crates or dropping off an illegitimate baby or two—to take away his entropy-defying abilities in the name of Saving the Universe. No, life went on, and Tom drew on the well of Specialness inside him that answered to his will, and the universe continued to putter on around him as per usual, as ignorant and intact as it had always been.

And so Tom's life continued, each day as monotonous as the one before, the school lessons pointless, the people around him receding into the background like the cardboard backdrops of the Easter Fair's Punch and Judy show. They fell into their inbuilt routines by instinct, just like migrating starlings, going in circles with the rest of the flock, chirping out the same stock phrases, the Good Mornings and How Do You Dos making his eyelids twitch when he could sense the insincerity behind the words. At times he was tempted to force them to tell the truth, to make them aware that they were just starlings and that he was not, but some part of him warned against flouting the rules of the universe too soon and drawing the attention of the Maintenance Committee of Existence before he was ready to defeat them.

He was, of course, only eight years old.

In the eyes of his caretakers, he was a child, just as much as he was a starling, at least for the next ten years. Until he turned eighteen. Then he'd be forced out of the nest (he was being generous with his metaphors here; it was Wool's they were talking about, after all) to fend on his own. After that, he could die for all they cared—he'd seen more than a few young men be pushed out of the rusty gates, to enlist in the soon-to-be war rumbling in the stirring pot of the Continent. And no one batted an eye that they were probably going to die. Dead or alive, they'd be called Brave Young Souls, and people would mutter reverently about King and Country, and so on.
Tom's internal monologue on the nesting habits of the common European starling was interrupted by voices outside his grimy bedroom window, a shrill clamouring of children in the small, paved courtyard between the front gates and the orphanage's main entrance.

He peered out, rubbing his palm over the foggy glass. It was mid-December, and the heating was intermittent. When it wasn't raining, the temperature difference between indoors and out was negligible, and as such, the children were allowed to go out for walks as long as they were back in time for dinner.

His room was on the third floor, so he had a decent view of the front gates. The sky and the street below were veiled in a miasmic grey pea-souper of a fog—this was London in winter, so that wasn't much of a surprise—but what had drawn his attention was a motorcar gliding out of the fog and in through the open gates. A shiny blue automobile with a big silver grille on front, whitewall tires and polished hubcaps, and a lady with a fur-collared coat stepping out of it, no doubt clutching her pearls close to her throat, because it was in poor taste to flaunt one's wealth to this poverty-stricken side of London.

(Nevermind that this lady's entire well-bred existence was a big, phlegmmy gob in the eyes of the hand-to-mouthers who lived here.)

Tom heard the dinner bell ringing from downstairs, and the clatter of feet pounding down the stairs. It had only been an hour or two since lunch, and thus too early for dinner, so—

He scowled.

It must be one of those days.

Adoption Days, where everyone had to comb their hair, spit-wipe their snotty noses, and line up by Mrs. Cole's office so any family looking for a free servant or a replacement child when one of their own moved away or died could pick one up. Like picking puppies out of a window display. To Tom's relief, the number of people wanting to pat his head and inspect his teeth had gone down significantly as he'd aged. He couldn't stand people touching him, or even being near him, which was how he'd wrangled a room to himself when everyone else had to share.

When he'd reached the ground floor, he saw Martha bustling about and handing boxes over to the older girls, and Mrs. Cole attempting to make conversation to the rich lady—more like try to coax her into donating cash, or better yet, taking a sweet, angelic little sprog out of her hands.

"—These'll go well with the girls; Christmas is always a stretch, especially these days."

"Well, the ladies of St. John's are happy to help those less fortunate. Those boxes there are my own daughter's clothes—she's outgrown them, and they're in good shape and ought to go to those who need them more than we do. The boys' clothes are to the left, just a bit worn—Mrs. Fanshaw's boys were rather rough with their things—but they've still a few years' wear left."

"Oh, splendid," said Mrs. Cole, flapping her hands at Martha and Lizzie and Dotty. "Sort them and lay them out, we'll see if we can have a new set of clothes for each child, or a new jumper and coat each."

"You can give everyone a new book, too," said the rich lady. "We brought a few boxes of those. Bibles and hymn books, though I'm sure you have some of your own, and some of ours from home."
Our Hermione didn't want to give them up from her collection, but we were running out of shelf space as it was, so we told her we hadn't room for anything new unless she cleared out some of the old ones."

She smiled fondly down to her right, and there, peeking out from behind her skirts was a little girl with winter-pale skin and the kind of frizzy brown hair that Tom associated with pet poodles and old floor mops. She was of the same age as he was, much smaller if one didn't count the few inches of height added by her hair. To his annoyance, she was better dressed than he, in a ruffled pinafore dress under a pink wool coat, and pristine patent Mary Janes with not a mark on them, unlike the scuffs on his own boots that he'd mostly polished away with a lump of beeswax. She, unlike him, probably used the motorcar every time she stepped foot outdoors.

"The books will go to our reading room," Mrs. Cole said, her eyes turning this way and that, tongue clicking when she'd seen that the children had found the box of toys, spilling lead soldiers and sock monkeys to the floor. Her gaze fell on Tom, standing innocently by the doorway, his face blank. "Tom, you'll take them there, and bring the empty boxes back with you."

At the mention of books, the girl's eyes lit up, and she turned to her mother. "Can I see the reading room, Mummy?"

Her mother gave an indulgent smile to her daughter, and Mrs. Cole hesitated, before fixing her eyes on Tom and giving him a Look.

"I'll show her the way, Mrs. Cole," Tom offered, his face shifting into his harmless angel expression. If he got to take the books up, then he'd have his first pick of the selection, before the little brats got crayon or jam or gravy or other mysterious and disgusting stains over the pages.

The concept of private property at Wool's Orphanage was somewhat theoretical. No one owned anything and all resources were communal. (Common sense said that the contents of Mrs. Cole's office and person were off-limits, so Tom had limited himself to reading through her paperwork and appointment book whenever he got the chance. He'd been fairly disgusted by the mess of empty gin bottles in the bottom desk drawer, and also vindicated in the assumption that she found dealing with orphans all day was as tiresome as he did.)

Anything donated to the orphans was common property and therefore fair game for Tom. Possession of toys and trinkets was directly correlated to the ability one had to hide and protect said items. From experience, Tom knew that the nicest ones could be had from the children who'd only been recently admitted to the orphanage, souvenirs of their past lives. At the end of the day, Tom could admit his "games" were all quite silly and childish, but nevertheless, they were amusing, and there was little else he could do to fill the vast stretch of time before he turned eighteen.

Tom nudged open the door to the reading room with his elbow, his arms laden with a box of books. The little fluffy-haired rich girl followed behind, her eyes darting up and down, at the soot-smudged plaster moulding of the ceiling, the worn floorboards creaking under their feet. He wondered if she noticed the small, dried bloodstain by the landing where Jimmy Thurgood had tripped on his way down the stairs one morning and lost a tooth; he hadn't had any valuables to confiscate, so Tom had had to take his payment elsewhere.

"Oh, this is nice," she said politely, eyeing the shelves of timeworn books, the rows of peeling spines and faded lettering. She clutched a box in her arms, biting her lip and shifting from foot to foot.
Tom glanced down at the open box in his arms. The books were lightly used, as evidenced by the smudge of fingerprints on the covers, the soft feathering of paper in the corners. But it was obvious that they'd been bought new, then discarded for having been read once or twice. Given away to make room for more, with a certain careless extravagance that he despised.

He decided that he hated this girl, her fur-bedecked mother, and her fancy motorcar and shiny, shiny shoes.

"Put the books on the table over there," Tom ordered, "and sort them by type. Bibles go to the left, school books in the middle, and fairy stories on the right."

"Fairy stories?" the girl huffed, shoving her box onto the table. "Excuse me?"

"Aren't these your old books?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"You're, what, six years old? And you're a girl," said Tom with a sniff. "Anything that isn't Bibles and textbooks will be fairy stories."

The girl's eyes narrowed in anger. "I'm nine! And you're very rude, you know."

"That's only fair," Tom said, pulling his orphan card with glee. Normally he didn't make much of the fact that he was parentless to outsiders, not wanting to make himself an object of pity and sympathetic head-patting and other such intrusive personal space invasion. But his status was impossible to hide from her. "I haven't any parents to teach me manners."

"You might have been adopted if you were nicer," the girl replied, in a remarkable show of tactfulness.

"Are you offering your parents, then?"

"N-no."

"Even if I promised to be nice?"

"No!" The girl's face had gone quite pink, he was pleased to see.

"There, now you see why I don't bother with being nice," Tom said in a cold voice, as he tipped the books out onto the table and turned them over to read the covers.

The girl sputtered for a moment, a furrow forming between her eyebrows. "What about common decency?"

"What about it?"

"Well, people have to be nice to each other, even if they don't feel like it, for the benefit of the community. It's true that people often want to be mean to others, and sometimes it's hard for them not to, but it's happier and more peaceful for everyone around them if they don't." She dug around in the box and pulled out a book with a scratched cover. *The Principles of Political Philosophy,* Tom read. "It's called a social contract; I read it in this book." The girl gave him a superior look and lifted
her nose. "And as you can see, it's not a fairy story."

He returned her superior look with one of his own. What kind of person told people off by reciting rules lists from a musty old book? Clergymen and grannies, that's who. And this girl, apparently. "Do you always parrot things that come out of a book?"

"When I think they're important and worth sharing," said the girl crossly, her knee giving a little twitch, as if she were only a few prods away from stamping her feet. "But if you don't care, then I'll have my books back."

"You can't have them back, you already gave them away," Tom retorted, his interest returning to book sorting.

Beneath the layer of Bibles was an eclectic mix of titles. Elementary Primer of English Grammar, boring. Junior's Basic Arithmetic, Volume I, and The Young Lady's Companion For Maintaining a Bright and Happy Home, no thank you. He could see there were a number of books on etiquette, and he had to wonder why anyone thought they would be of use to the children who lived here. None of the girls in residence would end up married to a "proper gentleman"; even being legally married at all was pushing the limits of probability. Let alone owning a full service of formal silver tableware.


"Oh, now you decide you want them?" the girl asked, watching him pile up the books he wanted to take a look at later.

"Maybe," said Tom indifferently. "I won't decide if they're worth keeping until I read them."

"But they're worth reading, even if they're girly fairy stories?"

"They might be acceptable fairy stories, but I won't know if I haven't finished them," Tom said, eyeing a book on Napoleon's failed invasion of Russia.

"Acceptable," the girl snorted. "You'd probably like that one. There are lots of battles and horses and Emperors, and a million soldiers who died in awful ways; it's the kind of thing that not-nice boys like you would like, isn't it?"

Tom ran his finger down the spine of the book. This one wasn't going to get splashed with ink or juice before he'd reached the end. "And I suppose a nice girl like you didn't like it at all?"

The girl frowned in thought, then said, "It wasn't a nice book, but it was interesting. I... I don't have to think it's nice to like it."

"That's the most intelligent thing you've said all day," said Tom.

The girl harrumphed and slammed a heavy Bible onto the table. Tom gave her a wicked smirk, which she returned with an irritated lift of her chin. They returned to sorting the books, the girl giving occasional sidelong glances to the pile he'd collected by his elbow, for bedtime reading.

She left before dinnertime, and the motorcar drove out from the gates, the growl of the engine muted
After dinner, Tom mentally revised his list of possessions. He had his private room and all the orphanage-issued things inside it. He had his Specialness. And now he had a dozen books of his own, not quite new, but in better condition than any of the other books he owned. They'd been given by a girl that he didn't like at all, but who did, he was forced to admit, have a decent taste in literature.

To his annoyance, he had to admit that her handwriting was decent too.

He felt some satisfaction in scratching out the name Hermione J. Granger from the bookplates pasted inside the covers. He felt even more satisfaction writing his own name inside, even though he knew that no one would ever see it, because these books would never join the Bibles and etiquette manuals in the communal library.

(And yes, he did end up taking that book on social contracts, if only so that he could tell the girl her ideas about common decency were stupid, the next time she showed her face at Wool's. This kind of thinking was like teaching sheep to shear themselves, which benefitted the shepherd more than the flock.

She could argue about "the needs of the flock", but he'd convince her that he was right. And that if one had to make a choice, then without question it was better to be a shepherd than a sheep.)

Chapter End Notes

I have attempted to make the story feel like it is set in Britain of the 1930's, with references to period culture and attitudes. Please remember that Tom's perspectives and personality are not reflections of the author's personal viewpoints.

If you notice any typos, story-breaking anachronisms or Americanisms, drop a comment!
Tom finished his books by the first week of the new year, distracted enough by the new reading material that he’d almost forgotten to observe the insignificant date that was his ninth birthday. He'd gotten an extra egg at breakfast and a slice of butter cake at dinner (once you'd had margarine cake you quickly realised why butter cake was considered a treat), but other than that, it was a day just like any other.

He didn't count his new-ish thick woollen jumper as a real birthday gift because everyone else had gotten one, courtesy of the Ladies' Aid Society of St. John's Anglican Church in Crawley. He knew this from perusing Mrs. Cole's appointment book, and he also knew that a Mrs. Helen Granger had donated twenty-five pounds in cash "for a special Christmas supper", according to the receipt. As Tom was familiar with the distinctions between Special and merely special, he could tell that their Christmas dinner had been neither. The only difference he saw was everyone being allowed second helpings that day, and Mrs. Cole's restocked gin drawer.

Mrs. Cole's vices made Tom impatient for the day when he wasn't so young and scrawny and could get away with things like extortion and blackmail without adults laughing at him or pinching his cheeks. He was self aware enough to know that nine-year-olds lacked all semblance of physical presence that an adult would ever respect or fear. He could heighten the effect of his presence through a careful application of universe bending willpower with other children, but it was more difficult with adults for some reason.

Tom spent the rest of the year—when he wasn't making his way through the collection of donated books in the reading room—testing the limits of his abilities. It was an educational experience, on his part and the other orphans', and he was pleased that they'd been taught well enough to remember that The Rules applied to everyone except Tom Riddle, and going to the matron would result in nothing but scolding and corporal punishment for telling stories.

Because how would Tom have made Clem Gilford slip in the shower when he'd been brushing his teeth in the boys' loo with three other people there too? Tom was such a good boy; he'd received the local academic achievement award every year since he'd begun primary school. This year he'd even shaken the mayor's hand during the annual Empire Day assembly. (It wasn't very nice; the mayor had clammy palms and stale tobacco on his breath.)

Tom was a certified Good Boy.

It was with the intent to maintain this reputation that he encountered Mrs. Helen and Miss Hermione Granger again that December.

They arrived in the same motorcar, splashing through a wet and windy winter drizzle. They brought boxes of clothes and bedding, jars of fruit preserves and homemade biscuits made by church ladies. Mrs. Helen wore a shearling car coat and driving gloves of fine kidskin lined in rabbit fur, and Hermione had on a navy blue wool coat with shiny brass buttons and thick white stockings under her Mary Janes.

Hermione caught his eye as soon as Mrs. Cole was distracted, and made her way over to him.
Tom lifted his brow, watching the agitated way she wrung her hands and smoothed the wrinkles out of her coat.

"I'm sorry," she said, swallowing harshly and struggling to meet his calm gaze. "I called you rude, said you weren't a nice person... which I thought you weren't for the longest time. But I reflected about it, and, well, did some research, and it was unfair of me to judge you like that. Nor was it my place to do so. I want to apologise for my behaviour from before."

It was the most eloquent apology Tom had ever heard in his life. Although to be fair, most of the apologies directed at him came in the form of blubbering half-sentences, punctuated with tears. He would have enjoyed them more if they hadn't been so... unsanitary.

"Research," said Tom blankly. "Is this about your idea of common decency?"

"No!" said Hermione. "I mean—yes? I do think we should be civil to one another, but I changed my mind for other reasons."

"Well, go on."

"I researched the living conditions of orphans in Great Britain," she began, "historical to present day. And how rapid industrialisation shifted the country's economic structure from farming, with urban migration patterns due to—"

Tom cut her off, his voice cold. "Are you reciting an essay?"

"Um," Hermione said, chewing her lip and not looking at him. "Don't you want to hear the rest?"

"No. I can read it for myself."

Hermione fiddled with the brass buttons of her coat. Tom folded his arms, an unflattering impression of the girl already solidifying in his mind. A well-meaning do-gooder, with an unshakeable belief in the inherent good of the human spirit. Someone whose personal experience of hardship went no further than going without red meat on Fridays.

"I just... I think you're different," Hermione said in a quiet voice. "Like I am. Not necessarily more grown up, or more clever. More... something. The other children at school wouldn't know what I was talking about, even if they cared. But you do—you understand, I mean. You're not afraid of big words."

Tom cocked an eyebrow. "It's called being better than everyone else, if that's what you're trying to say. That and the invention of steam engines is directly responsible for my being an orphan."

"You've read about it too!" Hermione beamed, sounding as if she'd skipped over what he'd said and clung onto only what she could comprehend, the historical trivia. She dragged over a carton of books. "I brought some books on the subject today, for you. And some military histories—you seemed interested in those last time. Here, look, Crimea in Retrospect, Chemical Warfare Tactics of Ypres, Skirmishes of the Second Boer War. I can tell you how hard it is to find good history books that aren't so horribly biased; they say history's written by the winners, so the only balanced ones are about British defeats or written by foreigners."

As tempted as he was by the thought of building his own library, a personal collection, Tom knew
that nice things didn't come for free.

"Why do you care?" he demanded. "What's your interest in me?"

He willed his voice to carry an echo of his power, for the universe to give his lungs the reach and resonance of an orator in an amphitheatre, so that anyone in earshot would follow their natural urge to not only listen, but to obey. To cower before him.

_Tell the truth._

His felt as if his blood were humming in his veins, his eardrums rattling from the pressure, his whole body tingling with power.

Hermione didn't cower. She swayed on her feet for a moment, blinking as the echoes of his will dissipated, before she planted them firmly on the ground and stared at him.

"What was that?" she asked, her expression suddenly thoughtful. "That was a very queer thing; have you any voice training? I've heard opera singers could shatter wineglasses with the right note, some sort of trick with sonic frequencies. But it takes years to learn and you're only nine or ten, your lungs aren't fully—Oh! I've seemed to have lost the point." Her eyes regained focus, and she faced him again. "I saw your name in the newspaper. You go to St. Mary's at Nine Elms, don't you? They posted your marks in the school notices section, and you were ranked top of our year in the Greater London Boroughs for the '35 to '36 school year. _T.M. Riddle_, that's you, isn't it?"

Tom made a face. Did this girl just come over to ask about his school records? "Are you here because you can't believe a random orphan got a good mark, so you wanted to see how he did it?"

"No!" Hermione cried. "I've never met anyone who got better marks than me. My parents had me tested a few months ago, and I'm in the top percentile for my age. Which means that you'd be up there too!" She gave him a wobbly smile. "I thought we could be friends."

"Wouldn't your parents be worried about you having friends in this place?" Tom asked, doubt colouring his voice.

He didn't know how parents worked, especially those of the social set who patronised (in every sense of the word) orphans. He assumed they were interested in sheltering their offspring from unsavoury influences, of which Wool's was rife. Mrs. Cole was an alcoholic embezzler. Most of the children in her charge were bastards and thieves, and every one of them who'd learned how to write could fill a sheet of paper, back and front and tiny script, with all the rude words and dirty street slang they knew. And used regularly.

"My parents are worried that I don't have any friends at all," said Hermione. "They said I spent all my time reading books instead of making friends, and they won't buy me any new books until I can prove I can socialise with people my age. I know we don't have anything in common, but we both like books, so I thought we could read them and talk about it. I imagine that's what friends do. Well, what I'd do if I had friends."

"I wouldn't know," Tom shrugged. "I try to limit my contact with everyone here. But I suppose we _could_ be friends, if..."

"Yes?"
"How much money have you got?"

"I have to pay to be friends?" said Hermione, white-faced and appalled.

"You said you needed proof of friendship," Tom quickly pointed out. "I'll need to buy postage stamps and envelopes so you can show your parents letters from a friend. I promise I'll only write nice things in them. And you'll send me a parcel now and then; I prefer chocolate over boiled sweets, the orange chocolate bars if you can get them. Don't bother buying me anything with nuts."

"Is that all?" asked Hermione, getting over her shock. Tom could tell she was running his demands over in her mind.

"We could agree on a ratio of letters to gifts," suggested Tom. "And a delivery schedule. One letter a fortnight, one parcel for every four letters? I'll write you two pages, double-sided, at a minimum, but there's hardly anything at Wool's worth writing about, so it'll mostly be about school things and books."

"I suppose that'll do," Hermione mused, already perking up at the mention of books. "It's still rather mercenary of you to sell your friendship."

"Don't think of it as a sale. You can't put a price on a human being, of course," Tom said, giving her his charming Good Boy smile. "Think of it as a maintenance fee, or an investment."

BESIDES, he thought, it's not like you could actually afford to buy me.

"Well, alright," Hermione assented. She reached into her pocket and drew out a small velvet coin purse. "Let's see how much I have in here..."

In the end, Hermione gave him everything she had in her purse. Sixteen shillings and sixpence, the most money he'd ever had in his life. It was a small fortune by orphanage standards, where individual pennies were jealously guarded by anyone who had them. Three ha'pence was the value of a postage stamp to someone who lived as close to London as Hermione did; five or six pence was the price of a handful of pick and mix sweets, or a whole bar of chocolate. A shilling would buy a book brand new, or two to three second-hand novels from a booth at the Saturday vegetable market.

Tom did his best to hide the gleam of greed in his eyes.

Hermione pushed the small pile of coins over to Tom. "Don't tell my parents about this. And don't mention it in the letters, they might try to read the first couple to make sure it's not a trick."

"Of course not," said Tom, rolling his eyes. "I'm good at keeping secrets. I hope you won't have any trouble with keeping them yourself."

Hermione frowned. "I don't like keeping secrets from my parents. I've never had to keep secrets from them before."

"You said earlier we hadn't anything in common, but now we do," said Tom. "We have a secret 'friendship' now. Nothing keeps people closer than shared secrets. And it's not like you don't get anything out of it. You're the one who wanted your parents to think you're normal."

"We'll be friends as long as you keep to your word," Hermione said. She held out her hand.
Tom eyed the hand, and the pile of coins on the table. He shook her hand, which to his relief, wasn’t sticky. Her skin was warm and dry; her nails were short and well trimmed, and there was a blue smear of ink along the inside of her thumb, a pen grip callus at the third joint of her middle finger.

"Agreed," Tom said, letting go of her hand, sweeping the coins out of sight and into his trouser pocket. He continued on imperiously, "Now show me what other books you brought today. And if I see anything by Dickens, I’ll be very, very disappointed in you."
Hermione Granger turned out to be a bookworm, a description more accurate than mere simile.

She had a single-minded appetite for literature. She was thin-skinned (although every child who hadn't gone through Wool's School of Life Lessons fell under this category) and fragile (a trait which Tom connoted with weakness) and did better in musty, dark spaces than out in direct sunlight. And she burrowed under his skin like a disease, infecting him with her contagious Opinions. She had a stance on everything, didn't hesitate to share them, and to Tom's disgust, made some legitimate points now and again.

In her fortnightly letters, she sent him newspaper clippings with notes written in the margins in tiny text.

**Chamberlain Improves Factory Conditions for Working Women and Youth**

I'm sure you already know that state-sponsored full-time education is only guaranteed until the age of fourteen, and after you turn fifteen I suppose you will be expected to take vocational studies or apprentice in a trade, or in worst cases, be sent to do light labour or other such work in a factory while whoever is in charge calls it "job training" and pays you half wages...

Tom did know this. Many of the older orphans were out during daylight hours doing odd jobs. He hadn't cared to look into it; he rarely interacted with them except for the few times when one moved out and left an empty room to scavenge through.

His personal plan was to stay in education until he was forced to leave Wool's. If he kept getting top marks then he'd be sponsored through to eighteen, and perhaps after that, enough recommendations would convince the local borough council to see him through university.

It was with abhorrence that he realised he'd have to be Tom the Good Boy until then.

It was with anger that he realised social mobility for someone of his status was very far from attainable. That even if his father was someone important—it was a long-held wish of Tom's, but he had seen no proof of it so far—his mother surely was not, and that the sin of birth was a permanent stain as far as most were concerned, no matter that Tom hadn't any choice in the matter, nor done anything to deserve it.

And it was with contempt that he realised Hermione Granger knew all of this, didn't care, and felt sorry for him.

...Might be opportunities available overseas suitable for someone of your ambition. A
comfortable position in India or Hong Kong would likely guarantee the native population to recognise you as unique, a rarity, just by virtue of being an Englishman. From the tone of your past letters, I surmise that is something you value. I make no judgement of it, apart from observing that this attitude is not uncommon for Englishmen overseas, and that if you ever do what Lieutenant Pinkerton did to Madame Butterfly, I would have no choice but to geld you.

Mummy would say that I shouldn't know what that word means, but Daddy is a doctor and a scalpel is not so hard to find, nor is an anatomy textbook. Don't worry, I promise that if I make a mistake, I'll get Daddy to put you back together so I can try again.

There were some things, at least, that were tolerable about her. For one, her sense of humour wasn't limited to jokes about flatulence. (One of the boys at Wool's had recently gotten his hands on a whoopee cushion; the ensuing antics had lasted for three days before Tom had had to put his foot down. He'd confiscated it and publicly disposed of it during supper in the name of the greater good.)

And it amused him that she held onto her Opinions with a tenacity that wasn't matched by her grasp on morality.

Your commitment to justice is commendable, Hermione, wrote Tom.

But I have my doubts that you would actually be able to carry out such a deed, no matter how much you wish it. I've always believed that you are one to prefer leaving justice to the duly sanctioned authority. In his case, Lieutenant Pinkerton would be charged by a military court for the crime of bigamy. As for me? I would not be in that situation because I would not be so stupid as to get married in the first place, let alone married TWICE.

Any "justice" you deem fit to dispense would be limited by your conscience.

But do go on, impress me with your moxie.

The months passed in a flurry of envelopes stamped with the face of the freshly-crowned King George. Tom wrote his obligatory two pages every two weeks. He didn't write anything about the orphanage, about the envious glances the other children shot him when he had trade goods to exchange for upper year school textbooks, to upgrade to a silver nib fountain pen. He didn't mention how second-hand glimpses of a world beyond the grimy streets of South London had distracted him from his role as Schoolmaster Tom, causing the starlings that slept under his roof to circle like tiny vultures, until he re-established his place in the pecking order with the death of a rabbit fed on rat poison.

Hermione, as per their original agreement, had made no such promise to write him back, only that she'd send gift parcels for every four letters he sent. But she wrote replies to his letters, on thick cream letterhead paper, her initials embossed on the top. She congratulated him on his excellent marks, sent him a clipping of his name in the paper for ranking top once more. She asked if he was enrolling to the nearby comprehensive or applying to a more prestigious local grammar school once he finished primary.
(He wasn't. There was no money to spare for uniforms, no money to take the trolleybus there and back every day.

Not that he told her that. He could write about his ambitions, his future, distant glory eternal and everlasting. But he said nothing about his present. Wool's was merely ephemeral in the grand view of things, a transitory stage in his growth; in a blink of an eye he would be gone, and it would be forgotten, and he would make everyone forget that this coal-blackened box of concrete was where he'd been born.

He didn't tell her.

She already knew.)

**Dear Tom,**

_The disdain you feel for humanity is truly unparalleled. Have you ever considered applying your talents to help humanity meet your impossible standards?_  

_Just the other day, I read an interesting essay on the concept of 'Zeitgeist'..._

Mrs. Cole stopped giving him wary looks when she passed him his mail, not oblivious to the fact that the envelopes were return addressed to a Miss Granger whose mother signed the bank cheques that put food on the table and gin in the desk drawer.

Tom still hadn't reversed his judgement on Hermione Granger. She was annoyingly persistent, like the people who stood on street corners pushing pamphlets and proselytising about Christ's imminent return or Communist utopias. He didn't like it.

He didn't like her.

She wrote her letters in blue-black ink, each word perfectly formed, the script evenly spaced in neat lines, the envelopes scented. The post office clerks thought Tom was a middleman delivery boy for someone's illicit lady love.

She was the only person his own age who didn't think it was a waste of time to study subjects beyond the school curriculum. One would not be asked to plot a polynomal function when working at a cannery. Stevedores and porters had no need for flawless manners and refined elocution.

She was the only one who prefixed her greetings to him with "Dear".

But—

Hermione was ordinary.

People didn't hurt when she wanted them to, because she couldn't do it and she thought it was wrong. She couldn't refashion the universe with the force of her will.
They had scarcely anything in common; their correspondence was a transcript of debates, each point evaluated and refuted, sentences crowned with sprays of ink splatters when touching on subjects of firm personal investment.

Nevertheless, she couldn't reshape his convictions with the force of her obstinacy. 

But she tried anyway.

*They still weren't friends.*

That December, Hermione invited him to the opera with her family as a special Christmas treat. She brought him a new coat during the now annual St. John's Ladies Society charity visit.

"I've never been to the opera before," said Hermione as she entered the reading room, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. "I was too young, and they run on for hours and hours once you add in the intermission. But my parents are convinced that I have a friend now, and since you don't go to the same school with me, they want to meet the person I spend days writing to."

*It's a test,* thought Tom. "Do they expect anything of me?"

Recite my times tables? Expound on my favourite Tory candidates? Fetch sticks or bark on command?

"They might ask you a few questions," Hermione confessed. "But you're ten years old; no one's going to sit you down for cigars and brandy and ask you to state your intentions."

"How thrilling," said Tom. "I expect I can remember not to drop my aitches for one night."

"It'll be worthwhile," said Hermione. "They've booked a box for the four of us. Mum and dad meant it to be a treat—not an interrogation. And I knew you wouldn't come if you had to rub shoulders with the peons in the stall seats."

In his letters, Tom had been plenty forthright about the subset of humanity that he didn't believe was worth rehabilitating. She thought he used the word "peons" ironically. They'd argued about it, Tom believing that she was too close-minded and sheltered about the topic: it wasn't like she had to live in a neighbourhood shared with the types of people he despised, the ones who roamed the streets in the dark and spoke in coded English that was never King's English. Rowdy boys, bawdy girls, rattle snafflers and ken cribbers, lurchers, lushes, dossers and ribbers.

Not that the East End of London was a lawless frontier where one would be cut down a metre outside their front step. It had been, he'd read, much worse last century. He was grateful not to have been born then. (As much as he could be grateful for being born; it was difficult for him to comprehend the feeling of gratefulness with relation to his mother, whom he considered useless in every other context.)
"Alright," Tom sighed, sounding resigned to his fate. It wouldn't do for Hermione to think that he actually enjoyed her company. Reading her rambling by post was quite removed from having to appear alert and interested in person. "If your parents are willing to play chaperone and chauffeur, then I'll be your Good Boy for the evening."

A week later—a week before his eleventh birthday—the Grangers picked Tom up from the orphanage gates in their motorcar, and gave him his first taste of grandeur. Of course he'd seen the grand buildings of central London before, toured Whitehall and the West End with a school group where the guide lectured at them about the history of the city and the important people who ran the country, feeding them false hopes that one day they could be there too, despite their lack of public school records and Norman Conquest pedigrees.

The difference was like looking in through the windows, and actually being allowed in. Here was a doorman doffing his cap, there was a velvet rope being pushed aside so he could pass through. In the instant where Tom was blinded by the light of crystal chandeliers reflecting off golden scrollwork panelling the walls and white-skinned marble nymphs set in alcoves, he had an epiphany.

This was the reason why princes wanted to be kings, and kings dreamt of being emperors. This was why a king would sign the Magna Carta, giving away his powers and offices bit by bit, as long as he kept the crowns and palaces.

This was the physical manifestation of success. Beautiful things, respect from lesser beings, admiration and envy from the aspirational. Tom absorbed it all; he gloated in it, he immersed himself in the feeling, he memorised it all, from the parquet floors to the fresco ceilings—and sent it to the corner of his mind that he'd labelled Motivational Thoughts.

He found the centrepiece of the evening—Madame Butterfly—to be inferior in retrospect to the awe he'd felt stepping into the theatre's foyer for the first time. The private box was nice, the seats luxuriously cushioned, though rather high up, and the intermission had an attendant serve the adults champagne and the children cherry squash in stemmed glasses. But the opera itself was an overacted melodrama, British actors swaddled in Oriental silks and singing in Italian; he judged it a shallow, absurdist fancy disguised as poignant tragedy.

Hermione and her mother both cried at the end.

On the drive back to Wool's, Hermione asked him, "What did you think of it?"

"It was... interesting," Tom replied diplomatically. Her parents were within earshot, so he was careful to remain the very picture of a polite, respectful Good Boy.

"You didn't like it?"

"I didn't agree with the characters' decisions," Tom said, with an ambivalent shrug. "You know why I prefer textbooks over novels. Their motivations don't make any sense to me, and their characters are contemptible."

What he didn't say was, I think it's pathetic for Butterfly to kill herself when she had a baby to look after.

That made him sound like a resentful whinger who cried himself to sleep because he'd had no one to tuck him in and sing him lullabies. He didn't care for the supposedly sublime joys of the maternal
bond, his own or any other's; he'd stopped concerning himself with this lack many years ago. He refused to see himself as any lesser because this was an area in which he was ignorant, and would always remain so. *Tom Riddle was lesser to no one.*

"Do you think they could have ever been happy together?" Hermione asked.

Tom stifled his snort of amusement. "Of course not. It's a tragedy, it's not supposed to be happy. That, and the playwright is contractually bound to kill as many people off by the last act as he can get away with. If they were real people, they'd be completely incompatible. They would've been better off if they'd stuck with their own kind."

Tom spoke with the utter certainty of his almost eleven years of life experience. To be sure, he hadn't meant his words to mirror the scathing tone certain people used when sending letters on the topic of the King's subjects in his colonial territories to the local editorial column. Those people that called themselves Social Darwinists but in actualty were plain old xenophobes.

(These people often overlapped with the segment of the population who had no tolerance for anyone whose income was less than £250 a year, and would have no difficulty drowning orphans at birth instead of putting them through eighteen years at Wool's. Which was a sensible act of mercy from Tom's point of view—he was quite the utilitarian in his daydreams of running the world—if he wouldn't have been one directly affected.)

"Outside the demands of the narrative, I mean. If they'd only talked to each other, if they'd learned to communicate past the cultural divisions. If only they loved each other," said Hermione, sighing mournfully. "Love has to count for something. It overcomes obstacles."

"Well, I hope someone explains that to the baby when it grows up," Tom remarked under his breath.

Hermione nudged him with her elbow and sighed again. "You mustn't be so cynical, Tom! I'm sure you'll change your mind about it when you're older."

"Hmm," was Tom's non-committal response. "I doubt it."

*If love is as real and strong as you think it is, then things like indifference and hate are equally real and strong.*

"It's certainly possible," Hermione said firmly. "After all, you did end up changing your mind on the use of area bombing as a method of urban development. Allowing yourself to compromise on a more moderate stance is a sign of emotional growth. Give yourself a few years and you'll be agreeing that there are other viable means of governance than a pure autocracy."

The motorcar, to his great regret, soon deposited him by the gates of the orphanage at a quarter 'til midnight. Tom shook Dr. Granger's hand, thanked Mrs. Granger, and bid adieu to Hermione, before heading through the gates (it was shameful how they hadn't gotten around to fixing that second A, dangling off a single nail; it made the place look like a particularly sleazy hotel) and up to the front door. Martha met him with torch and a swat on the shoulder to wash up and go to bed quickly, no dallying.

In the dim half-light of the streetlamps, Tom hung his new coat up in his wardrobe, admiring the thick boiled wool and sturdy Bakelite buttons. It was a real "new", never having been owned by someone else. Hermione had given it to him still wrapped in the department store tissue paper. He set the souvenir theatre programme on his desk, the pages well-thumbed where he'd flipped to read
English translations of the character dialogue.

He changed into grey flannel pyjamas, pulled the itchy blanket up to his chin, and stared at the lumpy plaster ceiling. If he was being honest, he wouldn't categorise this day as the best day of his life. Truthfully, he'd place the production quality of the opera at the same level as a motion picture show, and the entertainment quality inferior to that of a good book.

No, this was the most important day of his life so far. The day when his What-Could-Have-Been converged on the What-Will-Be, showing him a taste of what lay beyond the realm of books and dreams and the sooty brickwork of his current reality.

He had tasted; he was enraptured. Some part of him (all of him) would never be happy returning to the drab existence that was his What-Is-Now, having confirmed for himself that the matrons and minders were wrong—that there was nothing wrong with getting ideas above one's station. As if one's station was not only a condemnation from birth, but immutable, invalidating the presence of inborn aptitude and natural talent.

Delight and dissatisfaction warred within him, tumultuous thoughts keeping him from sleep.

Frustration.

He didn't feel culturally enriched after listening to three hours of Italian arias. Instead, he was irritated at the lack of language resources available to someone of his status. It was all the more galling when he recalled that the entrance examinations to Oxford and Cambridge required knowledge of Classical Greek and Latin. And one needed to enrol in a school like that to enter the higher echelons of British society.

Dr. Granger must have learned Latin at some point; if he still had his old textbooks, Hermione could get them for him.

Hermione.

She was... useful.

Tom's world was divided into a simple spectrum, labelled "Useful" and "Worthless" at each pole. Humouring Hermione served to advance his own interests. She, out of all the people with whom he had regular contact, had delivered the most value for the time invested. And it wasn't that unpleasant of a time, he was forced to acknowledge. There was more intelligent discourse in her postscripts than he got from an entire day of school lessons.

He might be indifferent to her taste in entertainment, but nevertheless, she remained valuable to him. And it must be reciprocated to some extent; she was indifferent to his political opinions but still found them interesting enough to debate him. She liked talking to him. And her company was... tolerable.

He wondered if he should tell her that.

He wondered whether or not it was a sign of emotional growth that he'd even considered the notion. Then he rolled over and closed his eyes.
Hermione Granger was still undecided about whether or not she liked Tom Riddle, but she did know for certain that he was her only friend.

But it wasn't as if you had to *like* people to be friends with them. In the military history books she'd bought for Tom, she'd read that nations formed alliances with other nations they didn't like all the time. England had fought a Hundred Years' War with France—and it was over six hundred years of conflicts altogether, if she remembered correctly—yet Britain and France had allied in the last Great War. The same could be said about the Americans, who had fought Britain for only a fraction of that time, but their shared history was no less contentious.

So there it was. You didn't necessarily have to agree with someone to remain civil; if you had the patience to see past one another's irreversible differences then you could spot the common values and complementary strengths.

She occasionally felt a bit uneasy having to justify her friendship with Tom Riddle, but then one of his letters would arrive and the lingering doubts would be settled. Because *that* penmanship! She'd never met a boy who could write like that, whose penmanship was so crisp, whose facility and diction made her feel like she was a lady scholar corresponding with her man of letters, and not just a child writing to another child from across the boroughs of London.

_Hermione,_

*I respectfully disagree with you on the subject of criminal justice. I've always found penal transportation a practical, and yes, more merciful system of rehabilitation compared to the very permanent alternative. Pity they stopped it by 1850; I expect by then Parliament had realised that railway sleepers don't lay themselves...*_

The first parcels she sent him contained sweets and tinned shortbreads, but after a few comments on their nutritional value, she'd ended up sending stamps for return postage and blank exercise books. That later turned to interesting periodicals, advanced textbooks, and most recently, Latin primers. Well, she couldn't fault him for having eclectic tastes.

Her parents probably wouldn't approve of her spending most of her pocket money on gift parcels, but all the books she'd bought for him she first read herself, and there was nothing unusual about Hermione spending half her weekend browsing newsstands and bookshops.

What would they scold her about anyway? Did they want to deprive an already deprived orphan of the kindness he would get from nowhere else? He had no parents, and despite the orphanage matron's yammering on about how all her young charges were a family, it was difficult to spot any signs of attachment or affection amongst the orphans, and impossible to discern with regards to Tom himself.
And it wasn't as if Hermione's mum and dad would want to deprive her of her only friend. Hermione had always been such an odd duck, a single child labelled *Precocious* at six years old, *Solitary* at seven, and by eight, she was *Peculiar*, for the strange incidents that happened in her presence but could not be blamed on anyone—mysterious malfunctioning locks, burst pipes, and small fires.

She'd thought she was going mad for the longest time.

She still didn't know if she was mad or not. Having delved into books to find answers—because there *were* answers, it was only a matter of how many books she needed to go through to find it—she had come up with a few explanations, but none of them were particularly satisfying. It was after she'd met Tom Riddle for the second time that she'd looked into the phenomenon of ESP and had been discouraged by how ridiculous it was. Spirit mediums and fortune telling? What nonsense!

She'd rather believe Tom Riddle was an opera virtuoso *in potentia* (on top of all of his academic talents) than some kind of—*of telepath*.

It was in a bout of frustration at the library archives that she'd discovered another explanation: *Legerdemain*.

Other people could deal and swap playing cards with a simple flick of the wrist. Hermione could turn the pages of a book without laying a finger on them. It was an ability she'd discovered hearing the library closure announcement. She'd panicked at the pile of books as yet unopened, and the page she had been skim-reading quivered like the wings of a butterfly, and then under her trembling fingers and frightened gaze one page had turned to the next, and the next, until it reached the back cover and closed with a thump.

She could replicate it too, one success per every five attempts. As long as she combined concentration (picturing the vanes of a windmill, the pattern of turning sheaves in a paddleboat wheel, spokes arrayed around the spinning axle of a bicycle tyre) and the memory of urgency, desperation, *need*.

In the end, Hermione decided she wasn't mad. They were only parlour tricks, like the ones seen in stage shows. There was surely another, better rational explanation—only she hadn't found yet it. Like magnetic attraction. Or static discharges and bio-electrical currents.

She half wondered if Tom Riddle was the mad one.

...You argue that an autocratic system is susceptible to regicide and power vacuums. *I* argue that the problem of the fallible system would be solved if the autocrat himself were infallible. Alexander and Napoleon, for all their victories and achievements, were failures: flawed not only in character, but in judgment.

*I*, however, am an excellent judge of character. *You* see, Hermione, *I've* always been able to tell when people are lying to me, or at the very least, when their intentions toward me are dishonest, and whether they are hiding something they'd rather I not know. It's been a very useful ability; it was how I confirmed it was worth making your acquaintance, something I do not regret. *I've* often wondered if this natural intuition of mine could be useful had I been in their position...
Tom had a very... forceful personality.

Oh, he could be charming when he wanted to be (her mother had commented on his sweet manners the morning after they’d taken him to the opera) but of the handful of times Hermione had met him in person, he’d always given the impression of a sort of feral intensity. As if his skin—his life—was too small, too confining, and he was restlessly anticipating the day where he would burst out of it like a moulted carapace.

She tried not to judge him too harshly. It wasn't Tom's fault where he was born; if she lived in an orphanage, it would not be likely she'd have come out of it as well-adjusted as he seemed to be.

(Sometimes when their debates became heated, it provoked one of his rare moments of candour, and he came off as delusional.)

But it wasn't as if he'd done anything to hurt her. The subjects of their debates were firmly placed in the realm of the hypothetical. And even if Tom did cause some form of offense, friends made allowances for one another's faults.

That's what friendship was about.

His fortnightly letters arrived every Tuesday morning, which meant Tom must have posted them during the weekend.

Hermione would tuck the freshly delivered envelope into her schoolbag and spend half the morning's lessons thinking about what Tom had written her, if he'd read the book she'd sent him... Then when lunch came, she'd sit in a shaded corner of the school quadrangle overlooked by the staffroom window and open his letter.

It was like unwrapping a gift.

(It was like having a friend eat lunch with her.)

She savoured his words; she imagined that he was in school right now, St. Mary's at Nine Elms, in the middle of his lunch recess. She pictured him sitting under a tree and reading her books, dark eyes devouring words she'd underlined and annotated, his fingers tracing the edges of pages, pages that had turned under her upraised hands—without needing her hands at all—like the spring-powered dial of a rotary telephone.

Hermione's days flew by without incident, the passage of time marked by a stream of letters that dropped through the family mail slot.

Some time after the middle of the year—not too long after Hermione had congratulated Tom for his
Year Five scores and newspaper namedrop—a letter arrived that did not come via Royal Mail. Most unusually, it was delivered by hand on a Saturday afternoon in late July, by a well-dressed man with sharp, perceptive eyes and a benign smile lifting up the corners of his auburn beard.

He wore a smartly cut suit in bright teal-green velvet, complemented by a silk damask waistcoat patterned with a tessellating design of golden feathers and flames. He called himself Professor and Wizard and the dependable cogs in the well-oiled machine that was Hermione's mind ground themselves into a screeching halt.

Wizard.

Witch.

The cogs sought for traction, a base point; the gears and teeth within her skull sunk into facts she'd just learned, observations she'd long known, searching for commonalities and correlations that had to be there, were there all along.

There all along, but it was only now that someone thought it convenient to tell her.

Magic.

She was at once captivated and frustrated; there was delight in getting answers to the questions she'd been asking for years, and in equal measure, a burning dissatisfaction in being denied the chance to find the answers herself. Because no matter how hard she'd looked, the answers were nowhere to be found, not in the local library, or all the bookshops of central London, or the academic archives at the university she'd visited with her father whenever he met with his Alumnus Society. Not for people of their heritage, those who couldn't see the publican's door hidden in plain sight on the high street at Charing Cross, who couldn't cross the sixth brick pillar from the gate at King's Cross Station.

Delight, frustration, and the final, welcome warmth of vindication. She hadn't been going mad.

Hermione's father observed the wizard, Professor Dumbledore, over the top of his newspaper, a colourful figure looking out of place in the sedate creams and browns of the family's formal sitting room. Hermione's mum set out a tray of tea and jam-filled shortbreads, before settling down on a loveseat, an open notebook balanced on her knee to take the Professor's information down in shorthand.

They'd been unsettled ever since the Professor waved his wand and made the legs of their coffee table sprout roots and branches and transform into an attractive leafy indoor trellis—with a level shelf in the middle to hold the tea tray and porcelain tea set. To Hermione's gratitude, her parents' anxiety seemed to be due to this strange man in their home, and not by the revelation that she could do the same things he did.

Mum and Dad seemed to be relieved on her behalf, and echoed her sentiments about the lack of answers until now, just a couple of months before Hermione was expected to go to a prestigious girls' preparatory school, one that she'd had to pass entry tests years ago to put her name on a waiting list. They'd already bought her the uniforms and textbooks, because Hermione was the type of student who preferred to show up on the first day with a study plan for the whole year's syllabus.

"I don't suppose I'll ever be a doctor, then," Hermione said, with a sigh of disappointment. "If it's dangerous to go untrained in magic, then I'll have to go to your school, and not to Donwell Prep."
"If you are interested in the field of medicine," Professor Dumbledore explained in a calm, assured voice, "the magical occupation of a Mediwitch or Mediwizard is our closest equivalent to, ah, I suppose, a General Practitioner in Muggle terms. Qualification for a specialty field is done through a Healing Mastery program, which is an apprenticeship undertaken after Hogwarts graduation and can last anywhere from three to eight years. This would be a specialisation in, for example, spell or curse damage, mind Healing, magical midwifery, or contagious illnesses."

"I do hope it's a position of respect in your society," Dr. Granger remarked, a contemplative frown wrinkling his forehead. Professor Dumbledore nodded in affirmation. "I don't suppose it pays well? We don't mind supporting Hermione however long she needs it after graduation, but she's always been of an independent disposition. And barring a ladies' boarding house, there's few respectable places that would take an independent girl like our Hermione, if she's reliant on a single income."

"I trained as a nurse before marrying," said Mrs. Granger, looking up from her notebook. "They didn't pay as much as we deserved, because the hospital's directors were expecting high turnover—they thought we'd go off and get married right after we completed training. But it led to most of us marrying just so we could afford to live in the city. It was a rather convoluted cycle, and a self-perpetuating one at that."

"Ah, I see," said Dumbledore, with a look of dawning understanding. "Healer trainees receive the same wages, whether they are wizards or witches. We don't distinguish between the sexes in our world, as all of us who are born with the potential are considered equally magical." A shadow crossed his features, and the kindly lines that wove around the corners of his eyes pinched together in rumination.

"Some of us marry quite young, right after finishing school—that is their prerogative, of course, and some choose not to marry at all if they are independently minded; I am one such, and I've never witnessed it held against me. Early marriage among our kind is usually due to a traditional upbringing than economic necessity. Economic disadvantage is never as severe as it is in the Muggle world, when most of our needs can be managed by magic. We can't conjure food—you'll find out more about it by fifth year—but creating shelter and warmth and clothes from very little or nothing at all? Certainly possible, for those who have the skill for it.

"But to return to what I mentioned earlier, about these traditionalists. They are a small fraction of our population, but can be disproportionately vocal at times, and harbour beliefs that I, and indeed many others, consider outmoded and unenlightened. Chief among those is their attitude regarding one's magical heritage, which is referred to by that set, in common terms, as one's 'blood status'..."

Dumbledore spoke in his tenured lecturer's voice, genial in all respects. But Hermione could sense the tension in her father's shoulders, and the white knuckles of her mother's hands where she clutched her fountain pen and stabbed the nib into the paper in the abbreviated strokes of phonetic shorthand. Hermione's own hands scrunched up the hem of her skirt.

By the time Hermione's mum had the kettle on for a second pot of tea, Hermione felt exhausted.

"It's better to know now than find out later, or not know at all," she murmured, picking up a biscuit. "Even if it ruins the first impression I have of magic." Hermione glanced up at Dumbledore, who was inspecting the framed anatomical lithographs that decorated the walls of the Grangers' sitting room. "Professor, do you tell this to all the Muggleborns you visit? I can't help imagining that you'd be scaring half the families away from magic."

"I give a general introduction to most potential students," said Dumbledore. "It usually takes years to
acclimate to the wizarding world; beyond the basics, I am limited to answering as many questions as I'm asked. And few have asked as many questions as you have. But Hogwarts' unofficial motto is that 'help is always given to those who ask for it', and I'm as much partial to that one as our official motto."

"What is the official motto?" asked Dr. Granger.

"'Draco dormiens nunquam titillandus'," Dumbledore replied, his eyes beaming behind his half-moon spectacles. "The Hogwarts founders' sense of humour is a tidbit of trivia unfortunately lost to the veils of time."

"Dragon... sleep... not... something!" Hermione puzzled out, brow furrowed. Her father seemed to have gotten it already. "Tom would figure it out faster than me," she grumbled. "I gave him our Latin primers because he wanted to study for matriculation."

It was in that instant that Hermione remembered her one and only friend, Tom Riddle.

How will Tom write to me when I'm away at school? It's in Scotland—the postage will take longer and the stamps more expensive. I'll have to send him the money, or the stamps, and I'll have to explain why I'm not going to Donwell Prep anymore, when I'd been harping on it for months as the best school for career-minded young ladies. And we won't be able to exchange curriculum notes anymore; he'll be learning English grammar and algebra, and I'll be studying magic.

Magic.

Dumbledore explained the concept of accidental magic. Unusual phenomena occurring around a magical child. Unintentional magical outbursts in moments of intense emotion. But it can be controlled consciously, some of the time. I've controlled it before.

...You see, Hermione, I've always been able to tell when people are lying to me...

"Professor," Hermione asked, turning to Dumbledore, "is it possible to tell when people are lying with magic?"

Dumbledore's face became grave, but his eyes hadn't lost their warmth. "It is indeed possible, but considered an extremely obscure branch of magic, and one that is not taught at Hogwarts. Where might you have heard of it, Miss Granger?"

Hermione couldn't miss his sudden curiosity; she was feeling the same thing once she'd heard the word 'obscure'.

"I know a boy who said he could... sense lies, I suppose," said Hermione, slightly nervous. "He has been my dearest friend for years. And he's much like me—we both make top marks every year, it's a bit of a competition between us—and he once did something strange that I could never find a sensible, scientific explanation for. Like he was speaking in my head, or something like that—it sounded so ridiculous and I thought I was just imagining it." She gazed up at Professor Dumbledore, an idea firming in her mind. "He's my age, eleven years old, just a few months younger than I am. I think he might be—could he be a—Professor, do you have a list of the Muggleborn students that you bring invitations to?"

"We have an enchanted quill in the Headmaster's office that makes a list automatically," said Dumbledore. "We sort out the addresses that are in Muggle areas, referenced against our existing list..."
of wizarding homes."

"Do you know if someone by the name of Riddle is on it?" Hermione asked. "Tom Riddle? He lives in South London, in Wool's Orphanage."

"I believe I have seen that name on this year's intake. The address was somewhat unusual," Dumbledore conceded. "My list is sorted alphabetically, so his visit would be sometime next week, or the week after."

_**Tom is a wizard.**_

_**And I'm a witch.**_

_He'll be so pleased when he finds out. I never told him about what I could do, or the accidents at school that made everyone think I was a graceless clod on top of being an overbearing know-it-all. It stands to reason that he's never told me about all the things he can do, Hermione realised. If he knows something, he isn't one to share it with the world. Heavens, he must have thought he was going mad too."

"Sir, when you visit Tom," Hermione spoke eagerly, thinking of how wonderful it was that she and Tom could go to school together, and see each other every day. "Can you bring him some books? Mum and Dad bought me the school textbooks for Year Six, but since I won't be needing them, Tom can have them. I've already finished reading them—and I promised them to Tom when I was done with them, since I was taking subjects his local comprehensive didn't offer."

At Dumbledore's nod, she ran upstairs and fetched the heavy stack of books she was supposed to take to school in September. A Muggle school. _Muggle._ Such a strange new word, and one of many she'd learned today, but the concepts they described seemed to make sense to her, naturally so. It was as if she'd known forever that she was different, but hadn't the words—_until now_—to bring her idle speculations into the world of concrete fact.

She still half-believed that this was all a dream, and she'd wake up tomorrow morning unaware of a parallel world that contained _magic._ It seemed too fantastical to be real.

_Law and Governance of Britain and Her Territories, Intermediate Geometry, Physical Sciences G6, Students' World Geography..._

She piled them up and brought them to Dumbledore, who raised his eyebrow at the weight of them, drew his wand, and shrunk them down so that each book was the size of a matchbox. They disappeared into a pocket within his teal velvet coat.

"I'll see you come September first, Miss Granger," said Dumbledore amiably, as he put his wand away and shook Dr. Granger's hand. He gave a short bow to Mrs. Granger and nodded at Hermione, who gripped the thick sheaf of papers from her Hogwarts letter as fiercely as if she was afraid they'd float away.

"Yes, Sir," said Hermione. "Please give Tom my regards when you visit him, Professor."

When Professor Dumbledore left, Hermione was still shaking with excitement, although it had started to morph into a sense of itching anxiety. She had only a month and a few days left before the start of term, and she hadn't read through her textbooks, because she hadn't even bought them.
With trembling hands, she dug into her desk drawer and peeled out a sheet of stationery paper and an envelope, stamp already affixed to the top right corner.

The pen nib hovered over the paper, her account of the day taking shape in jagged swipes and wobbly lines. It flowed out in a feverish pace, the paper smeared in the margins where Hermione had forged ahead without a second’s pause for the ink to dry.

Dear Tom,

Today, we had the most exciting caller drop in for tea...
1938

Tom learned a new set of cultural mores that autumn. He saw things he recognised, but they were mutated and combined with the magical variation Hogwarts produced.

Hogwarts' food was one mark of difference. The food was hearty and familiar British fare: meats, breads, pickles, and puddings. But it came with goblets of over-sweet pumpkin juice instead of the watery powdered milk he was used to. The school uniforms were to be worn pressed neatly and tucked in to no one's surprise, but were hidden beneath the loose, draping folds of a wizard's robe.

The school was located in Scotland, and the language of instruction was English, although no one commented on the wide range of regional dialects he heard amongst the student population. Nevertheless, his vocabulary and elocution were still scrutinised, not so much as for indications of social class, but rather any sign of partisan sympathies. The eyes of his Slytherin housemates didn't search for the same set of subliminal cues as a class-conscious Londoner would—for example, how one took their tea and handled the service accoutrements, from the sugar tongs to the slotted spoon. The kind of knot one used in their neckties, or the degree of sharpness one could coax out of their shirt collars with stays and starch and hot irons.

But it was still elitism, just a different flavour of it than he was used to.

To his disappointment, Wizarding Britain wasn't far removed from the Britain he had been glad to leave behind.

Every society had its strata, and the topmost layer would always be the corps d'élite; in this matter, Wizarding Britain was much the same. There was a new set of people who considered themselves his social superiors by right of birth, by the significance accrued like the dust of centuries on a long-established name.

They weren't Windsor-Mountbatten or Farnsleigh-St. Germain. They were Black, Malfoy, Lestrange, and Rosier, and together they called themselves the "Sacred Twenty-Eight".

It was a monumental effort in the aim of self-aggrandisement, couldn't they see it? The book ("stud-book" was a fitting name for what it was) had been published by Nott's father only a few years ago, and if Nott the Elder had been objective in his definitions of "Sacred" and "Pure" upon making his list, then Tom would go take a swan dive into the Black Lake in mid-winter.

When he had gone to settle his things into the stone-lined cellar of the shared dormitory, he'd been introduced to a new world of rude vocabulary by the boys in his year squabbling over who got what bed, because no one wanted the bed closest to the boy with a Muggle name and an unknown blood status. It was clear from the coarse language spouting from their outraged, snarling faces that they'd got 'well-bred' confused with 'inbred'.

Business as usual, Tom supposed. He was used to—resigned to—being surrounded by people he despised, much to his eternal regret, and Hogwarts was no different than Wool's in that respect.
But within the splendour of ancient stones and rugged valleys that made up the school and grounds was one single point of familiarity.

Hermione Granger.

She was a witch. She could perform magic. She was *Special.*

And she'd hidden it from him.

*...Tom, he said he's the Deputy Headmaster of a school for people just like us. Magic! I'd never have guessed. It still doesn't make sense to me, but in a way it explains everything. All the accidents that I thought were just coincidence, or put down to bad luck. Although in this year and the last, it seemed experimenting with conscious control led to fewer unfortunate incidents. I used to have them once every two months or so since I was seven. I don't suppose you had the same growing up...*

Tom wasn't used to people hiding things from him, not something of this magnitude. With Hermione, it was a result of their only meeting a handful of times a year, whenever her mother brought hand-me-downs to the orphanage, or when her parents invited him to an afternoon outing during term holidays. He couldn't discern truth and lies from her words on paper.

But now...

Hermione lived in the same castle. He could find her in person, in class. Talk to her, look her in the eyes and see what else she hid from him, make her tell the truth—

*But—*

He didn't want to talk to her.

She'd betrayed him on a second, more severe count. She'd told Albus Dumbledore about him, about his abilities, a week before they were due to officially meet. And so Dumbledore had come to the gates of Wool's in an extravagant ensemble of plum velvet, preconceptions already formed. He'd arrived on the scene warned and wary about Tom Riddle, the quiet orphan boy with an uncanny dark gaze, who had a room to himself filled with books where the other boys of his age had to share.

At least Dumbledore didn't get all of his secrets. No one knew he could talk to snakes, not even Hermione, or knew that the rabbit had died of unnatural causes. He'd taken pains to be more subtle after the orphanage had gotten more wealthy, regular visitors—ones who liked the idea of sponsoring an impoverished child, but not the idea of bringing it into their own home.

"How did you come by such an ability?" the man asked in his unbearably kind voice, settling himself on Tom's thin mattress with a squeal of worn springs. His pale blue eyes glimmered in the muted
light of the dirty window. It was a cloudy day in London, and in the height of summer, the damp heat had become stifling, but the man didn't appear overheated in his three-piece suit. "It's quite an unusual talent, but not entirely unheard of among our kind."

"I've always known how to do it," answered the boy who sat in the chair by the wooden desk, fingers resting in his lap, calm and composed despite learning about the invitation to an exclusive boarding school hidden in a distant valley in Scotland. "No one taught me. I'm the only wizard here. Sir."

"Ah, I see," said the man, stroking his beard in rumination. "An inborn trait, then. Sometimes hereditary, but always extremely rare."

"Sir," the boy asked, looking up from his hands for the first time, "do you know my family, then? Did they have it too? Was my—my father a wizard like me?"

"I'm sorry, Tom," said the man. "I'm afraid I don't know. Our enchanted registration quill records students' names from birth if they are magical, and if one of their parents has attended Hogwarts. If this doesn't apply, as in the case of Muggleborn children, it records the name and address upon their first outburst of accidental magic. The parents and guardians aren't listed, only the addresses—and in your case, we've put Mrs. Cole down as your caretaker."

The boy's eyes darkened; he looked sullen for a moment, then his brows drew together thoughtfully. "Hermione wrote that magic like I can do isn't taught at Hogwarts. But you know about it—you must have studied it, mustn't you? Or read a book about it?" He leaned forward, his pale face alight with eagerness. "If I was born with this, and there's no way to get rid of it, then I'm stuck with it, aren't I? What if I don't know how to control it? I'd run the chance of accidentally hurting someone when I'm angry—if it's magic, then it can be accidental too, when I'm angry or upset."

The professor nodded. "There's a slight chance, but it will go down once you get your wand and learn to practice controlled magic. Accidental magic outbursts tend to disappear altogether after the age of twelve to thirteen, and tend not to manifest in adults except in situations of great stress or mortal danger."

"There's still a chance, isn't there?" asked Tom. "I—I don't want to risk anyone getting hurt. What if I hurt Hermione?" His eyes grew wide, his lips trembled, and he held his hands out in a display of humble supplication. "The other children think there's something wrong with me because they can feel it when I'm upset. But I couldn't bear it if Hermione left me, if she was afraid of me for something I can't help having. Please, sir, would you consider teaching me more about it?"

Professor Dumbledore searched the boy's pale face, and found his eagerness to learn stronger than the emotional attachment to his friend Hermione.

"You are still young, Tom," said the Professor, turning away from Tom's hungry gaze. "Give yourself a few years before you start looking into subjects beyond the teachings of Hogwarts. But until then, you might improve your control through practising meditative techniques. A well-organised mind, as I call it, has helped me in numerous aspects of life."
life when some orphanage brats thought they could knock Tom down a peg or two. And it wasn't that some details of his special abilities were revealed to an outsider. He'd done it himself on occasion, whenever fresh meat was introduced to the native fauna of Wool's ecosystem, and Tom had had to "explain" why he, and everything that belonged to him, was not communal property, but sacrosanct.

No, the pain of betrayal came from how the things he'd written to her in his letters made their way off the page. *He'd trusted her.* They were his words, given from his hand, for her eyes, and she'd gone and—and—

Dear gods, if he was actually, genuinely upset about it, then he was more pathetic than he thought.

This, if anything, was a lesson on what happened when other people were held up to standards that one applied to oneself. And if that self was Tom Riddle, then *everyone* would be inadequate by default.

Tom was neither kind nor forgiving, so he resolved that Hermione Granger would have to be punished.

And thus, for the first week of term, Tom had ignored her. On the Hogwarts Express, he'd arrived early, found an empty compartment, locked the compartment door, pulled down the blinds, and sat by himself. When he looked out the window and saw her dragging her trunk through the brick gateway of the sixth pillar, he'd ducked his head behind one of his second-hand textbooks, and she ended up spending the journey in a separate carriage.

It was easy to avoid her in class. The subjects that allowed the most inter-house interactions were Flying and Potions (it was surprising how few cauldrons blew up with the way Slughorn spent most of the practical sessions gossiping), but Slytherin took those with the Gryffindors. In fact, the only class Slytherin took with Ravenclaw was Defense Against the Dark Arts and Transfiguration, both of which were overseen by no-nonsense professors who didn't tolerate note passing between desks, let alone the kind of tongue-lashing he could tell Hermione wanted to give him.

Granger was a Ravenclaw.

Her Sorting came as no surprise to Tom. If you tried to look up the definition for *Bookworm,* you wouldn't have been able to, as the dictionary would have already been taken out for her light bedtime reading.

It meant that she slept in the second highest tower of the castle. Ravenclaw Tower was five floors above the Dungeons, where the Slytherin Dormitories lay. They had very little chance of bumping into each other outside of classes, or even meeting one another in a shared space. The Library and the Great Hall were such spaces, but Tom always checked to make sure he was alone when he studied, and they sat at different tables during meals.

It pleased him to see that no classmates of hers went out of their way to sit next to her at dinner.

Not that other Slytherins *liked* sitting next to Tom What-Kind-of-Name-is-Riddle-Anyway, but at least they didn't make a public show of avoiding him. They valued the outward appearance of House unity too much, and they couldn't afford to ignore his talent. For instance, when no one volunteered to pass the salt, Tom had used a bit of wandless summoning to get the salt cellar to his side of the table. From that point onward, nobody in his year had attempted to prank him at dinner by dumping a flagon of gravy on his lap.
(They still tried to jinx him in the Common Room, out of public view.)

Granger had tried to catch his eye over the milk jugs and porridge tureens at breakfast, but by then he had started choosing seats where she'd only see his back.

The first week of September passed with cold glances and turned backs and silence.

Midway through the second week, a letter arrived during breakfast, delivered by a generic barn owl. The owl dropped it onto Tom's lap and winged away without stopping for bacon. Tom picked it up. The letter was on a standard student-quality parchment scroll, sealed by a bit of string and an unstamped blob of red wax.

Who would want to write to me? Tom thought. It looks like the sender wants to appear anonymous.

Tom had noticed that many of the older students in Slytherin, and some in other Houses as well, wore some sort of heraldic sigil ring on their fingers. When his dorm mates had written of their Sortings to their parents the evening of the Feast, their pen boxes contained seal stamps similar to the rings, as well as sticks of coloured sealing wax. He'd seen the whole range of colours before, at the stationers' in Diagon Alley. Most people used a nondescript red wax, the cheapest option at a few knuts per stick, but those who preferred more security bought charmed wax in metallic gold and silver that burned thieving hands or destroyed the letter if tampered with.

(Of course, the average wizard relied on a well-trained owl to prevent his letters being intercepted. However, the advantage of anonymity was moot when everyone knew your family owned a black barred eagle owl with luminous amber eyes and a seven-foot wingspan.)

He peeled off the wax and opened the letter, unfurling the message within.

His own handwriting was revealed to him, a clean and precise cursive hand that drew the stem of the \( f \) in a smooth, curling loop, and completed each lowercase \( t \) with a confident cross-stroke. It was his fountain pen penmanship, honed by years of practice—not the script done for his Hogwarts classes with his drippier quill pen, which had to be dipped in ink every other sentence, and was, to Tom's distaste, quite messy and inferior to the Muggle way of doing it. Until he could get his hands on one of those self-inking, no-drip enchanted quills, at least.

He scanned the page.

His own handwriting, he confirmed—then he recognised his own words—\textit{he remembered where they'd come from}.

A page from a letter he'd written to Hermione, several months ago. It must have been in late April or May when they'd discussed the failed imperial ambitions of a handful of European warlords.

Several sentences had been copied out in red ink, still in his writing. An excellent duplication or dictation spell with a colour-changing component, then. Clever spellwork, perfectly cast, and beyond the first year textbooks, Tom was forced to admit.

\textit{I, however, am an excellent judge of character... I've always been able to tell when their intentions toward me are dishonest... It was how I confirmed it was worth making}
And in her handwriting down the bottom of the page:

One o'clock, East Courtyard. By the statue of Hipparchus the Stargazer.

"What's that you have there, Riddle?" asked one of the girls in his year. Antonella Everard, a talentless braggart whose sole claim to notability came from the fact that her great-great-something-or-other had got his portrait placed in the Headmaster's Office. "Ooh, has someone been writing to you?"

"It's nothing," said Tom coolly. "Just a reply from Beringer's in Diagon about the dates for new shipments."

"You can afford to shop at Beringer's?" Everard scoffed, giving his robes a dismissive glance.

His robes were second-hand, but Tom had picked the best out of the pile at the uniform shop when he'd done his school shopping; he'd darned the linings and split seams in his room at Wool's. Once he'd gotten access to the Hogwarts library, he'd applied a handful of minor stain-removing, refreshing, and repair charms. His robes looked all right—he'd made certain of it—and any signs of wear were only visible up close, where repeated washings had faded the once black fabric to a dark grey. He wouldn't have been able to tell unless he put his robes side-by-side to a brand new set.

She was just being spiteful.

"I wasn't planning to," Tom replied, curling his lip in a look of pure derision. "I got the name of their supplier, so now if I want something, I can order directly without having to pay the middleman surcharge. It makes no sense to waste money by being lazy."

He shoved the paper into his trouser pocket and pushed back from the bench. He had History of Magic in ten minutes, and the class was dull enough that no one would notice if his mind were on other things.

Tom found the East Courtyard deserted. It made sense: at this hour, most people would be in the Great Hall, enjoying a filling lunch of flaky pot pies and ham-and-cheese croissants with chutney and all the butter they wanted. (There was not a dish of margarine in sight, an uncommon instance where Tom was grateful for the antiquated nature of Wizarding culture.)

It was a lunch that Tom wanted too, as he'd come to look forward to regular Hogwarts meals with
their dripping roasts and endless baskets of white bread and condiments he’d never seen before.
(Who knew you could make jam out of bacon? Wizards, it seemed, had no limits to their power.)
He was a little put out from missing a meal because of an annoying witch who had booked him for an appointment he hadn’t asked for.

The statue of Hipparchus was of a scholarly-looking man sitting on a marble plinth, legs dangling over the side. He had a head of tightly curled hair with a matching curly beard, and his neck was craned back at an uncomfortable angle, his carved eyes staring at the sky. The small bronze plaque under his sandaled feet proclaimed that the statue was enchanted to move after sunset, whereupon he would turn his head to follow the rise and fall of the moon.

Hermione leaned against Hipparchus' legs, her school satchel clasped against her chest. She bathed in sunlight, frizzy brown hair falling over her closed eyes. This would likely be one of the last few sunny days before a rainy autumn set in and heralded the arrival of their first Scottish winter.

Tom coughed politely and spoke first. "Lunch ends in half an hour."

She ignored him for almost a minute. "Do you know why I chose this place to meet?" she asked, rapping her knuckle on the marble plinth. "This statue in particular?"

"Not really," said Tom, dropping down next to her. "Do elaborate."

"Hipparchus was the mathematician who invented the astrolabe. And apparently he was also a wizard, but I never saw that written in any book. There was an engraving of him on page sixteen of the textbook I gave you—that Professor Dumbledore gave you. *Intermediate Geometry*. Did you read it?"

"Yes," Tom admitted, through lips pressed into a thin line.

"You never bothered to write back after I wrote you that letter and sent those books along. I wondered how you'd take the news, that we were both magic." Hermione sat up straighter, clutching her satchel closer with white knuckles. Her eyes opened, but she didn't look at him, only stared up at the sky in the same blank, unseeing way as the statue. "How are you, Tom?"

"You shouldn't have told Dumbledore," Tom said, his voice brittle and scathing.

"I wanted to know if you were magical too," Hermione retorted. "I thought it'd be unfair if someone told me that I was a witch all along and no one told you."

"He would have come for me anyway; I was already on the list," snapped Tom, his eyes narrowing in anger. "There was no use in you telling him about our letters."

Hermione turned to face him now, her cheeks flushed red and her eyes glittering with tears. "I didn't tell him about anything you wrote in your letters! Is that what you think this is about? Is that why you stopped writing to me, stopped talking to me, acknowledging that I even exist?"

"Then explain how the first thing Dumbledore said to me was to warn me about it? 'A Hogwarts education does not only comprise the study of magical disciplines, but self-discipline and the ethical use of magic'," Tom recited, the humiliation of his memory raw-edged and bitter.

His first meeting with a real wizard, expectations buoyed up by Hermione's letter days earlier, and he'd been told off in that calm, fatherly way, as if he were a child. Tom had been self-reliant since he
was six years old (by that age, he'd learned to wash, dress, and feed himself so the orphanage minders had left him alone to take care of the other brats) and didn't consider himself a child (despite what the laws of Magical and Muggle Britain said) and he certainly didn't consider Dumbledore a father figure.

In that moment he'd been afraid—an unfamiliar sensation within the long-conquered realm of Wool's Orphanage—that his invitation would be rescinded, and his hopes of the better life he knew he deserved dashed for good.

"He knew, Hermione! Explain that!" Tom demanded, fists clenched, the words high and harsh and resonant with magic.

"Firstly," Hermione replied in a low, dangerous tone, "I didn't mention our letters at all. He doesn't know about it. I wouldn't share anything in them anyway, since I write you back and that trust goes both ways. I'm sure that if you wanted, you could find something in all the letters I've written that'd out me as a terrible person.

"And second, the only reason he knew anything at all is because I mentioned something—the incident—that happened the second time we met, before you ever sent me any letters. Don't you remember it? You did something to me—you put words in my head, and I had a headache for the rest of that day. I'd forgotten about it, I'd brushed it off as nothing, because it was years ago, because I'd have laughed at the idea of magic back then. But it was magic, wasn't it, Tom? You were using magic, and you mightn't have known it was magic, but you knew what you were doing." She stopped, bringing her hands to her temples, her wild hair curling around her face where it had pulled out of a silver barrette clip. "You're still doing it, aren't you?"

Tom took a deep breath and reined in his anger, a strange, looming weight lifted off his shoulders, like the atmospheric pressure in the space between the two of them had suddenly disappeared into a vacuum. "I did it because I wanted the truth. And I'm not sorry about it."

Hermione huffed, pressing a hand over her eyes. "You're not going to stop doing it, are you?"

"Well, it worked," Tom said mutinously. "Dumbledore said I was born like this. Before I got a wand, before I knew I was a wizard, this was magic to me. It still is magic, just the same as your being a witch is magic. Neither of us can help what we have. And I already know you wouldn't give up being a witch if someone asked you to, even though we both know handing an eleven year old a wand is not much different than giving them a cocked gun. We learned the Knockback Jinx in Defense yesterday and it'd be ridiculously simple to use it on someone standing on a moving staircase."

Hermione shook her head. "I know that, Tom. It scares me, but I know it's true that magic is capable of being dangerous. One of the first things I found out about the magical world was that the wizarding hospital has a section for spell damage. But that's why we're at school, so we can learn how to be careful. Knowing that, I just wish you were more... more responsible."

Tom leaned closer. A curl of his dark hair fell over his forehead, grazing his brows. "I promise not to use it on you," he said, close enough that she could feel his warm breath on her flushed cheek, a mockery of intimacy. "Unless you give consent."

"You should promise not to use it on anyone without permission," said Hermione, sidling backwards. "Or better yet, not use it on anyone at all."
"I might need to one day," Tom retorted. "If someone is trying to hurt me and there's no other choice— you forget that not everyone spends their summers safely tucked away in a nice little house like you have. And in the summer, you know we aren't to use our wands on pain of expulsion. But I'll be careful, I promise; I won't be making a show of it." He peered closer at her, noting her hunched shoulders and lowered eyes. "You're afraid of me, Hermione. I can tell. Am I frightening you?"

"I don't think it'd change anything if I were frightened," said Hermione. She shivered and pulled her robes tighter around her body, but they both knew it wasn't because she was cold. "I think Professor Dumbledore is right. There is a point to learning about the ethics of magic. You might not care about girlish feelings and personal boundaries, but other people will, and you could get in trouble if you slip."

She hesitated for a few moments, clearly debating something in that head of hers, aware that if important information was withheld, Tom would be perfectly capable of finding out on his own. He had as much of a scholar's mind as she.

"While you were ignoring me, I was looking up different branches of magic in the library, based on what I remembered from Professor Dumbledore. And what you did to me," Hermione began in a shaking voice, sagging against the statue's feet. "I tried to find anything related to magical compulsions and... and telepathy, I suppose I could call it. It's a Muggle word, but wizards never seem to complain if it's in Latin or Greek.

"It turns out there is a branch of magic, or a spell of some sort, that replicates the effect of telepathic mind control. And it's highly illegal." Hermione's eyes darted to his. "That's why the Professor warned you: he didn't want you to get arrested before you even took your first exam. I looked up wizarding laws as well—you wouldn't just get your wand snapped, you'd be shipped off to prison. And the wizarding prison, from the references I could find, seem much, much worse than transportation to Australia."

Mind control.

Tom salivated at the notion. It was such a clean way to get things done, something he'd wished he'd been able to do in the lonely days in his early childhood when he was too weak to hit back, too untrained to make them hurt with a thought. As much as he wished he could do it, his abilities only extended to projecting a minor compulsion, and it only worked reliably on animals, young children, and Mrs. Cole when she was soused up to the gills, a rarity that only presented itself on Bonfire Night or Christmas Eve.

Tell the Truth. Go Away. Leave Me Alone.

Always simple commands, not a hint of nuance at all. Still, it wasn't as heavy-handed as making people hurt, which led to some becoming aggressive instead of slinking away as they were supposed to do. And it was far more noticeable if a bunch of people at Wool's had started reporting mysterious aches and pains. Too many complaints would draw the health inspectors, and the last thing Tom wanted was for stories to be told and Tom himself sent to a psychologist.

Tom had thought his compulsion ability similar to the muggle concept of hypnosis, but he'd only read of it in the context of asylum treatments and spirit medium stage shows. The lack of scientific evidence had made him believe it was nothing more than rehearsed quackery.

But this was real magic. More powerful than his own inborn magic, if the magical government had deemed it severe enough to ban it.
"What books did you get this from?" Tom asked, with a quick glance around the courtyard to ensure no one was listening. "I trust your memory, but I'd rather see it for myself."

"There's a set of encyclopaedias of British wizarding law in the library," said Hermione. "Funnily enough, Wizarding Britain still recognises all of Ireland as part of its domain, so apparently they ignore Muggle world politics. Anyway, it's not much to go on—it explains more on sentencing protocol and historical precedent than the magic itself." She sighed and pushed her hair out of her eyes. "There were some references to other texts, but I haven't read them, nor will I. Neither should you. Don't go looking for them."

Tom raised an eyebrow. _Don't Do This_ was not much of a deterrent when he decided something was worth having. "Why not?"

"They're in the Restricted Section. Supplementary reading allowed for Seventh Years, but only if they're on the list for the Defense N.E.W.T. and have a note from a professor." Hermione studied his blank expression. "Tom..."

"I'm not going to wait six years to read a book," said Tom. "I'm not going to break into the Restricted Section tomorrow, Hermione. I'm not stupid. But six years? Absolutely ridiculous." He flashed her a sharp-toothed smile. "I understand if other students need the extra time to grasp the material. But between you and me, I think I can get through the First Year curriculum by Christmas."

"Tom—"

"Hermione, you are free to wait until 1944 to read whatever you like," said Tom in his best saccharine sweet Adoption Day voice. "But don't ask me to share when I have that teacher's note and that book out of the library and I'm reading it, enjoying it—nay, savouring it—right under your nose."

Hermione buried her face in her hands.

Tom laughed and laughed.

Chapter End Notes

In this AU:

— Tom cleaned up his act in 1936. He's not a good boy but the seaside incident does not occur.

— Hermione tells Tom about magic beforehand, so Tom doesn't demand "proof" from Dumbledore during the Hogwarts letter delivery. Dumbledore doesn't set the wardrobe on fire and see the box of stolen toys. He knows Tom is a natural Legilimens and troubled orphan, but does not think Tom is an unredeemable demon child as he does in canon HBP. Tom finds Legilimency more impressive than Parseltongue, because snakes are boring animals and Hermione makes better conversation.
— Legilimency and the Imperius Curse are not the same thing, but both have a "mental communication" telepathic aspect. However, Tom and Hermione don't know any different because Dumbledore never told either of them that Tom's natural ability is called Legilimency, only that it is some sort of magical mind reading. Dumbledore probably doesn't want them to figure out that the spell for Legilimency is *Legilimens*, which they'd be able to find very quickly if they had key words to search with.

— Obviously, this story is based on the premise that TMR/LV wasn't born evil, and Dumbledore is well-meaning, if misguided and neglectful on occasion. He is not Evil!Dumbles with the veritaserum lemon drops.
Tom seemed to have forgiven Hermione enough that he'd started talking to her again, after putting her through a month of silence, lasting for most of August and the beginning of September.

_Or_, said the voice in the back of her mind that knew Tom Riddle wasn't as nice as everyone thought he was, _he believed that she'd served out her sentence and was now absolved of her sins._

Now that Hermione and Tom lived at Hogwarts, she had the opportunity to see him in person every single day. And thus she got to know a side of him that she hadn't seen in the polished, double-drafted letters he'd sent her for the last two years. Tom on paper was everything she imagined a pen-friend should be: legible, intelligible, punctual, and intellectual.

She'd unconsciously raised her standards for friendship to that level, and in the ensuing years since gaining his acquaintance, it was only natural that she hadn't found in other people an alternative to the dual rôles of companion and confidant provided by Tom. Other people were just too... too _short-sighted_. They simply didn't care about the things Hermione was interested in, the social causes she advocated. Of course, she knew that Tom didn't either, but he was articulate enough to give her a reasonable explanation for why he didn't.

She noticed that he didn't bother with fatuous greetings with her, never a "How do you do?" or a "Good morning, shame about the rain," as he gave other students in their year while they waited outside the classroom door for the professor to let them in and begin the lesson. No, he forged straight ahead to, "Show me your essay feedback," and "I need Schleiden's Apotheker for my Potions homework and you haven't returned it."

It turned out that whilst in person Tom made a very terrible friend, he was also a very dedicated scholar.

It was one of those things about Tom that made Hermione remain unsure whether she liked him or not—he was unquestionably brilliant and talented, but it was a slippery slope to continue overlooking his flaws in favour of his virtues. But there were, after all, plenty of fair-minded statesmen, genius generals, and progressive Parliamentarians who made the world a better place, while at the same time were, in their personal lives, philanderers or opium hounds or something equally terrible.

And years later, history textbooks and the average man or woman on the street would say that they had been great.
House Quidditch teams were playing an informal pickup game as a warm-up for the beginning of the Quidditch season. It was a training practice to get returned players back into shape, and new players on the reserve squads accustomed to the tactics of a full seven player team.

As it was the weekend, Hermione wore her school robe over a soft wool cardigan sent by her mother in a birthday parcel, along with a plain skirt and blouse. Her other birthday presents had been a pouch of galleons converted from pounds sterling, and a jar of Marmite, because Hermione had written to say that Hogwarts didn't serve it—although during special occasions they did have unusual dishes like dressed pike, juggled hare, and larks' tongues. Wizards were so traditional it was surprising that they even owned a steam locomotive. She had wondered if this was due to wizards having such long lifespans: Headmaster Dippet was over two hundred years old, so he was already an old man when foods like that had been common fare on a Briton's table, a century ago.

Hermione was working on a Potions essay, while Tom was fiddling with an ostentatious purple quill pen tipped with engraved metal nib, a book called *Time Saving Study Skills* open by his elbow. She noticed that Tom wore his full school uniform, perfectly knotted necktie and all, and with a flash of guilt, Hermione realised that Tom probably did not own much of a wardrobe outside his orphanage and Muggle school uniforms.

A younger Hermione would have commented on it, much to her mortification. Not only would she have commented on it, but asked him why, then answered the question herself before he could open his mouth to answer, in as tactless a manner as possible. (She was grateful that the first real conversations she'd had with Tom had been through letters, where she could restrain herself. Somewhat.) The Hermione of the present noticed but kept it to herself, taking the time to puzzle out the explanations and full implications.

The wand from Ollivanders cost my parents four galleons, eight sickles. I don't know the exact conversion rate between galleons and pounds, but I do know that the sixteen shillings I gave Tom a while back wouldn't have been enough for his wand, let alone all his school books and uniforms, she thought. *So where did he get that quill?*

The problem was, however, that regardless of their varying states of self-control, both younger and present day Hermiones had an all-consuming, irrepressible urge to know.

"What kind of quill is that?" Hermione asked, trying to sound more inquisitive than judgmental. "Your class quill was a plain brown one. I've never seen you use that one before."

Tom scratched away at a scrap of parchment. "Oh, Scrivenshaft's Deluxe Dictation Quill, I think," he said. "You wouldn't have seen me use it, because it's new."

"Where did you get from? First years aren't allowed out of the castle to shop in the village," Hermione pointed out.

He gave her a thin smile. "Do you really want an answer? I'm not sure you want to know, because it'll just upset you."

"Tom," Hermione sighed, setting down her own quill. "You have to be careful! Even if you borrow things and plan to put them back, you still can't tell what's had an Anti-Theft Jinx put on it."

"I didn't 'borrow' it," Tom said with a swish of the purple quill. "I traded for it from Avery. I did his Charms and History homework for a week, and he gave me the quill to dictate it in his handwriting. It's shocking, really—not only is he talentless, but on top of that he's also lazy and stupid. It's a
wonder how families like his have got so much money if it's this easy to talk them into giving it away."

Hermione gaped at him. "You did his homework? You cheated for him!"

"If you're going to throw around the word 'cheating'," Tom spoke in a confident voice, "it's Avery who cheated. I just enabled him. And if we're going to keep pointing fingers, it's Avery who's the victim here. He's the one cheating himself out of an education, when he gets to his N.E.W.T.s and realises he can't answer a single question. Imagine his face when he gets his results letter and it comes with a full set of Trolls and Dreadfuls." Tom's eyelids drooped in what appeared to be a pleasant daydream; his mouth twisted into a hungry leer. "Imagine his father's face, oho!"

Hermione was never aware more than now how, for all their similarities—their enthusiasm toward anything academic, the strength of their convictions, their persistence toward achieving their goals—Tom was different in other, irrevocable ways.

She believed in academic integrity. She thought it was morally repugnant to cheat, or to allow others to cheat off their work. If someone wanted better marks in class, they ought to put in the time to study, study more if they weren't doing enough of it, or ask for help from a classmate or teacher. To Tom, however, her explanation for why he shouldn't help others cheat wouldn't prevent him from continuing to do so, if doing so continued to be profitable for him. Persuading him using words like "integrity" or "morals" would just cause him to laugh and flaunt his newly acquired goods even more, to prove to her and anyone else who believed the saying "Cheaters never prosper" that cheaters could indeed prosper.

(It suddenly made her realise where he must have gotten that set of History of Magic study guides for the First Year final exams. He'd given them to her on her birthday; she'd been happy with them, because they were useful, and an excellent gift from someone who knew her well—or heard her complaining about Professor Binns' unengaging lesson structure—and quite a thoughtful one at that.)

It would never work if she told Tom, quite plainly, "Don't do this".

Tom bore an utter disregard for those who tried to demonstrate their authority over him. Most adults fell into this category, and there were several arguments these adults commonly used which failed to sway him in the least; anyone who relied on them lost his respect entirely.

From their past correspondence, Hermione had figured out that Tom considered an argument over if the opposing side tried to dissuade him from action by using any of the following rebuttals:

1. *It's wrong.*
2. *I don't like it.*
3. *Because I said so.*

And honestly, Hermione found answers like that to be unsatisfying too; ever since she was a child, she'd known that things were more complex than, "*That's just the way things are*". It was what drove her to seek answers in books rather than from the mouths of her nursery school teachers. Despite that, most of the adults in her life she'd encountered she considered reasonable and of sound judgment, and therefore worthy of her respect.

*But if they were so reasonable,* Tom had once argued, *they would be giving reasons instead of excuses.*
She couldn't demand Tom not cheat for Avery because it was wrong. (Or, as Tom would say, because she thought it was wrong.) Tom wouldn't listen unless her reasoning was sound and substantial. (And, as Tom would remind her, he didn't listen to other people because they were stupid, but he would make allowances for her, as long as she wasn't stupid either.)

Hermione was torn by two conflicting forces: her conscience versus Tom Riddle.

And as much as she didn't like to do it, she could compromise.

Hermione frowned, marking a page in her textbook before she closed it and set it aside. "Imagine your face when Avery goes to his father and says that it's your fault he got that set of Trolls and Dreadfuls."

Tom tilted his head. A lock of his wavy black hair fell over his eyes, escaped from the neatly combed side part he'd worn from the first time she'd seen him, almost three years ago. The roguish look didn't suit the cold smile he wore on his face. "How is Avery's laziness my fault? He takes the exams, he earns the mark."

"Your logic won't matter to them," said Hermione. "Avery will blame you, and his father would rather believe that Riddle the Upstart Orphan tricked his son than accept the fact that his son isn't... erm, academically gifted. He'd have a history of homework marks graded with Acceptables to show for it, that you'd have provided for him." Hermione lowered her voice, continuing with, "People like him have influence here—they're just like the Eton 'old boys' from back home, where his father went to school with everyone else's fathers. He could go to the Board of Governors and complain, and you know they'd allow him to re-take his exams when people like us would have to get on our knees and petition for weeks even if we were dying of Dragon Pox."

By the time she'd finished, she was quite pink the face from the passion with which she had spoken. Injustice and unfairness were social ills that had always upset her, especially if she was one directly affected. She had seen Old Boys' clubs first hand—her father had his Alumnus Society—and she had witnessed their condescension toward her mother when serving them drinks after dinner parties.

Her mother! Hermione's Mum was just as clever and politically informed as they were. In fact, Mum had marched with the suffragettes for her own right to vote when Hermione was only a baby.

And as diligent as always, Hermione had researched the wizarding qualification exams so she'd be prepared in time for her O.W.L.s and her N.E.W.T.s. During that research, she'd uncovered the existence of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, a group of twelve wizards and witches whose power, when directed by a unanimous vision, equalled the Headmaster's. They were the group responsible for ensuring that all Hogwarts students' fees were paid in full by the Ministry of Magic, regardless of their blood status.

(Hermione's parents would have paid £200 a year for her Donwell Preparatory school fees, and if Hogwarts was priced similarly, that would amount to at least forty to fifty galleons per student, per annum. If Wizarding wages were on par with the Muggle world median, working families with two or more children, "acceptable" blood status or not, would have bankrupted themselves to afford schooling, let alone buy the uniforms and textbooks.)

Tom's smile slipped a bit, but didn't disappear entirely. His eyes glinted, feral and dark. "I don't intend to die of anything, Dragon Pox or otherwise. On top of that, I also don't intend on doing Avery's homework up to our N.E.W.T.s. If he wants my help again, he'll have to offer more than last time. I imagine that by the time he's traded away something he can't afford to lose, it'd make for
the perfect opportunity to introduce him to the concept of 'mutually assured destruction'. Incriminating me will only get him into deeper trouble; I expect by then, I'll have a quill pen that writes in his handwriting and a copy of his family's letter seal.

"I don't like the idea of 'assured destruction'," said Hermione apprehensively. "Your own or anyone else. You shouldn't be putting yourself at risk at all. Tom, this is your future! You have to be careful, you have more to lose than him! Even if Avery fails his N.E.W.T.s the second go around, he'll be fine when his father finds him a place breeding mail owls on the family estate. But if people even get the slightest whiff that you did something wrong, you'll be in trouble, and no one will jump up to help you."

"Then the solution to that is to ensure that no one ever thinks I'm anything but a Good Boy," said Tom. "Good job that I've had years and years of practice doing just that." He inclined his head and blinked innocently at her, his black eyelashes casting shadows over his cheekbones under the warm light of the library lamps. It contrasted with his pale complexion; Hermione noticed that his skin was smooth and unmarked by the pox or measles scars that afflicted many other people from his side of London. "You don't think I'm a bad person, do you?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed. This was one of things she'd had to get used to. Tom's armoury of facial expressions, which she never saw in his letters, gave interactions with him a disconcerting amount of depth and secondary meaning.

"I think you're someone who is easily tempted into making bad decisions," said Hermione. "You're not a bad person, Tom. You're just greedy."

"Am I?" asked Tom. "What is 'greedy' but another name for 'ambitious'?"

"Greed is greed and ambition is ambition," Hermione stated in a firm voice. "I don't see why calling it something else would change what it is. A rose by any other name is still a rose."

"Giving it another name confuses the scent-blind," said Tom. "A rose smells like a rose, and greed smells like greed, but the unobservant—that's most people—wouldn't notice if I gave them mutton and called it lamb, as long as I served them with a smile. Except you, I suppose." Tom's cheek twitched in the barest flicker of a grimace, before it smoothed over. "And perhaps Dumbledore as well. I'm still not happy that he knows about me."

"You haven't done anything wrong," Hermione assured him. "You can't be in trouble for anything. And he hasn't acted any differently in class. He gives you as many as House points as he does me."

They were the two top points earners for their Year; whichever one of them earned the most varied by the week. Hermione was always the first to have her hand in the air when the professors asked questions during lessons, able to recite passages not only from the textbooks, but their optional supplementary readings too. Tom, slower with his hand and often allowing other students to have a turn, gave the most insightful answers which linked textbook theory to practical applications for everyday use. He was also praised by their teachers for his thoughtful questions, such as asking how their simple Levitation Charm differed in terms of casting strength and magical intent to the more advanced Modified Hovering Charm used in broomstick enchantments.

Tom shook his head, scowling. "Haven't you seen the way he looks at me? I've started sitting at the back because of the way he stares, right in the eyes, like he's waiting to catch me doing something wrong. I'm not even doing anything, taking notes or turning handkerchiefs into envelopes, and I can feel him watching. It makes my scalp itch."
"I don't think Professor Dumbledore is one to do anything inappropriate with a student," Hermione said. "Everyone in Ravenclaw says he's one of the best, if not the best, teacher in the school, even though his favourites are usually always Gryffindors. But it's not unusual, as I hear Professor Slughorn likes Slytherins the best. Everyone knows he's brilliant—he apprenticed for his Mastery in Alchemy straight out of school, and I heard his Alchemy Master was Flamel! He has at least three Masteries, you know; he's qualified to teach Defense on top of Transfiguration, and if he's got Alchemy under his belt, he must be at an advanced level at least in Potions, I can't imagine he wouldn't be—"

Hermione had to stop herself from gushing over Professor Dumbledore's academic accomplishments. If Tom was interested in the details, it was because it was useful to know, but he would never admire them the same way she did. If Tom saw Dumbledore's Medal of Magical Merit in the Hogwarts Trophy Room, it wouldn't be to appreciate the man's record-breaking N.E.W.T.s scores, but to salivate over the day where he had one for himself, engraved with his own name.

"He's not said anything to you, has he?"

"No, nothing," said Tom. "I'm still waiting for him to decide to teach me more about my abilities, but it will be years from now, if he even decides to do it at all. And until then, I'll have to practice with it on my own."

"You're going to experiment by yourself? Tom, that's dangerous! You don't know what you're doing—"

"I do know what I'm doing; I've been doing it for years." Tom lifted his chin, looking down at her from half-lidded eyes, his posture relaxed. But his eyes were hard and searching, as if gauging her reaction. "I'm used to learning things by myself. If it weren't for practical lessons like Potions or Herbology or in-class wandwork—and maintaining appearances, of course—I'd skive most of them and spend all day in the library."

Hermione pursed her lips. "You know why they don't allow us to use our wands during the summer, even when I'd rather be able to do revision outside of school. It's not so much because of the Statute of Secrecy, though that's part of it. It's because we're children, Tom. If we make a mistake in class, the professors have a Mediwitch on call in the Hospital Wing, if they can't put us to rights themselves after someone sets their desk on fire or turns a box of matches into a box of exploding splinters. Experimental magic without supervision is seriously dangerous!"

Her hands clasped themselves together on the table, knuckles bloodless and white, nails digging crescents into the skin of her palms. "Even in the Muggle world, scientific experimenting is dangerous and meant to be supervised. My father, when he was in school, said he studied anatomy from dead bodies, and before that, he used pigs and sheep from the abattoir. No one does anything to themselves, or by themselves, if they can help it. It's not 1650 anymore, when there was only a choice between your own body or robbing a graveyard for one."

Tom fell silent, his gaze lingering on Hermione's pale face, at the scattering of summer freckles over her nose and cheeks standing out in sharp relief. "I'm not alone, am I?" he mused. "If what you're suggesting is that we—"

"I'm not suggesting anything," Hermione interrupted, because she didn't want to hear Tom's side of the argument. The things he said often upset and unsettled her, even if they weren't intended to, and it made him evasive at times when he knew that he would meet her disapproval. "You think too
often in terms of extremes: sink or swim, fight or fly, action or inaction. You give yourself ultimatums when you don't have to."

"And you'd offer me other choices," said Tom thoughtfully.

"I'm simply suggesting that it's better to be well-informed than to jump in headfirst," she replied. "Because sometimes it's not about arguing that anarchy is better than autocracy, but considering other legitimate options too: democracy, monarchy, theocracy, or plutocracy. I may not like all of them, but, well, I can't just pretend they don't exist, and neither can you. And it's better to know than to realise that you've, erm, purged all your senators and have no one left to collect your taxes or run a country."

An argument platform that hinged on the notion that "purging the senators" was bad because murder was bad wouldn't engender as much discussion as "senators can be useful". She disliked that she had to speak like this, to act like this, to do this to herself, to her integrity and her conscience. It felt like she was losing her grip on herself bit by bit, the longer she remained in Tom's company.

"I'm not losing myself," she thought. I was always Hermione, and I still am, and the central tenet of being Hermione is how she defines herself as one who is kind and treasures her friends. There is no distinction between a Real or a False Hermione; I'm not the one who thinks in ultimatums and absolutes. What I'm doing is out of kindness—the only kindness that Tom accepts willingly instead of treating with scorn.

She had to do this if she wanted Tom to listen to her. It was better for her to be Tom's conscience because she was uncertain whether or not he had one of his own. It was better for Tom to listen to her than to wander off in his pursuit of ambition and fall off a cliff of his own making.

(It was better to be his shepherd than his sheep.)

"I've often wondered," spoke Tom in a soft, almost pleasant voice, meeting Hermione's eyes over their shared table, "why other people ever bothered with such trite and insipid nonsense as friendship. Ever since I was small, I've never cared for the company of other people, nor have I ever felt lonely. I've never cared to join the schoolyard scrum or keep anyone's wickets; validation through teamwork has never presented me with an ounce of appeal."

"What are you—"

"I knew you recognised how different we were to other people, the first time we met. You and I were formed from the same clay. Not an exact replica—as if anyone could hope to replicate me—but closer than anyone I've met since," continued Tom on his unexpected tangent, not letting Hermione get a word in edgewise. "I've never wanted to use the word 'friends' for what we are to each other—I've never liked the way other people used it for all their shallow acquaintances; it sounds so disingenuous, as if it were lacking... dimension, a level of substance that we share and they don't.

"But I do think that we were meant to be, if not friends, then foils," Tom declared, with a triumphant flash of white canine tooth in the barest flicker of a smile. "You were meant to be my foil. It's a much better word, isn't it?"

"It's a little bit farfetched," Hermione confessed.

She had never put stock in the notion that she was Destined for Greatness, or Meant to Be for
anyone or anything. That was nonsense, and it implied that people didn't truly possess free will, and therefore weren't accountable for their decisions. If there was greatness in her future, then it would only be won through hard work and the right choices; to believe otherwise was immensely egotistical. Although, now that she thought about it, egotistical would not be an inaccurate description for Tom Riddle.

(But she could see how Tom had come to the conclusion that he was Meant For Better Things. If she was a student whose brilliance the Hogwarts teachers saw once in a decade, Tom was the once per century prodigy. Professor Dumbledore's own brilliance had been acknowledged when he'd published original research in Transfiguration Today as a Seventh Year student.

Tom, she decided, without a single doubt, could do that too.)

"And overly... theatrical," she added, giving Tom an unimpressed look. "I suppose it might fit for people like Laertes and Prince Hamlet—or it might not, considering that they both died in the end instead of talking about their problems like sensible adults. But labels of this sort don't apply to real life. Real people are more complex than that."

"I wouldn't know," Tom said. "You're the only other real person I know."

Hermione had to force herself not to gape at him. Sometimes she wondered if it was better when Tom was evasive around her instead of sincere. He was much less shocking that way. "I'd prefer if you listened to me not because I'm 'real', but because the things I say have merit."

"Why does it matter, as long as I listen?" asked Tom. "You've made some valid arguments. Isn't that what you wanted me to say?"

"I wanted you to agree not to experiment on your own."

"Then help me, join me, stay and observe. I won't be on my own if you're with me."

Hermione's heart hammered in her chest. He wants my help. He didn't ask—he'd never ask for help, not even if he needed it. But... What was this but a compromise?

"I can help you research. And I can buy books through owl order if we have to, if they don't care that they're selling to underage students," Hermione said. "But I won't agree to help with anything that goes against my personal principles. No sneaking into the Restricted Section. No keeping watch while you sneak in. No using students as test subjects unless you have their permission. And definitely no dead bodies."

"As if dead bodies are that easy to find," Tom snorted. "The streets of London are paved in them compared to Hogwarts. But fine. I agree to your terms."

"There's one last thing."

"What is it?"

"If something goes wrong, I'm going to Professor Dumbledore for help. And you won't hold a grudge for an entire month because I chose Dumbledore over serious permanent damage."

"Alright," said Tom, somewhat reluctantly. "But only if something goes wrong that I can't fix on my own. Only if it wouldn't risk either of us being expelled; I'm not going back to London unless I have
to. And you won't report me to any other teachers or prefects because you don't like what I'm doing. If you don't like it, then you can leave."

*If I report Tom, Avery will no longer be the target of 'mutually assured destruction'. I'd go down with his ship if I ever tried to sink it, "friendship" or not. His Hogwarts attendance is the opportunity he's never been given before, and will never get again. To take it away from him... would be to destroy every virtue I've seen in him the last few years.*

The voice in the back of her mind whispered to her, "You know what it means to him if you choose this."

*I know,* thought Hermione fiercely. *It means I am his friend.*

"Agreed," she said after a moment of contemplation. "But if you're doing something I don't like, I'll tell you, and you'll justify why it's necessary instead of showing me straight to the door."

"Agreed," said Tom, taking down each of their concessions on a spare sheet of parchment. "By the way, Hermione..."

"Yes?"

"You still haven't returned *Schleiden's Apotheker.*"

Hermione sighed. "I've finished it, but it's in my room. I'll bring it down to dinner tonight."

Tom shot her a very pleased smile. "Isn't it so much better when we get along?"

"We'd get along more if you weren't so stubborn," Hermione said, sniffing. "And *Schleiden's Apotheker* isn't even that good. It's the most archaic Potions manual I've ever seen; half the terms are old-fashioned Alchemists' jargon. Lead sugars, lime oil, and wine salts—I've never seen any of those ingredients in the textbook or our class instructions."

"Just because it's not in the textbook doesn't mean you can't make a usable potion with it," Tom remarked.

"If it was right, then they would have put it in the textbook!"

The rest of the afternoon was split between finishing up homework assignments and arguing with Tom about the school textbooks being incomplete. It turned out that one could, if they wanted to, successfully brew most of the common household potions in a solid gold cauldron. However, it necessitated recalculating the ingredient ratios, simmer times, and the amount of stirring, as gold cauldrons were by volume smaller than the standard school pewter.

They didn't put this in the textbook, because very few people owned gold cauldrons, and those that did tended to be professional potioneers who could complete their own calculations and didn't need to follow recipes from a schoolbook. (On top of that, professional potioneers didn't waste their gold cauldrons on simple headache remedies or wart cures that school students practised with. No, they brewed in gold for rare draughts like Liquid Luck or Grochowska's Condensed Helianthus Essence.)

Tom was triumphant; Hermione was less so. She was a bit put off by having an incomplete textbook. She was also the slightest bit annoyed because apparently this was assumed knowledge to wizards and witches born in the magical world. She'd assumed that the Hogwarts authorities put
pewter cauldrons (standard size two) on the school shopping list because they were the best and the safest, not because they were the most economical.

"If they're the safest, why does some imbecile explode their cauldron at least once per lesson?" asked Tom. "You'd have seen it with your own eyes; you have Potions with the Hufflepuffs, and I have them with Gryffindors, but it's the same thing. A single porcupine quill on high heat and they're gone. The two thickest Houses at Hogwarts—now you know why they don't take Potions together."

"You know what," said Hermione with an irritated huff, disapproving of Tom's high-handed arrogance. "Since you're so clever, I think I'll keep Schleiden's Apotheker for another week."

Chapter End Notes

Hermione's PoV is slow-paced in comparison to Tom's, but I need to give her a reason for why she puts up with him.

Also we gotta establish that Tom lives in his own cuckoo world.
Tom's first term at Hogwarts flew by in a cascade of perfect O's.

He was used to getting perfect marks and being better than everyone else, so this came as no surprise to him. But for the first time in his life, his peers—he used the word loosely, to refer to people who were his equal in age and nothing else—respected him for his magic and intellect. They admired him, unlike the children of Wool's whose respect was founded on fear, and tainted by an intrinsic distrust of anyone who spoke the King's English and remembered to wash their hands every time they used the loo.

He learned that even though the other students had magic just like he did, and access to the same teachers and schoolbooks and lessons, to him the theory was intuitive, and the spells came easily. He was a wizard, but he was still Special.

He never used that word, Special, in public. Just as he never used the word Hermione or Friend in the same sentence at the House tables, in the classroom, in the corridors, or anywhere outside the closed drapes of his dormitory four-poster. To the public persona he presented of Tom Riddle the Humble Orphan, and to the rest of the First Year cohort, she was Granger the Topiary Wonder and resident Ravenclaw swot, a fellow classmate, class rival, but nothing more than that.

But in private—

Behind the closed doors of abandoned classrooms, hidden in a warren of corridors in the Hogwarts dungeons, Tom saw Hermione beyond what everyone else saw, those who were blinded by the mound of fluffy hair with too much tooth and the perpetually waving hand.

"Did you check the trap on the second floor?" Tom asked, opening his book satchel and sliding out a small shortbread tin with holes punched through the lid. He pulled the lid off and tipped out the tin's contents.

One scrawny brown rat with whiskers missing on the left side, motionless and stiff after being struck by a double helping of Petrificus Totalus.

Hermione had her own box out of her bookbag, a pasteboard jellybean box wrapped in a shiny layer of Spellotape. Inside was another brown rat, in better condition than Tom's, also bound with a Petrificus.

"I got one," Hermione said, kneeling down on the flagstoned floor of the empty classroom, the ends of her robes dragging on a thick grey layer of dust and old powdered chalk. Her wand lay in her lap. "Mr. Pringle almost caught me when I went to check. He started to notice that I kept loitering around the broom cupboard by the Charms corridor." She looked down at the rat, which appeared dead; the spell restricted movement, but permitted shallow breathing. Her cheeks were ever so slightly pink. "I think he thought I was keeping watch for older students. They say that specific cupboard is often used for—for—"
"Indecent proposals?" Tom remarked, setting out his parchment, quills, and wand, his expression unperturbed. "You don't have to dither about it; I already know where babies come from. I also know where babies go when a gentleman decides he prefers the indecent but not the proposal. I'm told my father was one of them."

Hermione flushed darker. "Oh, I'm sorry, Tom—"

"It's alright," said Tom, shrugging. "He may have been a cad, but if he gave me my magic, then I suppose he's exonerated. I'd rather be a wizard than not have existed at all."

"Perhaps if he had magic," Hermione put forward hesitantly, "he had your talent, too. Professor Dumbledore did tell you it was sometimes hereditary. Maybe that's how he... um, won over your mother."

"Maybe," said Tom, his eyes darkening in silent outrage. "But what a pathetic waste of talent. A rare skill in the hands of an adult wizard could have him hobnobbing with the cream of London, but instead of doing anything useful, he went off chasing skirts downmarket." He shook his head, the darkness clearing away from his expression, although his shoulders remained stiff and his spine rigid. "I don't want to talk about him anymore. For all I know, he's long dead. I've never met him, and if I ever do, I want to be better at magic than he is. Let's get back to work."

"Alright," Hermione agreed, not wanting to spend any more time discussing Tom's parentage, or rather, his lack of one. "Finite!"

In many aspects, Hermione was refreshingly blunt, especially when the topic involved subjects she viewed from an academic perspective. However, drawing reference to her comfortable standard of living and her well-to-do family, and now, apparently, broom cupboards, made her timid and self-conscious. Tom found her sudden bashfulness amusing, but not surprising—Hermione was several months his senior, and was older than almost everyone in their year.

(He'd long resolved that when his time came to undergo that mysterious phase of adolescence, or as he put it, *pupate*, he would never be as awkward as that. If there was any way one could go through that process gracefully, then Tom assured himself he would find it. He'd never got chicken pox, after all, and he'd been told that all children had it at one point in their lives. Specialness *had to count for something.*)

"Finite!"

The frozen rats shivered and twitched, their pink, hairless tails thrashing over the dusty stone floor.

"Hello, there," said Hermione, watching her rat crawl around on the floor for a minute or two, before it began heading for her bag. She reached inside and pulled out a bread roll wrapped in a handkerchief. "Our control rat is good to go."

Tom nudged his own rat with the tip of his yew wand. "Mine is a bit slow. I double-spelled it just in case it wore off in my bag. It seems to have worked."

When the rats had woken up, he and Hermione set the empty classroom up as an obstacle course.

They set the bread on the empty lectern, or hid it in a drawer of the teacher's desk, or in the musty storage cupboard in the back of the classroom. Hermione and Tom lowered the rats they had been
levitating, and let them sniff around the food.

Hermione's rat, which Tom had named "One", but Hermione had re-named "Sienna", relied on its nose to scent out the hidden bread. Tom's rat, which he called "Two", but now went by the name "Peanut", hesitated at Tom's feet.

For most of his life, Tom had been good with animals. Tom's definition of "good" meant that he could ensure small animals remained quiet, docile, and defecated only in places he approved of, rather than the romanticised Man's Best Friend angle that everyone else seemed to adore. Mice never nested in the back of his wardrobe and left stains on his socks. Mrs. Thornton's one-eyed moggy left him alone when he stole plums from over the fence.

Billy's prized pet rabbit came to his hand quietly when he called for it, its little heart thumping in its chest beneath the layer of velvet-soft fur and delicate ribcage. And quietly it went back to its nest of torn linens and ragged tea towels under Billy's bed, with not a peep until it passed, whereupon Billy filled the glazed brick halls of Wool's with his cries.

(Tom still reminisced about that day. No one knew he'd done it; it was considered one of the Great Mysteries of Wool's, like the Disappearance of Jamie Fitzroy, one of the original orphans who was presumed to have died in 1897, and the Strange Racket in the Attic. Tom would have liked to claim credit, but in the end, he'd spread the rumour that Billy had done it himself, and after that, none of the girls would sit next to him at supper or talk to him at school.

It was worth it not to have taken credit in the end—Tom had found it pretty hilarious to see Billy Stubbs be treated as the orphanage outcast, not to mention Mrs. Cole giving him the evil eye for an entire fortnight.)

Tom stared down at the rat.

Rats didn't think the same way as humans. How could they? They were vermin, short-lived and instinctual, even the ones exposed to magic for generations—a result of being raised by wizards as pets or potion ingredients, or from living in wizarding homes. They were simple-minded creatures, driven by simple things. Hunger and thirst, mates and territory, danger and survival.

As good as Tom was with animals, he didn't make it a habit to keep them as pets. They were unclean, the orphanage didn't approve of keeping animals, and most important of all, making them do as he wanted required him to think as they thought, for all the thinking they were capable of. It wasn't as if they could speak English or understand verbal orders. A dog might, and maybe a monkey or a parrot or a wizard-raised mail owl, but they only had access to rats.

That was because Hermione had put her foot down at Tom's suggestion of "borrowing" cats from their classmates. Pet cats were allowed to wander the Common Rooms of all houses, leaving hair on the sofas. The male cats wiped their... secretions on the furniture and on dormitory beds if anyone forgot to close their doors at night or when they left for classes. (Lestrange had done that the other week, and Tom punished him by covering his pillow with cat hair and furballs. No one knew who did it, but after that incident, everyone in the dorm learned not to leave the door open.)

Tom hadn't thought using cats would be much of a loss; Hermione had very loudly disagreed.

Empathy for human beings was a demanding task to Tom. Empathy for animals... well, strenuous was a very mild way to describe it.
But hardship wasn't something that could intimidate Tom.

_Hunger and thirst_, he could remember those from his earlier days at Wool's, when he'd been sent to his room without dinner for his cheek. Back then, he didn't care about speaking unless spoken to, and he had wanted to prove he was cleverer than this minders. He'd made comment on Miss Gloria Caruther's beau and his wandering hands tangled on Thelma Roscoe's apron strings, by the tradesman's gate last Tuesday—

_Urgency_, he could remember too, along with darkness. The boiler room in the basement, a place that little boys dared each other to explore during rainy Saturday afternoons. It had contained a dirty cast-iron box boiler, coal-fired and coated in a fine, clinging dust that stained his hands and clothes black and fell into his eyes when he banged on the door—

The rat shuddered, and its beady eyes met Tom's. Its whiskers quivered, then drooped, and the light in its eyes glazed over.

The rat jinked left and right, wobbling along in a drunken zigzag, as if it couldn't decide which direction to go. As if two conflicting instincts were competing within its simple little mind. Tom clenched his teeth, a headache forming behind the sockets of his eyeballs, his eyelids twitching in concentration.

The rat went for the teacher's desk. The second drawer from the top, on the right side. It didn't have the strength to pull open the handle, so it gripped the top surface of the desk with its forepaws, and used its back legs to wedge its toes into the opening. Once it had pushed the drawer open past a crack, it dove in headfirst, and both he and Hermione could hear the scratching sounds from within.

"Two minutes and thirty-seven seconds! Good job, Peanut!" announced Hermione, glancing down at a Muggle stopwatch in her left hand, then across to Tom who had dropped into one of the student benches that littered the empty classroom. "And you too, Tom."

Tom grunted in response.

Empathy was exhausting. Why on Earth would people want to feel it all the time?

By the time the Christmas holidays had rolled around, Tom had Peanut fairly well-trained.

Or, to be more accurate, Peanut Three.

Peanut One and Two had both died during a series of rather violent seizures, and Hermione speculated that they'd suffered an aneurysm, after Tom had overloaded their danger reflex response. Hermione had been upset at him, but she wasn't one to talk. She'd already lost her first Sienna, who had gnawed out of its box while they were in class, and couldn't be found anywhere in Ravenclaw Tower. After she'd cried a bit, Tom had reminded her that it would have died anyway, as Mr. Pringle the caretaker hadn't set his rat traps to collect furry little pets.
The loss of the Peanuts hadn't left Tom unscathed. After the death of Peanut One, he'd had a massive headache that lasted for three days, and after that he took a much lighter hand to training. No more trying to override their simple instincts by pure magic and force of will—he got better results and stopped losing his time investments after he tried a basic training regimen that rewarded obedience with food and positive mental stimulus.

It was an almost Muggle way of doing it, to his annoyance.

When Hermione returned to London for the Christmas holidays, Tom remained at Hogwarts with Peanut.

Christmas at Hogwarts was the highlight of his school experience, by far. He had no classes, so he could spend all day in the library without having to fight with older students for the best studying nooks. The dormitory was empty apart from him, so he could study in bed past midnight without hearing one of his dorm mates complain about trying to sleep with the lights on. The dinner tables produced all sorts of seasonal treats that he hadn't seen before—iced gingerbread houses, creamy spiced eggnog, and pineapple jelly with vanilla ice cream. That wasn't even counting the glory that was the Christmas Feast, during which Tom had felt like an emperor at a banquet. The tables had been laden with two dozen roasted fowl: goose, duck, pheasant, turkey, stuffed and dressed in their own feathers. The small number of students and staff who'd stayed hadn't even eaten half of them.

Tom thought it was very excessive and disgustingly wasteful, but if wizards could multiply food, then perhaps grand banquets were more of a show of magical prowess than a tasteless boast of financial superiority as Muggle dinner party hosts would have done. As Hogwarts was the centre of magical learning in Britain, it was only fair that they put on a good show.

After Christmas, Tom and Peanut explored the deserted corridors of the castle, looking for secret rooms and hidden passages. Tom held Peanut in his gloved hand as he paced down each side of the corridors, and Peanut would squeak when detecting mysterious draughts or strange smells. So far, they'd found three alcoves hidden behind tapestries, a number of abandoned classrooms, an empty storage cupboard, a room full of floral-scented soap in great vats, and a secret shortcut that connected the Fourth Floor to the Great Hall without having to cross half a dozen moving staircases.

Before she'd left for the train, Hermione had given Tom the gloves, along with a woollen hat and scarf set in Slytherin colours as a Christmas present. They were traditional gifts given by parents in the days and weeks after Sorting, which Tom and Hermione had found out when all their yearmates had received them via owl post. Tom's dorm mates had had their green-and-silver scarves the evening of their Sorting, as most of them had already known they'd end up in Slytherin. Even though no one needed a scarf on the second day of September, they still made a show of flaunting them in front of him in the first few days, as proof of their House pride and family tradition, both of which Riddle the No-Name Orphan clearly lacked.

(Tom had written a Third Year student's History of Magic essay with his handy Dictation Quill in exchange for sneaking out several vials of Shrinking Solution from their Potions lesson. He'd then shrunk Lestrange's and Rosier's scarves over the following weeks, so when the weather was finally cold enough to use them, they'd lost a good three feet in length, and couldn't be fixed with a simple Finite. The Common Room had a good laugh at that; even the Prefects thought it was a clever trick.)

Tom was bundled up in his toasty new scarf when he turned a corner on the Fourth Floor and encountered Professor Dumbledore, not far from the entrance to the Hospital Wing.
"Good afternoon, Tom," said Dumbledore amiably, his hands in the pockets of a fluffy orange robe, embroidered with metallic copper thread in the shapes of oak branches, leaves, and acorns.

"Good afternoon, Professor," Tom replied, stuffing Peanut into the pocket of his own robe.

"I do not believe rats are on Hogwarts' list of approved pets," Dumbledore remarked with a gentle smile. His eyes, however, were not as kind and gentle. They were astute, and they were fixed on Tom's pocket.

"Well, sir," said Tom, returning Dumbledore's smile with one of his own, "the Hogwarts Student Relief Fund didn't have enough to afford an owl or a cat as a pet, and if it did, I don't think I'd have wasted it on a toad. It's quiet in the castle during the holidays, and I suppose I have to enjoy company where I can find it. Beggars can't be choosers, and all that."

"Ah, indeed," said Dumbledore, his eyes lighting up with a genuine sort of fondness. "Well said, Tom. Would you like to join me for tea?"

"I'd actually planned to get some homework done," Tom said, even though he'd finished all his essays by the second day of break.

"I'll write you a note giving you an exemption from the pet approval list," Dumbledore offered.

"I was going to ask Professor Slughorn when he comes back after holidays," Tom said. Then he added, "He is my Head of House, sir."

"And I am the Deputy Headmaster," said Dumbledore. "It's best to take care of these things as soon as possible, while they are fresh on our minds."

How could this man seem so genial while pulling a power play over a twelve year old? Did he even realise he was pulling rank over a child, or did he act in this infuriatingly patronising way with everyone? Was his entire modus operandi based on being underestimated, a powerful genius hidden under the guise of a harmless eccentric? Be a respected Professor, while on the other hand act as a friend to all students and a kind ear to be trusted with their juiciest secrets?

It was a clever strategy, much like Tom's Good Boy persona, but every time Tom held open a door for a gossiping harpy, allowed someone to ruffle his hair, or handed away the last slice of chocolate cake on the dessert platter, something inside him died.

"Of course, sir," Tom said, and he would have ground his teeth if Dumbledore wasn't standing right in front of him. "To your office, then?"

"Yes, to the First Floor we go," said Dumbledore, leading the way down the moving staircases, Tom jogging along to keep up with his long strides. "Quite a distance to travel, but I've always noticed that the castle provides an alternative path when one is in desperate need of it. A few years ago, my N.E.W.T. students were practising with self-transfiguration, and one young lady, in the process of transforming herself into an osprey, went with the inchmeal visualisation method. It's a thorough method, and allows one to copy the finest details of the original object, but it's very slow, especially for beginners, and the girl began her transformation from the bottom up.

"She was so slow with her self-transfiguration that her fully transformed osprey legs couldn't support the weight of her human torso. And so she ended up shattering the bones in her legs, and we had to rush her up to the Hospital Wing so the Mediwitch could heal her before we changed her back. It
wasn't worth it to reverse the transfiguration and risk leaving bird bone fragments embedded in her flesh—they're hollow, and much harder to detect than solid human bones, you see. But luckily we had her sent to the Hospital Wing in time, thanks to the magic of the castle."

What a morbid tale to tell a First Year, thought Tom. It wasn't as if he hadn't heard cautionary tales before; every British child learned what happened to the little boys who cried wolf, sucked their thumbs, and ran with scissors before they were old enough to walk. It was just, well, rather alarming how blasé wizards were when it came to serious bodily mutilation. Especially mutilation that occurred in a student under the eyes of their professor.

Tom knew he was a wizard, not a Muggle, and on an intellectual level understood that most injuries could be healed with the right combination of spells and potions. But somehow he couldn't help but acknowledge that Hermione had a point, magic could be dangerous in the hands of the inexperienced and untrained.

Or, Tom thought to himself, to those whose visualisation was unfocused and whose willpower was weak.

"Professor, why didn't she turn herself into an osprey in one go?" asked Tom. "If she had enough skill and focus to copy fine details, then she could have expanded her focus on changing her whole body, with less emphasis on exact detail. It's the same technique on different scales, isn't it? The same way levitating a feather is not much different from levitating a desk. Then she would have avoided breaking her own legs."

"The technique for partial self-transfiguration is slightly different from a full transfiguration," explained Dumbledore. "Animal self-transfigurations alter the thinking process of the caster, so many inexperienced wizards lose concentration right before completing the spell, when their transformation begins to affect their mental faculties. An experienced wizard may perform multiple, rapid partial transfigurations to replicate the effect of a full self-transfiguration, which in most cases is considered a safer alternative, even if the multi-stage approach is not quite as efficient. It is rare for a wizard or witch to have the broad and comprehensive mental focus to perform a full-body self-tranfiguration in one go; the ones that can do it often become Animagi, which grants the benefit of an animal body, while retaining the human's mental acuity."

By this time, they'd reached the Transfiguration teacher's office. Dumbledore drew his hands out of his pockets and tapped the doorknob with one long finger, and Tom heard a click of tumblers sliding within the locking mechanism. Inwardly, he marvelled at Dumbledore's use of non-verbal, wandless magic. This was a door protected from a textbook Alohomora. In fact, it looked more like an enchantment found in the locks of premium expanding trunks.

Dumbledore's office was circular in shape, situated at the base of one of Hogwarts' many towers. Shelves lined the walls, containing row after row of intricate magical gadgets: spinning tops, armillary spheres, animated globes, chronometers, metronomes, and barometers. The bookcase behind Dumbledore's desk contained a collection of ancient-looking tomes with weathered spines in a wide assortment of exotic leathers, and even a few scrolls and clay tablets.

A tall, diamond-paned window at the back of the room overlooked a snowy courtyard, and by the window was a golden stand upon which rested a large bird with red feathers that faded to a warm, buttery gold in its long tail and crest. The bird was asleep, its head buried in its chest.

A phoenix, one of the rarer magical species, Tom observed. I wonder if it means something that Dumbledore has a phoenix and my wand contains a core of phoenix feather. Do we have shared
magical affinities? Are we to be equals in power some day? There are few magical creatures as powerful as phoenixes, although their magic tends to be concentrated toward their abilities in healing and longevity.

"Please, have a seat, Tom," said Dumbledore, settling himself behind his desk. He gestured to a well-worn armchair arranged in front of the desk, upholstered in a soft blue velvet patterned with moving clouds. "How do you take your tea?"

Tom sat down, adjusting his robes so he didn't squash Peanut. "With lemon if I'm being served the good stuff. If I'm not, then with cream and sugar. I've never been partial to the aftertaste of fermented dirt."

"You are young to have such discriminating tastes," Dumbledore remarked. He drew his wand out of his sleeve and tapped it against the table. A silver tray appeared on his desk, containing a tea service of Hogwarts' standard set of bone china, white with gold rims and the school crest in relief on the sides of the cups, sugar bowl, tea pot, and creamer. With a wave of his wand, the tea pot leaped up and began pouring over a levitating tea strainer.

Tom noticed that he hadn't spoken an incantation, nor had he used the standard "swish and flick" motion taught in Charms class. It was proof that one didn't need words and wand-waving—or even wands—to perform magic. Of course, he had known this before he'd come to Hogwarts, but he'd thought it was an ability limited to those who were Special, and of those, Tom was the Most Special. For all that he disliked admitting it, even in the privacy of his own thoughts, perhaps Dumbledore had a smidgen of Specialness in him as well.

Only for some reason, he hid his Specialness, as if he enjoyed being one starling in a flock of a thousand others. Tom couldn't imagine why.

"I don't see any use in pretending I like the taste of boiled dirt," said Tom. "It only serves to encourage people who buy cheap tea to keep buying it. And well, sir, I can't say I like the idea of reinforcing negative behaviours." He accepted the cup of tea that floated to his side of the desk, closely followed by a hovering saucer of lemon slices. "I found a book in the library on the care and handling of nifflers, and it seemed like solid, practical advice."

"But you forget, Tom, that nifflers are not people," said Dumbledore, as he dumped spoonful after spoonful of sugar into his teacup. "Practices for one kind do not necessarily transfer to others."

"Are they, sir?" Tom asked. "I read that the Ministry of Magic defines centaurs as 'not people'. They even have a Beast Control department assigned to take care of them. I haven't taken Care of Magical Creatures yet, but it seems somewhat presumptuous to decide who counts as a person, and who doesn't. But then again, I'm only an outsider who learned about the magical world a few months ago, so what do I know?"

It was easy for him to slip in the rôle of the wide-eyed, open-minded young schoolboy, a humble scholar so very eager to siphon wisdom from the mouth of the master. Professor Slughorn, out of all his professors, loved his performances the most, although the man had no idea that it was just that, a performance. Hermione, who debated him in words and letters, called this side of him her Devil's Advocate.

Dumbledore's piercing eyes looked at him from over the rim of his teacup. "You're a clever boy, Tom. I'm sure you can discern for yourself what makes a person a person and what doesn't."
Well, there it was. Dumbledore was quite patently not like Professor Slughorn. Sluggy was a weak-willed pushover, for all his talent in potionering and networking. But Dumbledore only pretended to be weak and useless, and certainly wouldn't consent to being addressed as "Dumbles".

At least, not by someone like Tom.

Tom found that he couldn't decide whether or not he should respect Dumbledore for having a backbone.

"I'm a supporter of self-determination, sir," Tom replied, keeping the muscles of his face from twitching, from showing any hint of dishonesty. Hermione relied on raw fact to win her arguments. Tom had always had a way to put his opinions in the best light, to make his side of an argument sound so reasonable that people forgot they were only his opinions. "It's up to the individual to decide what they want to be—what name they want others to call them. But if someone willingly allows themselves to be led into doing things, whether it's buying or boycotting cheap tea... Well, as they say, actions speak louder than words."

"Indeed they do," Dumbledore said placidly, setting his cup down and leaning back in his armchair. "It is our choices that define who we are, more than words or ability, inborn or otherwise." He folded his hands across his stomach. "How has school been for you, Tom?"

"Good," said Tom. "Sir, you're my professor. Shouldn't you know my academic standings from marking our term exams?"

"Beyond exams and marks, how are you settling into Hogwarts?"

"Well enough," said Tom. "I like the castle and I like learning about magic. I like it more than the orphanage, though that's not hard to beat. Living in the Hogwarts broomstick shed would be superior to being locked up with a bunch of Muggles for three months." On impulse, Tom decided to ask something he'd been contemplating from the first week of September. "Sir, I don't suppose I could stay at Hogwarts during the summer? It's just that I'd rather not stay at the orphanage if it could be helped."

Dumbledore shook his head gravely. "I'm sorry, but it wouldn't be possible. The staff return to their own homes during the summer, and the only adult member of staff who stays year-round is the caretaker. It's not nearly enough supervision. There is, after all, a good reason behind Hogwarts' prefect system."

"I suppose it was too much to hope for," Tom said dispassionately, but on the inside, he'd felt like Dumbledore had just slapped him across the face. It was a rare day that Tom experienced the sting of barefaced rejection. Tom could argue, cajole, flatter, or threaten to get himself placed in most people's good graces, but it would never work with Dumbledore. Dumbledore was too perceptive. Too principled. Like Hermione, but she was twelve years old and the only person she knew who was as persuasive as Tom... was Tom. Tom guessed that Dumbledore had met other people over the decades who could do what Tom did, and it had made him resistant to things like clever words and superficial charm. Hermione was starting to develop that same resistance, much to his annoyance.

"It's very strange, sir," spoke Tom in a soft, conversational tone, "that the Ministry of Magic would fund school and board for each student, and the Hogwarts Relief Fund pays for robes and books, but no one cares for the student himself. In a way, it reminds me of the orphanage. There's the same kind of... disengaged philanthropy, shall I call it, where a well-meaning individual can donate money, yet he will never learn the names of the orphans who benefit, nor will he grant a
disadvantaged child the blessing of a family.

"In this regard, Professor, I can see that despite calling ourselves Wizard and calling them Muggle, and drawing lines between our world and theirs, there's not much different between us, is there? In the end, we're all rather alike, aren't we?"

"You are correct, Tom," Dumbledore agreed. His eyes closed and then opened again, as if he was repressing a memory of great agony. But it passed, and his eyes cleared, returning to the normal shade of blue that pierced through the many constructed layers of Tom's identity. "We were all born human, imperfect; we suffer as much as we profit from the volatility of our human natures. I cannot change it, and I cannot change the specifics of your situation, for all that I wish I could. Unfortunately, there are responsibilities outside Britain that require my presence this summer, and I fear, the coming summers as well."

Tom would have made a comment on Dumbledore's recent lecture on the importance of choices over lip service, but he bit his tongue. The overarching moral was one of wisdom and making wise choices, and Tom was self-aware enough to recognise that it wouldn't be a wise choice to mouth off to his professor.

*It is our choices who define who we are, thought Tom. Not only to ourselves, but also to other people.*

"I wish you luck on your travels," said Tom, in as bland a voice as he could muster. "If that's all you wanted to discuss, do you suppose you could write me that note of authorisation for my pet?"

"Of course, of course. Before I forget!" Dumbledore reached into his desk and took out a sheet of parchment, printed with the Hogwarts crest on the top centre. He began to write out the note in violet ink, excusing Tom for breaking the rules on approved pets. Tom noticed that he wrote in a very clean hand, obviously well-practised with a quill, although he had a few idiosyncratic touches in the form of drawing out his capital letters with long, flamboyant curlicues.

He also had multiple middle names, which he took obvious pleasure in writing out, as slowly as he could.

Tom wanted to snatch the paper out of his hands.

Dumbledore set the quill back in his ink pot, glancing up from the parchment, which he'd rolled up into a scroll and sealed with a daub of wax. "Here you are, Tom. And another matter before I forget—I trust that you have been keeping up with your meditation practice?"

"I try, sir," Tom said, tucking the scroll up his sleeve. "But the only place I can do it is in my dormitory, and it gets noisy sometimes what with my dorm mates snoring all night."

"Have you tried a Silencing Charm? The incantation is 'Silencio.'"

"I have, sir. But it only lasts for a quarter of an hour at most before it wears off."

"You should focus your spell on the drapes next time, rather than straight up in the air or in the direction of your classmates," said Dumbledore. "Close your curtains, and conclude the wand motion with the final downwards flick while touching the tip of your wand to the curtain. Cast the spell with the visualisation of the curtains being a solid, discrete barrier that sound cannot pass through. Focus more on defining the shape and boundaries of the spell rather than the effect you
want to achieve—although you mustn't disregard it. Cast correctly, you should get at least an hour before it wears off. Or even longer, once you get better at holding a twofold visualisation."

"Thank you, sir," said Tom. "May I ask how that works?"

Dumbledore gave him a serene smile. "It is an advanced topic that you will learn once you take the Magical Theory class in your N.E.W.T. years. Suffice it to say, it is the difference between using my wand to cast *Lumos*, and turning on my lamp." He raised his finger and tapped the red glass shade of his desk lamp, which began to shed a soft golden light across the surface of his desk.

"Oh," Tom breathed. "It has to do with enchantments. Interesting. Well, I shan't occupy any more of your time, Professor. May I be excused?"

"You may," said Dumbledore. "Don't hesitate to drop in for tea another day, Tom. If there is anything I like as much as I do warm woollen socks, it's tea and excellent conversation."

"I can't make any promises, sir," Tom demurred. "But I suppose I can try."

Tom left Dumbledore's office with a profound sense of relief. He had a sneaking suspicion that it was the same kind of relief ladies felt when they removed their girdles after a long day. Not that he knew what that felt like, of course, but he could commiserate with the sensation of being squeezed into, *confined*, into a shape he did not naturally resemble, for no other reason but to conform to expectations set by Society and the annoyingly persistent Professor Dumbledore.

He was exhausted. It was the longest serious conversation he could recall having in the last few years with anyone besides Hermione.

How did other people do it? He didn't understand how his fellow Slytherins spent the hours from dinner till curfew lazing about in the Common Room, playing cards and Gobstones and defending their favourite Quidditch teams. How people *looked forward* to being invited to Slughorn's dinner parties, where they had to listen to an obese old fogey ramble about his holiday spent in a chalet owned by another obese fogey. They said Slughorn served wine and whiskey to the Sixth and Seventh Years, but to Tom, enduring the Professor's presence for the sake of the drinks was nothing more than exchanging one unpleasant vice for another.

(It was like sitting through the sermon just to drink the Communion wine, a very Muggle analogy that Tom would be embarrassed to have thought of, if it hadn't been so apt.)

He walked back to the Slytherin dorms and flopped onto his bed, letting Peanut out of his pocket. After staring at the top of the canopy for a good ten minutes, Tom whipped his wand out of his sleeve and pointed it at the drapes.

**Incantation**, the spoken component. *Silencio.* It wasn't strictly necessary, but Tom hadn't got up to the level of nonverbal casting yet. Privately, he thought that while an expert could cast a spell without a word, a true master could cast a Stunner by shouting "*Urgleburgle!*"

**Visualisation**, the mental component. Shaping his magic into the form he wanted it to take in the physical realm. The pinnacle of this skill was advanced Transfiguration and Conjuration, the art of creating something out of nothing. Or to be more precise, matter out of energy.

**Gesticulation**, the physical component. Directing the magic and anchoring it to a subject using his wand as a focus. The permanence and stability of the spell were determined by how well he
combined intent, effect, and subject. Magical Portraits and the Slytherin Common Room entrance barrier were examples of near-perfect implementation, the magic in them functioning even after hundreds of years.

"Silencio!"

The Silencing Charm was a minimum Fourth Year spell, and tested in the Charms O.W.L. It took him six tries before he got the hang of combining the different spell elements as described by Dumbledore.

It seemed the old man was good for something, at least.

By the time Tom had to head back out for dinner, he had marshalled his thoughts with the help of some peaceful meditation. He still didn't like Professor Busybody—and was unsure if he ever would; it was as alien a notion as being friends with Mrs. Cole. However, on the scale of Useful to Worthless, Dumbledore had proven to have some value. (Dumbledore’s pet phoenix was also valuable. Everything from its tears to its feathers to the ashes of its rebirth was worth tens of galleons in the potions market.)

It was to Tom's convenience that he didn't have to spend the entirety of dinner avoiding eye contact with Dumbledore, a harder task than usual during the holidays, as the remaining staff and students dined at a single table instead of being separated by a High Table and the four House tables.

An owl had swooped down and laid a heavy wrapped box by Tom's plate. Owl delivery wasn't common outside the breakfast rush, but this was a special occasion.

Dear Tom,

Happy twelfth birthday!

It was surprising how quickly I began to miss Hogwarts once I'd gotten off the train. I can't count how many times I reached for my wand and remembered I wasn't allowed to use magic outside school. Reading in bed with an electric light feels so strange now.

Seeing Mum and Dad again is wonderful, of course, but somehow, the house feels empty. I think I've gotten too used to sharing my dormitory with six other girls, and sitting for each meal at a table shared with a hundred other people in my House. It's like I'm missing something important, but I know what you'd say—most things in London can't compare to Hogwarts. Our Christmas cards lack moving illustrations, our tinsel doesn't glitter like it does on the charmed trees in the Great Hall, and it's hard not to ignore the absence of snow that you're probably getting by the bucket up in Scotland...

Chapter End Notes

Because Dumbledore needs a reason for why he is the only person Voldemort ever
feared. He is more sympathetic and less negligent to Tom compared to canon thanks to the AU orphanage introduction, but in the end Albus cares more about the Bigger Picture than a random twelve year old kid.

Friendship and magic were my favourite parts of the HP series, so they get a focus in this story. Tom is said to be a magical prodigy, but his magic skills hardly get any focus outside of creating horcruxes. I'm quite tempted to timeskip a few years, but there needs to be some space for character development.
1939

The rest of the school year passed without much fanfare.

Tom was invited to Dumbledore's office for tea three more times, but managed to get out of it once by volunteering to tutor Lestrange in Potions. Slughorn was delighted; Tom was not. But it was better to spend an hour or two deciphering Lestrange's atrocious handwriting than spend that same time listening to Dumbledore sneakily present philosophical dilemmas as an attempt at friendly conversation.

Tom could smell a test of character a league away.

Mrs. Cole had mentioned psychological examinations in the first few years Tom discovered he had magic. He'd read as much as he could on the subject, to ascertain if there was indeed anything wrong with him, and once he'd found no mention of his strange abilities, had decided that the best thing to do was to make certain other people didn't think he was abnormal. But Tom had learned his lesson: those who applied arbitrary tests of character to others made it very clear what kind of character they had.

His First Year ended with good marks all around. Much to the tears and resentment of their wizard-raised classmates, Tom and Hermione both got straight O's and took the first and second spots in every single subject. (Except for Flying Class, but since it wasn't marked and examined like the rest of their classes, it didn't count.) Tom surpassed Hermione in practical wandwork, which gave him an advantage in Defense Against the Dark Arts and Transfiguration. Hermione was better at memorising huge chunks of their textbooks, which won her the top spots in Astronomy and History. In Herbology, Charms, and Potions they were equal, but Tom didn't care so much about the marks—he'd rather ensure that he learned everything he considered useful about the subject, not what the teachers thought was useful.

His First Year success was also marked by having pranked his dorm mates into submission. Apart from the scarf shrinking incident, he'd also shrunk the left shoe of every pair belonging to Lestrange and Travers. It was less than half a centimetre's change, but for people who bought their shoes bespoke and handmade, it was enough that they could feel something odd, but small enough that they, being unobservant clods, couldn't tell that anything was wrong at a casual glance.

Over the period of a few months (and after several re-shrinkings after new pairs of shoes were delivered by owl) the boys had developed a strange, limping gait to compensate for their squashed toes, and later, painful ingrown toenails. Tom got a leg up in Defense class, thrashing them handily as he knew to aim to the left. He'd convinced them that their shoe problem was all in their heads—it wasn't as if the shoes could be the issue, could it? Hadn't they ordered from the same coddwainer who'd been serving their family for the last century? If these shoes were good enough for their grandparents, why were they being whiny babies about it?

Tom had read an editorial in the London newspaper a while ago that said long term use of poorly fitting shoes could lead to spinal injuries and chronic back pain. If Lestrange and Travers proved that
they deserved punishment, then Tom had the next few years to see if the newspaper was right. It was a little bloodthirsty, but Tom had never been tender-hearted in nature; the notion of granting mercy for first infractions hadn't once crossed his mind. And as it was meant as a punishment, they only got what they deserved. He didn't take an eye for an eye, of course—he wasn't *that* barbaric.

Napoleon, the last great European emperor, wasn't famous for his martial conquests or a strong dynasty of worthy heirs. In fact, from the perspective of an Englishman, it was his defeats that were not only noteworthy, but celebrated. No, the man's true legacy lay in the Napoleonic Code, modern laws that had overturned the existing old-fashioned feudal system. Napoleon had altered the status quo to his own design, beheading the aristocracy and taking half of Europe along for the journey. Tom admired it, and dreamt of replicating such feats within the microcosm of the Slytherin boys' dormitory.

(To his displeasure, "The Tom Riddle Code" sounded a bit silly in his head, and even sillier written down in the margins of his diary, but anything was better than "Schoolmaster Tom's Big Book of Life Lessons". He supposed that naming things after yourself only worked if your name was grand and powerful, like Napoleon or Hammurabi or Justinian. Would anyone cower in the presence of the Grand Sorcerer of the British Wizarding Empire, Tom the Great?)

The rest of the Slytherin boys seemed to have noticed how misfortune befell those who were rude to Tom, although they hadn't figured out what exactly he was doing, or how he was doing it. They just saw what appeared to be a series of unconnected accidents, like Quentin Travers knocked off the duelling platform and landing on his head, or Fourth Year Jasper Hastings' mother sending a Howler because he'd handed in fourteen inches on doing dirty deeds with the Sorting Hat, instead of the Charms essay he was supposed to have written.

(It was rumoured that Hastings had put the rips in the Sorting Hat to convenient use, and added something new to the collection of stains on its brim. Hastings ventured no details, but his reddening at the mention of their Charms teacher, Professor Winthrop, was taken as an admission of guilt. Thereafter, he was known as "Hatty Hastings" and nothing he said could remedy the situation.

It was much as he deserved for using slurs in public and ramming Tom into a balustrade on the way to dinner.)

By the end of the year, most of Slytherin House had reined back on their aggression; Tom was a House point earner favoured by Professor Slughorn, and it was in poor taste to sabotage Slytherin's chances at the House Cup for a petty grudge—most Slytherins could agree they hated all of Gryffindor House more than a single no-name orphan boy. In the case of the First Year cohort, most of them had become somewhat civilised. Only once they'd learned not to mention Tom's blood status in or out of his presence did he declare them thoroughly housebroken.

Having accomplished so much at Hogwarts, Tom was disappointed to return to Wool's for the summer.

"It's only for ten weeks," Hermione reassured him, while they packed away their school robes on the train.

To Tom, it felt like shedding the vestiges of the magical world, although the plain white uniform shirts and trousers (or knee-length wool skirts for Hermione) didn't look too different to Muggle clothes, once one doffed the distinctive drapey robes. Of the few differences Tom noticed was the fact that wizarding clothes fastened with laces, toggles, brooches, or temporary Sticking Charms for the lazy, and never with the newly fashionable zip fastenings. Buttons were made of horn or shell,
never plastic. The older girls painted on their lipstick with a brush and a pot of paint, not from a
twist-up tube as he'd seen from the minders at the Orphanage. And most people got their things
tailored to size with magic, so even those who couldn't afford dragonhide looked fairly decent.

"It's ten weeks without magic," said Tom. "You had trouble going back to living like a Muggle
during Christmas, and that was only two weeks. This is like a Roman citizen used to flushing toilets
and daily bathing moving to provincial Britain, then seeing people toss their waste into the street
from their windows. You can't help but see everyone around you as a barbarian."

"I wouldn't put it like that," Hermione said, undoing her blue necktie and putting it away. "We lived
like Muggles for most of our lives; nothing about going back will be unfamiliar to us. Not like it was
when we first learned about magic."

Tom scoffed. "For God's sake, Hermione, I'm going back to a place where they use lard as a
condiment. Where they believe a lard and onion sandwich counts as a good lunch. Muggle or not,
any place that does that qualifies for being Hell on Earth."

"That sounds a bit dramatic."

"You've seen where I live," said Tom. "Now go on, please tell me that I should be grateful for it."

"No," said Hermione firmly. Her hands clasped together in her lap, in a weak attempt to restrain
what Tom knew would be a passionate outburst. "I'll never say that to you. I might believe that half
your stories about that place are hyperbole—honestly, Tom, most of the time I can't tell when you're
joking or not. But I do believe that you deserve better. A loving home should be every child's
birthright, not just a privilege enjoyed by those who were lucky enough to be born with the right
name. And an orphanage, especially one like Wool's, will never be a home."

Tom regarded her with cold eyes. "You're right. It's not a home. It's a holding pen for Britain's
future labour force." On the opposite seat, Hermione fidgeted. "Your words were very pretty. Are
you going to do anything about them, or are they just that, words?"

Ever since his first teatime talk with Dumbledore, he'd become skeptical whenever he heard speeches
that involved other people deciding that his life would be better off if it had this or if he did that. It
was unfair of him to take it out on Hermione, but the Hogwarts Express' imminent arrival to King's
Cross was lowering his mood from anxious to bitterly spiteful. It was just so frustrating to go from
easy access to magic and books, two of his most favourite things in the world, to a world where he
had no access to either. To go from promising, talented Mr. Riddle... to Tom the friendless orphan.

It made him feel powerless. Insignificant. As if everything he'd earned and achieved in the last year
no longer mattered.

"I'll ask my Mum if we can meet at least once a week," Hermione said. "That way you can get out
of that place as often as you can. We can go to Diagon Alley, too—we can do magic there; with all
the adult wizards and witches walking about, they can never tell who's underage, as long as we don't
make a show.

"I think it's unfair that the other students who live in a magical home can practise spells over the
summer," she complained. "I asked my Head of House, and he said that magical homes have Floo
connections and qualified adults who can get an injured child to the hospital in an emergency.
Because I'm a witch, my parents are permitted to know about magic, visit magical areas, and use the
Floo system. But because they're also Muggles—the same for your caretakers—we're not allowed to
"You're one of the luckier ones," Tom remarked. "You'll turn seventeen at the beginning of Sixth Year, and if they let you register via owl post, you'll have most of your affairs taken care of when you go home for Christmas. You could have your Apparition license half a year before everyone else even begins the school lessons, if you wanted."

"You could do it too," said Hermione eagerly, kicking her heels against the train seat. "You're not that much younger than me, and since your birthday falls during the holidays, you could also take the test earlier, if you had a teacher accompany you to the Ministry office. Knowing you, they'd fall in line to offer, and buy you drinks afterwards."

Tom leaned back in his seat. "I wouldn't have the money to pay the examination fee, or pay an instructor for the private lessons. I'm afraid I'll have to wait for the school instructor just like everyone else."

"Oh." Hermione looked away. "Well, I'll think of something. We have years yet to come up with the money."

"Are you planning some sort of moneymaking venture?" asked Tom. He was intrigued; Hermione was more of a philanthropist than an entrepreneur. She could string together a good speech if she had time to draft and rehearse it—she lacked the charisma for spontaneous public speaking—but it took more than that to convince people to part with their money. The concept of a profit margin would drive her into a spiral of guilt, because it was not much different from cheating people out of their money, and cheating was \textit{wrong}!!!

"I was thinking..." Hermione began, chewing on her lip, "that if you wrote something for a periodical or an academic publication, they'd pay you if you got published. You're good now, and you'll be even better by Sixth Year, so I'm sure you can think of something to write. If you aim lower and go for something less prestigious, like the spell tips section for \textit{Witch Weekly} or \textit{Housewitch and Home}, the pay is just as good and they publish once per week rather than once a month. It's steady work as long as you don't mind adapting spells to churn butter or fluff up a meringue."

Tom lifted an eyebrow. They weren't bad ideas, and the nature of the work meant that he wouldn't even have to leave his dorm room to get them done. Nor would he have to meet anyone in person who would reject him out of hand because he was underage, a student, or Muggle raised, as long as his work was good enough. Obviously, it wouldn't do for people to know that Emperor Tom's earliest creation was an altered freezing spell for making the most refreshing lemon mint sorbet (\textit{perfect for summer entertaining!}), but a pseudonym would take care of that issue, as well as obscuring his age and lack of formal qualifications.

But because Tom was a cynic to the core, he said, "You're trying to convince me there are alternatives to writing other people's school essays for money, aren't you?"

Hermione flushed. "I don't want you getting in trouble! And I know you don't take pride in doing other people's homework. I'd much rather see you use your time and skill on original work, even if it's something trivial, like hair charms or airing carpets. For every piece you publish, hundreds of
people would see your name, and I can tell you care about that. It's got to be more satisfying than letting someone like Avery take credit for an essay you stuffed with spelling mistakes and poor grammar on purpose. Even if it's some housewife you'll never meet, respect for your skill is still respect."

"And money is money," Tom added. "I'll think about it. It's not as if I have anything better to do for the next ten weeks." Experimental spellwork, even if it was for minor, trifling applications, was far superior to hawking cigarettes on a street corner, or whatever kind of Muggle job the older orphans did for money during term holidays. (He quickly terminated that line of thinking before he began to speculate on what other kind of business the older girls got up to on street corners.)

Weighing up his options, he was quite certain wizarding work paid more, once he factored in the exchange rate.

"What about your summer homework?"

"I got most of it done before we left. I didn't see the sense in not getting as much time in the library as I could."

The train had begun to slow down upon entering the outskirts of Greater London. It was easy to spot the divide between the countryside and the City—the grass faded into swaths of concrete and bitumen, the sky filled with the grey smog of industry, and the horizon disappeared from view, replaced by slate tiling and row after row of pebbledash terrace houses. It lacked colour, vibrancy, and above all, magic.

Hermione's mother was waiting by the platform gate, ready to drive her home in their family motorcar. Tom, however, had no one to anticipate his arrival; he'd expected to take the trolleybus back to South London by himself, and he'd saved his shillings and pence for the fare, instead of converting his Muggle money to galleons as Hermione had done during her first visit to Gringotts. The trolleybus was how he'd arrived to King's Cross back in September.

She waved to Mrs. Granger, then looked back at him, brow furrowed in thought, almost tripping over her trunk.

"Tom," she said, leaning in so that she would be heard over the din of reuniting families, screeching children, and the whistle of the Express' steam boiler. "I'm going to talk my parents into getting an owl, so we can write to each other this summer. I'll tell them it's faster and cheaper than the Royal Mail's service to Scotland, especially with parcel post. If you need anything, or if you want me to come get you, send a note through the owl."

"You should keep mail to the morning or evening like they do at Hogwarts," Tom replied. "I wouldn't want the Muggles to notice there's an owl sitting by my window in broad daylight."

"Alright, unless it's an emergency," said Hermione. "It's less than thirty miles from our house to Wool's as the crow flies, so you can expect a reply on the same day. And if they give you lard sandwiches, write me and I'll send you something from our supper."

"As long as it's not soup," said Tom. "I wouldn't mind a good steak or a pork chop. Don't forget the mustard and currant jelly, though; I don't like my steak dry."

"Oh, Tom," said Hermione, rolling her eyes and laughing. "I'm going to miss you."
And before he could do anything about it, she'd reached over and pulled him into an embrace. For an instant, Tom was overwhelmed with sensations. He felt the warm curve of her cheek press against his own, and the brush of her hair on his neck, not itchy and frizzy as he'd expected based on its appearance, but soft and somehow... organic, pleasantly scented with freesia and orange blossom. Her fingers grazed his shoulder blades, followed by the bony point of her elbows grazing his ribs, a gentle pressure of her arms folding around him, and then a moment later—an eternity later—the arms were unfolding, and the weight was gone, the warmth withdrawn, and Tom was left standing on the crowded Platform staring blankly over Hermione's shoulder, feeling as if he'd lost something before he'd even known what to call it.

What was that?

"Goodbye, Tom!"

"Goodbye," he heard himself repeating.

On the trolley back to Wool's, he came to the conclusion that she'd given him a hug. He wasn't sure what to make of it.

Over the course of his life, he had never found the touch of other people to be pleasant. It was meant to be avoided when possible, and endured when it wasn't. He never asked for it. He never expected it. He never wanted it. Physical touches came in the form of pinches to his cheek, boxing over the ears, shoves on the shoulder, kicks to the shin, and swats on the buttocks and hands. Nothing about it was comforting, caring, or God forbid, loving.

But... that.

Hermione hadn't ever done that before. It wasn't as if they hadn't touched each other before: he could recall instances where her fingers had brushed against his when she passed him a book or a roll of parchment, or the nudge of a knee under the shared bench in Defense, and the quiet tap of a knuckle on his shoulder when he'd lost track of time in a solitary corner of the library.

This, however, was a first.

For the first time in his life, he had been embraced by someone because they'd wanted to, not out of pity or deceit. It was nothing like the old grannies who cooed over his pale skin and straight teeth and pressed his face into a mass of saggy bosoms, assaulting his senses with the smell of talcum powder and dried violets. They'd prodded at him and looked him over the same way they did with vegetables at the market, sighing to each other that for all his sweet manners and pretty looks, he was just another mouth to feed.

Hermione Granger had embraced him because she liked him, and what's more, he hadn't made any indication to show that he hadn't wanted it in return; he had, however tacitly, allowed it, and it hadn't been awful. It was, perhaps, if he was being generous about it, the opposite of awful, although calling it pleasant was overselling it. It wasn't that good.

But—

He didn't mind it.

He minded that he didn't mind it.
What was going on? What was wrong with him?

*Was there anything wrong with him?*

He tried to imagine Amy Benson hugging him and was repulsed by the idea before Imaginary Amy had even got within arm's reach of Imaginary Tom. The thought of her sliding into the seat next to his in the orphanage dining hall made him wince; the thought of her touching his books, especially his Hogwarts spellbooks, made him angry. Anything more than that was utterly incomprehensible. Next, he tried to imagine Mrs. Cole in Amy's place, and he almost gagged.

*Good.*

Nothing out of the usual. He had better not be going mad.

*Because,* he reminded himself, *I'm not mad. I'm a wizard.*

In the end, he found his mind plenty occupied during the ten tedious weeks without magic.

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Tom's first summer as a wizard wasn't as bad as he'd expected it to be.

He wrote to Hermione every other day with the new owl her mother had bought, a plain tawny owl she'd named "Gilles". Tom thought it a pretentious name, but seeing as every other one of his Slytherin Housemates named their pet owls Athena, Hercules, or Sultan, pretentious naming must be an established practice among wizarding traditionalists. And it wasn't like he could declare himself the Ministry appointed Officiate of Pet Naming, as his own pet was a rat named Peanut. Peanut Three, if he was to be accurate about it.

Tom had let Peanut out to fend for itself during the summer. He would be inconvenienced but not overly upset if the rat got itself eaten or caught in a trap. Tom had no use for a pet that couldn't take care of its own basic needs; if an animal needed constant maintenance and attention from its owner to survive, then as far as he was concerned, it didn't deserve to live. Rats were common and replaceable. He still had that note from Dumbledore, so if Peanut never showed up in his room before August 30, then Tom would go to Hogwarts and catch himself another one.

It was good that Peanut was out of his room most of the day, because Gilles liked to rest on Tom's windowsill in between letter deliveries. The owl had claimed the spot as his own by butchering a few pigeons on it, splattering blood over the glass windowpanes. It was after a quick application of Tom's animal training magic that Gilles soon took his meals elsewhere, as it put Tom off his own meals when Gilles was choking out a furry lump of an owl pellet two feet away.

And his meals were worth enjoying—Mrs. Granger was a decent cook, and whilst he found her Beef Wellington a tad overdone compared to the Hogwarts gold standard, she hit the mark with her puddings and tarts. It was a shame to discover that jam sauces and ice cream sent by owl post didn't travel well.
Dear Tom,

Mum says the food is cheaper and higher quality at the wizarding grocer, particularly the meats and out-of-season fruits, which seem to be in season year round. She's started shopping more at the Diagon market than with our local greengrocer, although we still take our regular milk delivery. She says she finds magical sweets bizarre, and she doesn't know what the dragon liver at the butcher's is meant for. Do wizards eat it? Or make potions from it?

Gringotts' monopoly on currency exchange aside, there must be other aspects where we, having a foot in each world, have an advantage over our purely wizard-raised classmates. For example, we enjoy a Hogwarts education funded by the Ministry of Magic; being British subjects by birth, we both had our primary educations funded by His Majesty's Government. But British citizenship comes with certain obligations, so it might not be so advantageous when we're older, now that I think about it—how would the taxes even work...

For most of the summer, he met Hermione twice a week at Diagon Alley. The Leaky Cauldron on Charing Cross Road was less than two miles away from Wool's, close enough that he could walk there and back without needing fare for the trolley, as he didn't have a heavy school trunk to lug around. Now that he had a wand of his own to open the brick gateway, he visited as often as he could, either alone or with Hermione.

It was frustrating how the magical window displays beckoned him to enter the shops and try out the wares when he couldn't afford a thing. Until his Second Year book list arrived with the pouch of coins from the Hogwarts Relief Fund, he refrained from spending his money. He did, however, sell and exchange his First Year textbooks for the Second Year basics, while browsing the offerings for the Third Year electives. Introductory Numerology caught his interest, but Social Customs of the Common British Muggle was as ghastly as its title implied.

Once he'd gotten his book list in the first week of August, Tom was invited to lunch and shopping in the Alley with Hermione and Mrs. Granger.

He accepted. A free lunch was a free lunch.

He'd been determined to hate Mrs. Helen Granger from the very first time he had seen her. There was something about her that had seemed unreal, artificial against the Victorian grimness of the orphanage. It must have been the roller-set curls of her hair, the elegant arch of her eyebrows, the click of her heeled shoes on institutional tile. Her aura of affluence had shown him his first glimpse, at the age of eight years old, of the unattainable; it was then that he had truly understood the meaning of the phrase 'class consciousness'.

He wasn't sure he hated her as much as he had four years ago—the list of things he hated had evolved over the years to encompass the abstract rather than individual people.

It was how Mrs. Granger looked in the shop windows in the same way he looked at them, a familiar mixture of hunger and wonder in the gleam of her eyes and the stiff carriage of spine and shoulder. She marvelled at the convenience of simple charms: self-stirring ladles and knitting needles and self-lacing boots, commonplace objects to the people around her but which she'd never seen before.
Mrs. Granger caught him eyeing the boots. "Charmed waterproof, self-lacing, shined with Peckling's Permanent Polish," she read from the card in the display case, glancing at Tom. "It seems as if magic can solve every problem, doesn't it?"

"Not every problem has a magical solution, but I believe that one can create anything with magic," said Tom, and his eyes darted down to his scuffed Muggle-made boots. "It's only a matter of knowledge and imagination."

"Would you like those shoes, Tom?"

"Are you offering, Mrs. Granger?"

They entered the shop and she asked to see the boots from the window. The shop clerk hovered around him, showing him the variety of leathers and finishes as an alternative to plain polished black, offering him the extra sets of laces they had in stock (*Ten different colours! One for every season!*) and trying to take his address down for their owl order catalogue.

Tom sat on the stool and let the clerk fuss about with the sizing charms.

"I've often regretted the day I brought Hermione to Wool's Orphanage," Mrs. Granger said in a guarded voice, looking him over with a clinical gaze. His face was washed, his hair was combed into place and parted down the side, and he was dressed neatly, so he assumed he was being assessed for more than just aesthetics. "But for all my misgivings, you are the only real friend she's ever had."

Tom's eyes narrowed. "I beg your pardon? Are these shoes meant as a parting gift? A *Thank you, goodbye, and don't come back* gesture?"

"Don't be facetious, Tom. It doesn't suit you," Mrs. Granger snapped. "I don't dislike you as a person. Your academic standings are impeccable and you make for tolerable company when you aren't trying to be glib. No, what I dislike is my darling Hermione, the only child I'll ever have, spending every day of her Christmas holidays wishing she'd rather be somewhere else than at home with her family. Now she spends every day of her summer holidays waiting by the window for the owl. And what I dislike most of all is that it will only get worse from here."

"I think," said Tom in a low, cold voice that the clerk wouldn't overhear, "that if you're upset your daughter is a witch, you ought to do it in other places than in the middle of Diagon Alley."

"It doesn't matter to me if she's a witch or a lion tamer," she retorted. "She was a witch from the day she was born—but she was my daughter too. I can already tell that when she finishes school, she'll never want to look back. And the one friend she has will never care to show her that there are some things without magic worth having."

"Nothing in the Muggle world—" he spoke the words with distaste, using *Muggle* like some people used *Yankee,"—has shown me it was ever worth a moment of my time. Hermione might have been worth it, but she's not a Muggle, is she? She never was, and never will be. If it bothers you that her plans for her own future don't involve you, perhaps she'd be better off leaving. I may not be an expert in family dynamics, but I do know estrangements happen all the time. In a few years from now, when you're in need of an excuse for your church ladies, just tell them Hermione went off and married a Catholic. They won't even question it."
Mrs. Granger looked away briefly, before steeling herself. "If you think it's as trivial as—"

"Madam?" said the clerk, interrupting them. "I have your purchase boxed up. Would you like the boar brush and shoe horn? It's seven sickles for both."

Mrs. Granger turned to Tom, eyebrow arched. "Tom?"

"Yes, please," Tom said politely, resuming his regular Good Boy performance.

"And the extra bootlaces, young sir? You can match it to your House colours!"

"No, thank you," said Tom.

"He's in Slytherin," said Mrs. Granger, ignoring Tom. "Can you make the box fit into his pocket?"

"Of course, Madam," the clerk assured her, selecting a set of dark green laces with silver aglets from a rack by the counter. He chattered as he worked, wrapping up the extra bits and bobs and fitting them inside the shoebox. "The ones in this colour are always in, and they go with every style of shoe. Can't say the same for the Hufflepuff ones—we can never move them like the rest. I told the boss we should've gone with the black laces and the gold trim, but he wanted it the other way 'round; he was a Badger in his day, and he said to me—"

The bell over the door rang. The clerk's head jerked up.

Lestrange—Tom couldn't remember if his given name was Edward or Edwin, not that it mattered, as they weren't on first name basis—stood in the doorway, not looking as well as he had when Tom had last seen him on the Express platform several weeks ago. His face was pale, his lips chapped, and his black hair lay limp over his brow where it had been dampened by sweat. Most interesting of all was that he walked with the aid of a cane.

"I'm to pick up a custom order," said Lestrange, scowling viciously at the clerk behind the counter. "Name's Lestrange, Edmond."

"Of course, Mr. Lestrange, it's just in the back," stammered the clerk. "I'll just be a moment," he whispered in Tom's direction.

"Riddle? What are you doing here?" asked Lestrange, his fingers curling around the handle of his walking stick like a claw. His beady eyes had lit onto Tom, who was putting his Muggle shoes back on after trying the shop's wares for size.

"Shopping for a racing broom, what does it look like?" Tom replied. He stood and looked Lestrange up and down, forcing away the pleased smirk that had almost slipped onto his face. "Were you attacked by a hippogriff on the way over?"

"I wish," said Lestrange. He leaned in. "Don't tell this to anyone, I swear, Riddle. I had to get half my toenails removed and regrown, and now one of my feet is smaller than the other. It hurts more than anything, but at least I won't have the cane on the first day back."

"I won't," said Tom, who was already thinking about how to best make use of this information. "Did they figure out what happened?"

"Nah," Lestrange shook his head. "They couldn't tell. The Mediwitch told Father I'd dropped
something heavy on my foot, but I'd have remembered it if I did. I told him the witch was lying, and Father wouldn't listen to me, would you believe it?"

"Well, I believe you, even if no one else will," said Tom. "If the Hospital Wing cuts you off for pain potions, I know a good recipe or two. I was top in Potions last year, so you'd need only get me the ingredients. It'll be our little secret, eh?"

Inwardly, Tom was amazed at how easily people were fooled into thinking he was harmless. For Lestrange, it only took a tutoring session or two, a few tips with homework assignments, and faking sympathy for his asinine medical conditions. It was also amazing how Lestrange's personality had undergone a total reversal. In a situation where he was separated from his Slytherin cronies and cousins, on bad terms with his father, and suffering from constant low-level pain, Lestrange was almost amicable.

Of course, it had only taken Tom a whole year and the gradual destruction of the boy's self-esteem.

The clerk brought Lestrange's order then, shrunk to a quarter of its original size. Lestrange pocketed it and bid a curt farewell to Tom. Before he turned to leave, his eyes lingered on Mrs. Granger, who was paying for Tom's purchases.

"A word of advice, Riddle? You should've said you were a half-blood from the start," he said, leering at Mrs. Granger's backside. "You wouldn't have got half as much ballyhoo if they'd known about that."

Mrs. Granger wore a dove grey calf-length coat of wizarding make—she must have been familiar with the Diagon shops if she knew about the parcel-shrinking service—over a long skirt and heeled shoes, which would have passed as a smart ensemble, if overly formal for daywear, in the Muggle world. In the wizarding world, she looked like a respectable witch with a taste for modern fashion. Tom had noticed from wandering around Diagon Alley that the modern working witch preferred the practical, closer-cut sleeves of a long coat over the more traditional floor-length witch's robe. And good materials and tailoring spoke for themselves.

"My surname is still 'Riddle'," said Tom, wondering if Lestrange remembered that Tom was an orphan. It wasn't as if he'd shouted it from the Astronomy Tower, but he knew in the first two days of Hogwarts, he had answered a few questions about his parentage, telling them that both his parents were dead. "That's the only thing that matters."

"I s'pose. But some people make exceptions for the right circumstances, if you know what I mean," Lestrange said, with a wink. Weren't Slytherins supposed to be subtle? Mentally, Tom retracted his statement about Lestrange qualifying as amicable. He was still an intolerable boor. "Right, see you in September."

After finishing with the shoe shop, Tom and Mrs. Granger met Hermione outside the uniform shop where Hermione had been fitted for a new set of school robes for the upcoming year.

They went to a fancy Muggle hotel on Hyde Park for lunch, one with a doorman in gloves and tailcoat, which reminded Tom of the night at the opera almost two years ago. Their table had a crisp white tablecloth and floral centrepiece, and was shown them by the maître d'. Tom had dined at a table with a tablecloth fewer than five times in his life (Hogwarts' Great Hall, for all its decadent feasts, was a communal refectory, not a restaurant), and he had never seen a maître d'hôtel.

He didn't mention anything about their earlier conversation as the courses were served. When Tom
caught Mrs. Granger's assessing gaze on him a few times, he pointedly did not comment on it. Instead, he spent the meal concurring with Hermione about how much they were looking forward to school, and debating if it was worth it to hire a room out at the Leaky Cauldron for the day just to practice magic from their Second Year schoolbooks.

Summer drew to a close, and everything seemed to be going well for Tom.

He had his new school books. He hadn't had to buy a wand, the single most expensive item on the supply list last year, so there was enough surplus to this year's Hogwarts Fund for him to replace his old uniform shirts and trousers, with a galleon or two left over to spend on second-hand books. The soggy fish and peas of orphanage meals were supplemented by daily food parcels from the Grangers. He'd grown two inches from when he'd last measured himself in December, and despite his lean, rangy appearance common with the other boys at Wool's, it was clear from a glance that he was much better fed and clothed than they were.

The Hogwarts Express was much better this time around, now that he and Hermione weren't quarrelling. After they'd locked the doors of their train compartment, they practised their First Year spells, and Tom was pleased to see that he remembered how to do everything from the previous year. It wasn't hard, as he'd snuck in as much magic practice as he could, loitering around Diagon all summer. Which Hermione hadn't done—when she'd tried to cast a Levitation Charm behind the stack of cauldrons by Wiseacre's, she was so nervous of being caught and warned that the book she'd been using floated half a foot before dropping to the ground.

Yes, thought Tom to himself, when he'd settled back into the Slytherin dorms, in the same bed closest to the watery green window he'd slept in last year. I'm back at Hogwarts once more, and it's just as magical as I remembered.

The other Slytherin boys left him alone while they unpacked, no one commenting on the state or quality of Tom's belongings. The background conversation soon turned to the events of the summer, and what everyone had got up to during the holiday.

Lestrange sent him a few meaningful looks, which Tom returned. Neither of them drew any attention to Lestrange's new shoes, of which the left was slightly smaller than the right.

"I heard Hatty Hastings was thrashed by his father the day he got back. Didn't show his face at a single gala the whole summer. What'd be the point anyway? I mean, now that everyone knows he'd rather marry a hat than the witch wearing it," said Avery rather callously, sorting out his socks from his pyjamas.

Rosier chimed in with, "Pater said they brought up Madam Hastings' Howler during the quarterly Wizengamot assembly. The woman has got some lungs to her, I can tell you. Not very surprising, though—didn't Hatty's great-aunt captain the Harpies back in ninety-eight? They were still second-rate to the Falcons back then, when they had Renwick as their Keeper..."

At that point, Tom closed and silenced his canopy curtains.

Tom spent the weekend reacquainting himself with the Hogwarts library. He got used to the feeling of carrying his wand in his pocket. His one-of-a-kind wizard's wand, not just a pointy, polished stick as it appeared to Muggle eyes. He liked knowing that he could draw it whenever he wanted, that it was ready at an instant to be used as a weapon and not just a threat. He sank into the ambience of living in the magical world, of talking portraits and clanking armour and the wistful melodies of Merfolk singing in the lake outside his window.
The warm glow of nostalgia converging onto reality lasted until Monday morning, whereupon Hermione cornered him after breakfast, waving a letter and the front page of a Muggle newspaper into his face.

**BRITAIN DECLARES WAR ON GERMANY!**

Chapter End Notes

According to Pottermore, owners of yew wands are said to be good at duelling and curses and can also be fierce protectors of others. Hmmm....

Some minor timeskipping happening here to move the story along. Ya boy is growin’ up.
Galleons

1939

Magic, to Hermione Granger, was love at first sight.

When Professor Dumbledore came to her house, he had given her family an introduction on the magical world. Although it had been informative, and he'd shown them his magic wand and performed a simple transfiguration in their sitting room, it was still a lecture. And so Hermione absorbed it with the same academic interest as she would have done for a lesson on Biology or Chemistry. It wasn't magical, not really. It was learning. While knowledge had a magic of its own, it wasn't magic.

Magic was the moment when the bricks had fallen away, in that alley behind the dingy pub on Charing Cross Road. Magic was seeing broomsticks fly and drawings move and tiny, wrinkly-faced men with gilt livery and golden axes.

It was multi-faceted, that magic of one's first impression. It was wonder, it was connection, and it was kinship. It was a whole world opened to her that she had never known existed, full of opportunities waiting for her to grasp. It was filled with people just like her.

But that love wasn't perfect and everlasting. It was honeymoon love.

Hermione would always remember fondly how her wand had chosen her and showered Garrick Ollivander's floor with leaves and flower petals, and how the clerk at the bookshop had shrunk and wrapped her three dozen magical books with a cheery wink and a wave of his wand.

But she would also remember how, in her second week of classes, her fellow Ravenclaws giggled to each other when a Hufflepuff in their Potions class blew up his cauldron and burned half the skin off his hands. He'd been crying as he was shunted off to the Hospital Wing, and the rest of the class had tittered and resumed their work as if nothing unusual had happened. And in the first half of her second term at Hogwarts, Jasper Hastings was publicly humiliated during breakfast, by his mother and his own Housemates. For weeks, no one spoke to him in the corridors unless it was to mock him; she could only guess that it was worse in his Common Room where there weren't any teachers to see and intervene.

(She didn't count the instances where she'd been called a know-it-all by students in other Houses. She was immunised to this from her years of Muggle primary school, and while it had stung at first, she didn't think it was a flaw to want to know everything. None of the other Ravenclaws in her dorm had disapproved of her constant need to study, and neither had Tom. Besides, if she was a know-it-all, then Tom Riddle was an unabashed teacher's pet.)

She knew she'd been raised in a sheltered environment, but this amount of... of casual disregard of fellow human beings was something she'd never witnessed before. When she'd asked her dorm mates about it, she was told her unease was due to cultural dissonance between the Wizarding and Muggle worlds. Wizards didn't make a fuss about physical injuries because they could be healed within a day. Wizards of the traditional stripe were pressured to marry well and marry early, and public displays of "deviant behaviour" diminished one's prospects for making an advantageous match. It was all well and good if Hastings had waited until he'd secured the line, so to speak, before
he indulged his tastes, but he hadn't and it had gotten out and that was that.

She had been enchanted. And she was now disenchanted.

Magic was still magic, of course. She would always love it, all its simple convenience and its grand potential; she couldn't see herself ever taking it for granted as witches and wizards did when they were born knowing what they were. But people, magical people, had lost their lustre for her. She had, unconsciously, held wizards to a higher standard, the same way she had expected families with wealth—like her own—to be generous to those less fortunate. But it turned out that wealth, just like magic, didn't make the people who had it any better, any different, than those who lacked it. She had given them the benefit of a doubt, but the evidence came out, and she couldn't ignore it.

Wizards just didn't care about the war.

At first, Hermione thought the lack of reaction was due to the old British custom of the stiff upper lip. There was no sense in hurting morale or scaring the youngest First Years by making a big fuss of it. But a week later, Hermione had gotten several letters and newspaper clippings from her mother, about city-wide curfews and blackout hours. And still, no one at Hogwarts seemed to be talking about it. When Hermione compared the *Evening Standard* to the *Daily Prophet* she found abandoned in the Ravenclaw Common Room, there was scarcely any mention in the wizarding papers.

Notice from the Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Transportation:

*Temporary interruption of service to International Portkey and Floo Terminals for the following cities...*

...To request an exchange or a refund, please send copies of your booked itinerary to the owling address below.

The Department hereby apologises for your inconvenience.

It was a list of several major cities in Central and Eastern Europe, and it was buried on Page 9, in between an article on obtrusive fireworks set off by spectators at the latest Kestrels versus Wasps Quidditch game, resulting in fines for any future occurrences, and a report on the renovation of a wing in St. Mungo's Hospital.

Hermione showed Tom the disparities between the Muggle and Wizard newspapers in the library one Saturday, while they were labelling diagrams for a Herbology assignment.

"It reminds me of French aristocrats," Hermione observed. "They sit in their towers and eat cake and throw masquerade balls, until one day the peasants are banging on their doors."

"That's why they invented moats, you know," said Tom, not looking up from an illustrated field guide of shrivelfig subspecies. "And if the average wizard can dodge a burning stake, then a guillotine won't be any more trouble."

Hermione did not point out that the ghost of Gryffindor Tower, a Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, seemed to have had trouble evading the guillotine. She knew that Tom would have said it was his
own fault, a result of his own incompetence. Because what kind of wizard allowed himself to be
arrested and disarmed by Muggles? Clearly a very inept one, and therefore if he died, it would be no
tragic loss to wizardkind.

She imagined that he'd be smug about the fact that the Slytherin ghost was rumoured to have taken
his own life. Tom would overlook the motivation behind the deed and jump straight to the fact that
his House's ghost had died by a wizard's hand. Since the Baron himself was the wizard in question,
and his death was by his own prerogative and no one else's, it was, all in all, a much more dignified
end than being offed by a Muggle.

Hermione thought Tom had a very unhealthy view of death and mortality, not to mention a severe
lack of sensitivity when it came to other people's feelings. She had brought it up once or twice in
their past letters, but Tom stated that they were his genuine beliefs and he saw no need to censor
them. He respected her opinions, so why could she not grant him the honour of respecting his? Did
she not respect him? Was she dismissing his beliefs just as Christian missionaries did in Papua,
Ceylon, and Tonga, because having been raised in brick houses—and not in communal lodges or
palm huts or orphanages—they inherently knew better than everyone else?

She hadn't known what to say to that, so she'd said nothing.

Tom, when he spoke to her through words on paper, was only convincing because he laid a
foundation on legitimate points. In person, however, in his most passionate and persuasive moments,
he didn't even need that veneer of legitimacy.

"I don't know why you're not worried about it," Hermione said, her quill scratching into the
parchment with more force than necessary. "They've handed out gas masks and evacuated half the
children out of London."

"Simple," Tom replied. "We're not in London, are we? Nobody at Hogwarts cares because
everyone knows this is the safest place in Britain."

"We won't be in Hogwarts the whole year," Hermione pointed out. "Mum says she wants me to stay
during Christmas because it'll be safer out of the city, and on top of that, they'll start rationing in the
new year. But the teachers won't let us stay during summer, so we'll have to go back to London, no
matter what's going on there. And... and you're not the slightest bit alarmed!"

"I always knew I was going back," said Tom, "and there wasn't anything I could do about it." He
leaned forward in his seat, tapping his quill nib on the rim of his ink bottle so the extra drips fell
away. "You see, Hermione, as I've mentioned before, Wool's Orphanage is Hell on Earth. When
you transplant Hell to a warzone... well, Hell is still Hell, isn't it? Just one circle lower down, if you
take Dante's word on it. And what's the difference, when it comes down to it? More orphans, less
food, no electricity, complimentary mustard gas. I've had all of those before, except for the mustard
gas, of course. But luckily, I'm told that everyone gets a free gas mask."

Hermione's mouth dropped open. "I'm going to assume that your nonchalance is a coping strategy.
Not a very good one, though; I daren't think you'd ever be one for sobbing, but if you need to, I'd
never judge you for it—everyone needs a good cry once in a while." She cleared her throat, ignored
Tom's petulant expression, and continued with, "But you're right. If my family have got to worry
about rationing, then the conditions on your end will be even worse. I'm going to try and think of
something to fix this..."

"You're going to defeat Germany and end the war?" Tom asked incredulously.
"No," said Hermione, "I'm going to find something to make summer better for us, or at least safer, if we can't be at Hogwarts or use magic without being expelled. Mum says if London is too unsafe, we'll be packed off and evacuated to the countryside. And if we're out of London the whole time, not only won't we be able to see each other, but we won't have any way to visit Diagon Alley, and then we'd start our Third Year electives without having bought our textbooks!"

Hermione was almost hyperventilating by the end. She always, always, started a new school year with the assigned texts fresh on her mind. To do otherwise would be tantamount to coming to class unprepared. It was unthinkable. One didn't come to class without their pens and paper. Hermione Granger didn't come to class unless she could recite their textbook's table of contents and flip to the relevant pages as soon as she saw the topic of the lesson written on the blackboard.

(Tom was amused by Hermione's obsessive study habits, and had called her a pedant on more than one occasion. Hermione didn't understand Tom's own revision methods: he paced around in circles, summarising the key points of their class lectures, while his Dictation Quill jotted it all down in a sort of stream-of-consciousness commentary. He barely took notes in class, and when she looked over his shoulder, much of it was in abbreviations and references to books and authors outside the professors' supplementary reading list.)

"What are you going to do about it, then?" Tom asked, his eyebrows lifted in interest.

"I'll have Mum arrange somewhere else for you to stay that isn't the orphanage," said Hermione firmly, not knowing how she'd pull it off, but aware that if Tom was hurt or crushed to death in an overcrowded public air raid shelter, she'd never be able to forgive herself.

"Dear God, you're not going to have your family try to adopt me, are you?" said Tom, a flash of revulsion passing across his face, before he smoothed it away. "I don't need a family, not even for convenience's sake."

"I'll have you know that my family are wonderful people!" Hermione said, though not with much acid. "My father thinks you've a clever mind and good prospects, and my mother... Well, she doesn't talk about you much, but I've never heard her say anything bad. They like you. If you weren't a wizard, I'm sure they'd have sponsored you through university, and a good one at that. Dad was impressed when I explained why I wanted to borrow his old Latin primers."

"Besides," she added, "I think 'Tom Granger' is a good name. It suits you."

"'Tom Riddle-Granger', then," said Hermione, smiling.

He made a face. "Are you going to come up with any more horrible examples to support your belief that family members should share the same name? If so, consider repeating 'Hermione Granger-Riddle' out loud three times before you open your mouth."

"I think it would give my mother a heart attack," Hermione said. "But at least the hyphen makes it sound posh."

"Flights of whimsy aside, was this the best idea you've thought up?" Tom asked. "Or are you and your family going to rent rooms at the Leaky Cauldron for the whole summer? It'd cost well over a hundred pounds with the exchange rates the way they are. Your family aren't hard up for money,
but that's still quite a sum to spend to stay in London. Especially as you don't know how long it'll last, and you'd have to do it every summer as long as there's a war on."

"It would be cheaper if my parents were allowed to rent directly in Diagon," Hermione grumbled. "It would be easier if we were old enough to rent in our own names. It's unfair that we, as children, have to think up a solution on our own because the Headmaster and the professors aren't going to do a thing about it."

"I seem to recall someone saying that we should always listen to the teachers..."

"If their duty of care as teachers expires in the summer, and they absolve themselves of responsibility for our welfare," Hermione said, "then we have no responsibility to listen. Only for the duration of the summer, mind you. We might have to take matters into our own hands, but it'll be out of necessity. It's certainly not an excuse to devolve into anarchy."

She didn't like it, but what else was she to do?

Muggle London was growing dangerous. Wizarding London was expensive, and many parts of it were inaccessible to her parents. Living in Diagon Alley meant that they wouldn't be able to come and go as they pleased, and both her parents needed to work at her father's clinic. Since Mum and Dad didn't have wands of their own, they'd have to rely on her wand or, if she was somehow unavailable, on the indulgence of other wizards to let them in through the brick gateway. Mum visited Diagon Alley to stock up on groceries, and either a kind wizard or the Leaky Cauldron's bartender would open the gate for her on request. Hermione knew that not all wizards would be keen on letting unattended Muggles wander around Diagon, knowledge of magic or not. In the worst case scenario, someone with a grudge would report them, and Mum and Dad would run afoul of a Ministry Obliviation squad with an inflexible "clean up first, ask questions later" policy.

Or she could be evacuated to some distant village in the countryside, with most of the city's children. She and her parents would be separated from one another, just as she would be from Tom, as he'd be sent along in a group with the other residents of Wool's. Her parents would have to go to a great deal of trouble in bringing her back to London in time to catch the Hogwarts Express, but it was still possible. They could afford to send her money for rail fare and the family had their own motorcar, and enough money to buy black market petrol since the official stuff had been under ration from the first week of September. Tom didn't have any of that.

"Oh, Hermione," said Tom, propping his chin in his hands and giving her a very self-satisfied look. "Every day you grow closer to seeing the light."

Hermione huffed and turned back to her books.

I've heard Tom say that magic is only limited by one's knowledge and imagination, thought Hermione. If only we were allowed to use magic in the summer! I know if we use it in self-defense or emergency, we can get the official reprimands struck off our permanent records by appealing to the Ministry, but just like the Hogwarts Board of Governors, the old families have an advantage that we won't.

I'm in the Hogwarts library. There is no source of magical knowledge better than here. I just need the imagination part, but I'll have the rest of the school year to think of something.

Imagination wasn't her strongest suit, she knew; Tom had proved to be much better at it, completing his transfigurations on his first or second try, while she had to spend half the lesson focusing on the
proper visualisation. They were top of their class, as most of their other classmates only got a halfway decent result by the end of the lesson, and a good quarter hadn't managed a successful transfiguration at all. In Charms, however, they were evenly matched, as the subject required a great deal of precise wandwork and timing. And this was where her textbook skills put her in good stead.

So when she returned to her Common Room after dinner, Hermione decided to go about her plans logically.

She approached the Sixth Year Ravenclaw Prefect in one of the reading alcoves set in each of the windows of Ravenclaw Tower. Devina Holbrook had been the Fifth Year Prefect last year, which meant she had been in charge of introducing the First Year girls to life at Hogwarts. The six Ravenclaw Prefects divided responsibilities so the First Years went to the same person for advice and tutoring up until their Third Year, and anyone above Fourth Year was considered old enough to be able to figure out their problems on their own if they could, or by asking a classmate if they couldn't. It seemed like a sensible system to Hermione; she'd wondered if the other Houses did the same thing.

"Devina, can I talk to you?" Hermione asked. Step one: always ascertain the facts.

Devina held up a finger, her eyes scanning the page of a book in her lap. She gave a short sigh, then lowered the finger and shut the book with a brisk snap. "Yes? Granger, isn't it?"

"I've heard people say that Hogwarts is the safest place in Britain. Is that true?"

"Worried about the rumours?" said Devina, cocking her head. "They do say Hogwarts is safe, that much is true. But you weren't asking me to repeat hearsay, were you? I can only confirm that, according to my historical knowledge, Hogwarts has never been captured by enemy force. Goblin rebellions, Danish invasions, pre-Statute royal succession crises, more goblin rebellions. They've come and gone, and while the castle has been attacked before, they were all successfully repelled.

"So the evidence does point toward Hogwarts being a safe place to be. I'm not sure if is the number one safest place, as I hear the Unspeakables in the Ministry's Department of Mysteries have got their patch locked down tighter than a goblin's pocket. But whatever rank on the list it has, Hogwarts is definitely safer than the average home, and you don't have to worry about anything while you're here."

"Oh, good," said Hermione, pulling a bit of parchment out of the pocket of her robe and jotting notes on it with a pencil. "What exactly makes Hogwarts so safe?"

She'd seen wizards frown in silent disapproval at those who used fountain pens—which she still used when writing on the train or outdoors where there wasn't a good place to set a bottle of ink—but they still used pencils in such tasks as drawing diagrams or filling out astronomy charts. Wizard pencils, however, looked like thick, square sticks of graphite wrapped in string or paper and not the slim, machine-manufactured wooden cylinders she was used to.

"First: there's the teachers, of course," said Devina. "All of them have qualified for a Mastery in their respective subjects, so trust me, they've got a bit more skill than your average housewitch. Never seen proof that they could match up to an Auror in an all-out duel, but I expect Professors Dumbledore and Merrythought could give them a run for their money.

"Second: the Founders built some sort of native protections into the castle walls. I've never seen them myself, and neither have my grandparents, so this is either rumour or quoted from Hogwarts: A History. It says, in an emergency, that when called on in a time of need, the castle itself will come to
life to defend its charges. Make of that what you will.

"And third and finally," Devina said, clearing her throat and waiting for Hermione to catch up with her frantic note taking, "the everyday protections in the form of wards around the grounds. Most wizarding homes have some sort of simple ward: things like keeping the gnomes out, Muggle repelling, or for the families who live around Ballycastle or Tutshill, noise wards to keep the shouting out when there's a Quidditch match in the village. Hogwarts has wards built by the Founders, the strongest anti-intruder protections I've ever heard of. No Apparition, no Portkeys, limited internal Floo, no one comes in unless the Headmaster personally approves them."

Hermione jotted all this down, except for the bit about Quidditch. "Can anyone have a ward around their house?"

"I suppose," said Devina. "But not everyone can cast one. Well, they could, but an amateur job wouldn't last a day. And most people would prefer to pay a professional to do the work than study years for the Mastery themselves, or do a rush job and have to re-cast it every other day. It might work if you want a small silencing ward for a Quidditch game once a week, but anyone who wants serious wards hires a wardmaster."

"How does one... get a wardmaster?" asked Hermione.

"You could owl the Ministry for their list," Devina said, shrugging. "They have a pool of warders on call, in the Department of Magical Accidents. They're the ones who set up barriers while waiting for clean-up to arrive and do their job. Sorry, I can't tell you much about this—I'm not a warder, and it's my mum who takes care of our family's banking and filing."

"Thank you, I learned a lot," Hermione said gratefully, putting her parchment away. "As a Muggle-raised student, I'm glad I had someone to explain all this." And, taking a page out of Tom's book, she gave Devina Holbook a bright smile and said, "I really hope you make Head Girl next year. I can't imagine anyone else who'd do a better job at it."

Devina beamed and patted her on the shoulder. "Any time, Granger."

Hermione went up to her dormitory, deep in thought.

_I want a ward for our house, but I don't want the Ministry involved. I don't think I should use a Ministry warder—would they be obligated to file a report on all of their unofficial housecalls? Is it the same way a doctor is obligated to breach patient confidence if they believe a serious crime has been committed? If I'm asking them to perform magic in a Muggle home, it might be a breach of the Statute of Secrecy, thought Hermione, gnawing at her lip. She didn't want her parents Obliviated, and the Ministry warders worked directly under the Obliviators!_

She knew some Obliviations could be undone, but if she had her parents committed to St. Mungo's to get their memories returned—and who knew how long that took—what would happen to her? To the Muggle world, it would look like her parents had disappeared without a trace, and left with no adult guardians, she'd be in the same boat as Tom.

_I need a wardmaster, she decided. But not an official one. A black market wardmaster, if that exists._

Hermione could consider buying black market petrol morally permissible in an emergency. Nothing counted as more of an emergency than ensuring she had a way to get to Hogwarts, to study magic.
And it wasn't as if the Germans would roll Britain over just because her father bought a few cans of petrol from some shady man in a back alley, in order to get her to school on time.

Therefore, there was nothing inherently wrong with the existence of a black—or grey—market. All economies were built on shifting webs of supply and demand. No government, no matter how powerful or restrictive, could take total control over the wants and needs of a population of forty million people, so there would always be blind spots. In the British wizarding world, the population numbered in the tens of thousands, but the pattern still stood.

She just had to look harder.

The weeks and months passed, the warmth of late summer fading to autumn and a snowy, freezing winter.

Hermione kept up with her classes, studied with Tom on the weekends, and whenever she had some time free before dinner, buried herself in the library to look up information on wards and warding. She noticed that she met with Tom less often than she had the same time last year, but it didn't seem to bother him. He'd managed to ingratiate himself with his Slytherin year mates, and while he still sat next to her in their shared classes—Defense and Transfiguration—his "friends" always saved a space for him at dinner. She presumed that Tom sat next to them in his Slytherin-Gryffindor classes, based on his complaints about their lack of skill and poor grasp of the English language.

She called them his "friends" because he never had anything nice to stay about them; he held more fondness for Peanut than he did for the likes of Avery, Lestrange, or Travers. When she asked him what positive attributes he saw in the other Slytherin boys, his response was rather telling. But in the end, she couldn't count "rich" as a compliment, and definitely not "gullible". He didn't respect them, and she didn't believe that he ever would. They would only ever be "friends", and as long as he spoke of them with such disdain, there would be no chance whatsoever of their sharing a true and genuine friendship.

"But why on Earth do I need to be friends with them, Hermione?" Tom had asked, a thin smile lifting up the corner of his mouth, throwing the planes of his cheekbones into sharp relief. "I have you."

It was the way he said it that seemed so unsettling, as if friendship was in the same category as chattel, like a chocolate frog card or a coin in one's pocket.

_You are my galleon_, he implied with the gleam of his eyes and the tilt of his head, _and everyone else is worth a knut to me. I would rather have you than four hundred and ninety three knuts. They might be equivalent, but they will never be equal._

She knew he meant well, and before he'd met her, there wasn't anyone else he could speak to in so forthright a manner. She assumed that he just didn't have much practice at—at sounding nice.
He could make himself sound nice if he wanted to, said that voice of circumspection in the back of her mind. Have you seen the way he acts around Professor Slughorn?

But whatever she was to him, it did not go unreciprocated. She was "friends" with the Ravenclaw girls in her dormitory; they spoke amiably to one another a few times a day, and reviewed their class notes together during meals. But the only things they had in common were magic and schoolwork, and the relationship built on that was... academically fruitful but ultimately unsatisfying on an emotional level.

To be harsh on Tom for his inability to make genuine friends would be unfair. Not to mention hypocritical.

It was during an afternoon meeting in mid-November, when they were practising spellwork in the abandoned classroom in the dungeons, that Hermione considered telling Tom about her personal project. It wasn't as if she was deliberately keeping him in the dark about it, but she had enjoyed studying with a goal in mind beyond getting yet another perfect Outstanding mark. Yes, having Outstandings across the board was nice, but she had five years' worth of class assignments ahead of her, so in the greater scheme of things, a single perfect mark was insignificant compared to her already perfect record.

(If this had been her O.W.L.s year, it would be a different matter, naturally.)

Tom had his own personal projects, too—which he'd been keeping to himself. She knew he was still looking for answers about magical mind control whenever he had a chance of being left unsupervised by the librarian, or unobserved by the other students. Not even the threat of arrest and imprisonment had been enough to discourage him; in fact, he had been quick to look up the technicalities of the law, but it didn't do much to soothe her worries.

"Did you know that the mind control spell is only illegal when used on an unconsenting human being?" asked Tom idly, as he stacked five cups upside down and hid a knut under one of them. Peanut, Tom's pet rat, watched with sharp eyes and twitching whiskers. "It used to be illegal against witches and wizards only, but they revised the law in 1717 to encompass Muggles."

"I don't see a problem with that," said Hermione. "But it's somewhat insulting that wizards had to go through a referendum to consider my parents worthy of legal protection. And I don't see why anyone would consent to being mind controlled. If you valued someone enough to respect their consent, couldn't you just ask them to do things of their own free will?"

"The law book said some wizards can be granted exemptions in special circumstances. For research and education purposes," Tom replied. He moved the cups around so that the one with the knut was hidden, and clucked his tongue. Peanut leaped to his hand and began sniffing around the cups.

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"I imagine that somewhere out there, wizards are studying for their Mastery by casting mind control spells on each other," Tom breathed. His eyes were unfocused and he was sitting very still. "And the most interesting thing about mind control spells is that you can legally cast them on animals and creatures, so long as the creature isn't registered as property to a wizard owner who hasn't granted consent. There was one precedent in the 1840's about someone cheating in a horse racing championship by spelling a competitor's Granian stallion to throw the match in the last furlong. Of course, it'd have been legal if the owner had given permission, though the perpetrator would still be found guilty of match fixing."

"By law," said Hermione slowly, "a wizard would be able to buy animals to test spells on them, and
even if a pet shop or animal breeder knows the creatures would have illegal curses put on them, no one can do anything about it?"

"It wouldn't be illegal," said Tom. "That's the point. But I don't see the point in making it public that you're planning on using advanced spells on your pets. That's just going to get you on a watch list, because why else would someone practice on animals unless it was to train themselves up to working on humans? If it was me, I'd have gone with a reasonable excuse for needing so many disposable animals, like working on a Potions Mastery." Tom frowned, his brows furrowing in thought. "That wouldn't be a terrible idea; Potions Masteries can be fairly useful."

Hermione objected to the notion of 'disposable animals'. She decided to put that aside for later; if she tried to rag on Tom for it now, he would no doubt present her eating habits as his side of the argument, and it would end, quite predictably, with Hermione renouncing meat for a week while Tom made faces at her from the Slytherin table, putting on a grand show of piling steak and sausages onto his dinner plate.

However, if he'd said the words 'disposable Muggles', she would have stopped him right there and demanded an explanation. That was crossing a line he couldn't come back from, and one she couldn't excuse.

Hermione was aware of Tom's distaste for the general Muggle population. What he had once referred to in his letters as peons had almost overnight been replaced by Muggles. And Hermione, trying to comprehend his hostility, had turned her thoughts to the people who surrounded him when he wasn't living at Hogwarts. She remembered meeting girls her age at the orphanage, when she was nine years old. They had looked at her as if she was an extra-terrestrial, as if they had trouble restraining themselves from touching her wool coat and gold buttons and silk hair ribbons. It had made her distinctly uncomfortable; she couldn't articulate why, but she hadn't left the place with the best of impressions—it had also been the first time she'd met Tom. And then there was Mrs. Cole... "Likeable" was far from an applicable description of the woman.

"Well," she said forcefully, "if it was me, I'd owl the Department of Magical Education and keep an up-to-date list on who's undertaking a Mastery program. Anyone pursuing topics too far outside their Mastery supervisor's field of expertise is worth taking a second look at."

"Ah, the old conundrum," Tom sighed, his dark eyelashes cast down in false resignation. "You'd stifle innovation in the name of moral integrity. I find it funny coming from you of all people, Hermione, since I've heard you complain more than once about how stagnant wizarding society is."

Hermione had been focused on transfiguring a fork into a spoon, and that spoon into a knife. Fluid, sequential transfigurations were difficult to complete within a self-imposed time limit, and harder when she didn't have examples next to her to copy, but she wanted to be prepared when the class studied them after Christmas. It was one of the basic skills for advanced transfiguration techniques, so it was never too early to become competent.

She paused, her wand half-raised. She knew what Tom was doing, after years of debating with him. He was probing the edges of what she called her moral compass, trying to figure how hard he could press and where to push to make her North swing a few degrees in his direction. It didn't bother Tom that her compass didn't align with his, or that he didn't seem to rely on his own; Tom appeared to have relegated his internal compass to the same function and importance as his appendix.

"Instead of devoting my time to arguing whether integrity is better than innovation," said Hermione primly, "I would much rather find a way to innovate with integrity. There's nothing that says you
have to pick one and forgo the other."

Tom watched Peanut point at a cup like a well-trained hunting hound. Tom tipped the cup over, and revealed the bronze knut beneath.

"Some people say that walking the middle ground means you lack conviction," Tom remarked. "But I think that a man who has the ability to successfully take the middle path can show up the two groups on either side. He might not be popular, but he'd be superior."

"I don't think popularity or superiority matters that much to me," said Hermione. She hesitated, then added, "Of course it would be nice to have people like you, but I'd rather keep my principles intact than sacrifice them for the sake of other people's opinions."

"You know," Tom mused, "Machiavelli once debated whether it was better for a prince to be feared or to be loved. You already know what I'd choose. But I'm not quite certain he'd know what to do with you, since you don't seem to care about either—so long as you're convinced you're in the right."

"Do you think I'd make a good prince, then?"

"I think you'd make an effective one."

"That's good, then," Hermione said. "Being feared or loved is irrelevant if the person in charge is ineffective. Nor is public opinion an indicator of the merit in a leader's public policy. You might as well replace the prince with a parliament if it would prove a more dependable guarantor of social progress."

"It looks like someone has got their priorities in order," said Tom approvingly. He picked up the knut, rubbed it with his thumb, and slipped it into his trouser pocket.

Hermione decided that the best solution would be the simplest one.

After a few mornings of loitering around the Great Hall after breakfast, Hermione noticed that a good third of the castle's population subscribed to or borrowed copies of Wizarding Britain's largest newspaper, *The Daily Prophet*. There were a handful of others who read sport and hobby magazines, upper year girls who liked fashion plates and gossip rags, and N.E.W.T. students who browsed academic publications to prepare themselves for taking an apprenticeship after leaving Hogwarts.

But the most widely-read publication by far was *The Prophet*. She'd read it on occasion, as there was always a copy or two left on a chair or table in the Ravenclaw Common Room, free for anyone to take back to their dorms. She'd never thought about purchasing a subscription herself, as her mother bought and sent her the Muggle paper from London via Gilles, the family owl. She had preferred reading reports on Britain's contributions to the war effort, instead of wasting her time with
Quidditch rankings or brazen Statute violations by drunken great-uncles at their 150th birthday party.

It was only natural, with Wizarding Britain's limited population, that the newspaper would have to invent "news" each day to fill the headlines. She'd seen the same thing in local papers when she and her family had holidayed in small seaside villages when she was young. They reported when a prize-winning ewe gave birth to twins, complete with photographs of the darling little lambs. The Daily Prophet reported on local Quidditch teams' mascots having a cold. Their photographs, however, were animated.

So she forced herself to read The Prophet cover to cover, and thus found her solution.

If she needed to catch a wizard, then she ought to cast a net.

Looking for:

Private and Discreet Wardmaster, to secure London residence.
Will pay market rate and above, negotiable in galleons or pounds sterling.
Must prove familiarity with Laskaris' Alternating Ravelin.

Send inquiries to H. Granger,
care of Classifieds Correspondence Desk
Daily Prophet Office, 43 Diagon Alley.

She composed the letter to the Daily Prophet office, and enclosed a pouch of galleons.

Most people would leave their own owl address in their classifieds, but Hermione didn't want to draw the wrong sort of attention by putting her parents' Muggle address in a public newspaper. Nor did she want to put her own Hogwarts address out; anyone reading would assume it was some trick or prank if they saw it was a student running the ad. So she acquiesced to paying extra for the Daily Prophet people to hold her mail until her private owl could pick it up.

Now she would have to sell her mother on the idea, because market rate for a private wardmaster was more than her allowance and birthday money combined could afford.

It was a good thing, she observed, that both she and her mother went by the name H. Granger.

She'd handle the magical side of the deal, and she was sure that Mum could manage the rest.
Twice as many students stayed in the castle for the Christmas holidays compared to Tom's first year. Most of them were Muggleborns or half-bloods, and all of them came from families who lived in Muggle neighbourhoods.

A wizard who could afford to rent a small flat in the centre of Diagon Alley might spend that same amount of money in British pounds to afford a comfortable townhouse in Muggle Manchester or Brighton. This was an option many families with multiple children took; half-blood and mixed households could blend in quite capably with their Muggle neighbours, while Muggle parents of magical children could commute to and from their Muggle jobs. Access to wizarding areas from a Muggle house was made possible if the family had their fireplaces connected to the Floo Network.

As it had been the previous year, Tom was the only student left out of the Slytherin Second Year cohort. His dorm mates were all proud, self-professed purebloods who lived in isolated estates and manor houses, which meant, once again, he had the whole dormitory to himself. The majority of his House had returned to their homes as well; the handful of Slytherins who'd stayed were Fifth and Seventh Years who planned to study for their exams and remain within walking distance of the Hogwarts library.

There was only one long table in the Great Hall for meals, and Tom was forced to listen to the blathering of students of other Houses, some of whom he had heard complaining about having to stay at Hogwarts instead of being at their Muggle houses with their parents. Did they not know that food was being rationed in the non-magical parts of Britain? A fully-trained wizard would never starve to death unless he was an idiot, but whilst it was one thing for a wizard to stretch a bag of flour or a loaf of bread, most could not magically duplicate rationed luxuries like tea leaves, coffee, and chocolate, let alone the elaborate ice cream sculptures and seven-layer game pies served up during the Hogwarts feasts. It was as if Tom's fellow students didn't realise that living at Hogwarts was a privilege, or that returning to their Muggle homes meant giving up their magic in the name of the law.

The one redeeming aspect of having to sit through so many inane conversations—outside of the food, that is; during his first week in the castle, Tom had had trouble deciding whether the meals were better than the library—was the fact that Hermione had to endure it right next to him.

But... she didn't seem to be enduring it now. In fact, she appeared to be enjoying conversing with one of her dining partners, a Ravenclaw girl in her Third or Fourth Year. And a Muggleborn, based on the topic of their conversation.

"...My favourite was always Mansfield Park—have you read it?" asked the girl. She had prominent ears that protruded from the side of her head like teapot handles, and Tom guessed that she had chosen her hairstyle of jaw-length rolled curls to conceal them. If only it had worked.

"Oh, yes," Hermione replied, nodding eagerly. "It emphasised the satire over the romance, so most
people overlooked it in favour of Austen's more straightforward romantic works. In my opinion, the romance only works because of the social commentary. You have to overcome great obstacles for love, I think, and in those days, social inequality was just that."

"Exactly!" said the other girl. "Everyone else I know who's read the genre seems to think nothing more on it beyond siding for either Mr. Darcy or Mr. Rochester."

"Mr. Rochester? Mr. Darcy I can understand," Hermione scoffed. "But Rochester, really?"

"Well, he's dark. And brooding."

"He's a terrible person!"

"But he broods so well..."

Both girls broke into giggles.

Tom poked irritably at his roasted Brussels sprouts. He couldn't remember the last time he'd heard Hermione giggle like that, or if she had ever giggled at all in his presence. Most likely not.

The time they spent together was occupied with serious, practical things. Magic, learning, learning about magic: they honed useful skills so that they might be better prepared for the future, because it was unacceptable to be anything other than excellent. It would be a waste of their gifts and their education if they didn't take as much of an advantage of their time at Hogwarts as they could.

Giggling over silly girl novels was a waste of time. It was like the boys in the Slytherin dormitory, lounging on each other's beds and cackling over the illustrated funny pages in the back of their Quidditch magazines. They thumped each other on the back after flying laps with the reserve squad, they jostled shoulders behind the double desks of the Charms classroom, betting on who would set their feather on fire first.

It was undignified, unseemly, and childish. He liked Hermione because she was better than that. She was different from other people, in the same way that Tom was different. More mature, less childish, and yet not at all like the older girls at the orphanage who stitched up the hemlines of the dowdy grey uniform skirt and told Mrs. Cole that it had shrunk in the wash. The girls who couldn't step outside without their pocketbook—even if they weren't going past the gates—or worried if the colour of their nail enamel made them look fast.

It was instances like this that he was reminded that she was different from him. Not significant enough for him to write her off as a lost cause, but it was enough to make him feel uneasy. And in the hollow space beneath his sternum, he felt the cold bite of anger simmering into life.

It was very similar to what he'd felt when Dumbledore had visited his room at Wool's a year and a half ago, the thick cream vellum envelope of a Hogwarts invitation held in his hand.

"I have heard interesting things about you, Mr. Riddle," Dumbledore had said, his phrasing ambiguous and his expression neutral, but to Tom it was ominous, and unease dripped down his spine like fever sweat.

He didn't want these strange, incomprehensible thoughts. He knew hunger, bitterness, spite, and rage—they were as familiar to him as the lines and wrinkles on the flesh of his palms, or his
reflection in the mirror. But this subtle, subdued unease slipped inside him like the vapours of consumption, with no cause or reason that he could identify by name. It made him restless, his skin prickly, as if someone was observing him from around the corner and ducking out of sight if Tom looked up or behind.

He wondered if he and Hermione were growing apart just as they were growing older. He wondered if the distance was due in part to their physical separation, as they had to make a concerted effort to see each other outside of classes. Unlike this other Ravenclaw girl, he and Hermione couldn't sit together at the House tables and share casual conversation with one another; their weekly meetings were always dedicated to meaningful affairs, because they hadn't any time to waste with frivolities.

It wasn't against the rules for a student of one House to sit at another House's table for meals, but in most circumstances it was sibling with sibling, cousin with cousin, or in a few rare occurrences, future step-mother with a not quite son or daughter. He'd noticed a few older students sitting with their beaus of other Houses, or for the students (mostly Slytherins) who were the proud scions of old, monied families, their fiancés or fiancées. It was allowed because the Great Hall was a public space, and people would notice if their hands lingered too long under the table.

People would certainly notice if Tom Riddle sat with Hermione Granger.

It almost made him question his experience with the Sorting Hat.

(He had wanted to punish the stupid Hat for being unco-operative as much he'd wanted to humiliate Jasper Hastings for being annoying.)

Tom knew that most British public boarding schools divided students into classes or forms. Hogwarts, apparently, had four Founders and four corresponding Houses. The envelope given by Dumbledore was sealed by a blob of wax on the flap, imprinted with the Hogwarts crest. Divided into quadrants, it carried the images of a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake.

Tom liked the snake the most.

He'd read a little about the Founders while browsing the bookshop in Diagon Alley, but he hadn't the money for any books outside the textbook list, and then he had to return to Wool's before Martha locked the gates and scolded him for being late. He had been tempted to write a letter to Hermione to ask her what extra books she'd bought to prepare herself for Hogwarts, but then he remembered that she was The Betrayer. She was Judas with frumpy hair and an overbite.

So Tom went to his Sorting angrier than he wanted to be, and more ignorant than he wished.

The First Years were called to sit on the stool in alphabetical order, which meant Hermione Granger would be Sorted with the first half of the large group of milling students, and Tom in the second. The Hat was dropped over her head, and she spent several minutes beneath it, her hair spilling out from under the brim, white fingers clutching her knees.

"RAVENCLAW!"
When it was Tom's turn, he strode forward without looking left or right, putting one foot in front of the other like he was walking a plank, the watchful eyes and turning heads of the older students like the circling of hungry sharks. He didn't look for Professor Dumbledore, the only adult wizard he knew from the staff members sitting at the High Table. It didn't matter what House he was put in; everyone at Hogwarts was offered the same class subjects, so he'd learn the same things no matter what crest he wore on his robe, or what bed he slept in.

The Hat dropped over his eyes.

"You've a clever mind, Mr. Riddle," said the Hat in a voice that rasped and rustled like paper bags being shaken out at the grocery market. "You have such a thirst for knowledge, such a hunger to learn. Ravenclaw would welcome you. But..."

"...Yes?" prompted Tom. The lack of reaction from his watchers left Tom to assume that the Hat had spoken directly into his mind, and not aloud.

"The pinnacle of Ravenclaw virtue is not learning, or knowledge. It is wisdom. But... I see, I see. Your appetites and potential lean elsewhere, Mr. Riddle. I can see where Slytherin would suit you well indeed. The seed of Salazar's virtue lies in you—not mere cunning or just ambition, but the promise of greatness."

Before he'd put the Hat on, he'd seen Hermione's face. She was watching him, her shoulders tensed, and from the expression on her face, the liquid glitter in her eyes, he could tell that she was desperate to turn away and ignore him completely, but there was something—something he didn't understand—that made her keep looking. She was the only one out of the school of hungry sharks that he knew for certain was neither hungry nor a shark.

But—

She was a witch.

She was no friend of his.

She was magical.

She was a traitor.

She was Special.

"Ah, Mr. Riddle. I can offer you one small drop of insight. In the long-past years of my creation, the so-called days of yore and legend, there was a young man who chose Slytherin and whom Salazar took as an apprentice. He loved a Ravenclaw who told him that she would not give him her heart, not even with her last dying breath. He had ambition; he wanted greatness and reknown, and he wanted to win his love's heart—but in doing so, the young man cast aside wisdom, and committed a great crime that proved to be his undoing. In death, he learned what became of those who went without wisdom, and when he learned enough, it was only then that he found reconciliation of a sort.

"Ambition and cleverness were never meant to be singular suits, and the same can be said for chivalry and tenacity. For greatness without wisdom is unsound, and wisdom without greatness is unheard."

"The true moral of the story," said Tom, "seems to be that separating by House traits is a terrible
idea, so Sorting is ultimately meaningless.” He saw no point in pretending to be polite if the Hat could read his mind.

"It has exactly as much meaning as you give it," the Hat said with a dry chuckle. "Now, on to your Sorting..."

"Wait, Hat! How did the apprentice learn 'in death'?" asked Tom. "He'd be dead. How is that even possible?"

"That, I do believe, is a story for another time."

"I want to know!" Tom demanded. He decided to put some pressure on the Hat. It wasn't an animal, or a drunk matron, but if it could speak, then maybe it had a mind. And all minds could be compelled.

**TELL ME NOW—**

"Then, Mr. Riddle," spoke the Hat in Tom's head, "you may find the answers you seek in SLYTHERIN!"

---

Tom didn't regret being a Slytherin.

The green linings on his robes flattered his colouring and complexion; the green light of the watery windows gave him an air of graveness and mystery, rather than making him look sallow and ill as it did for Lestrange and Nott. He appreciated the refined tastes of whoever had appointed the Slytherin Common Room and dormitories. The fireplaces were kept in use year-round, so instead of being cold and damp like the rest of the dungeons, the Slytherin living areas were always warm and dry. And his four-poster had bedposts carved with snakes.

At first, it had been a bit odd, the way he was treated differently than others. The Slytherin table didn't clap for him as it did for Travers who was Sorted right after. No one really spoke to him or looked him in the eye—they did look at his robes—or passed him the serving tongs when the food appeared. Tom didn't mind. There were plenty of other dishes to choose from. He hadn't eaten anything the whole day but a bowl of plain porridge at breakfast; the Express' tuck trolley only served lollies and sweet pastries and no proper lunches, not that he'd had the money to make a purchase.

Tom was used to being treated differently, so this wasn't an issue for him. And over time, he'd established himself within the First Year hierarchy, and when they treated him differently now, it was not because they saw him like wild dogs saw an antelope with a malformed leg.

Until now, he hadn't speculated on what it would be like to have been Sorted into another House.

The day after Christmas, Tom decided to question Hermione about her own House experience.

Hermione sat at the very end of the single long table in the centre of the Great Hall, and Tom sat next to her. Even with the reduced population of the castle, students organised themselves by House and year. There was some mixing between Houses and years, but not that much, and since Tom was
wearing his Slytherin uniform robes—he didn't have any others—no one tried to take the seat closest to him. In fact, wearing his Slytherin crest was useful for getting a good seat at the table, far away from people who would reach over his plate—*disgusting*—or bump elbows with him on either side.

He had noticed that most Muggleborns, when not attending class, didn't wear their school robes over their shirts and slacks. It was expected, but not an official rule, that students dress properly for dinner; Tom had heard his Slytherin Housemates comment on the slovenly appearance of those of inferior blood status during meals, so he personally made sure to wear his robes whenever he left the Slytherin living quarters.

Tom kept his thoughts to himself on what was slovenly and what was not. He had seen one particular upper year Muggleborn in Gryffindor come to Christmas dinner in formal evening whites, which included a sharp black tailcoat and a high, starched, chin-scraping collar. This same Gryffindor was one he'd also seen at breakfast on the weekends wearing a full suit of hunting tweed and ghillie boots, and on a separate day, jodhpurs and spats under a caped riding coat.

(Tom supposed that thumbing your nose up at the entrenched aristocracy was much easier if you were an aristocrat yourself.)

"What is it like, being a Ravenclaw?" Tom asked, as the remains of their dinner were cleared from the table.

"Is this your attempt at trying to wheedle out House secrets?" Hermione replied, dabbing at her lips with a serviette, before dropping it onto her empty plate. It disappeared an instant later. "I've heard the Hufflepuff Common Room has a door or hatch that connects it directly to the kitchens. There's a communal biscuit tin, and every Friday and Sunday they have a cocoa party."

"How is it a 'secret' if even you know about it?"

"*Even you?* Excuse me!" said Hermione, huffing in indignation. "It's not really a secret; they tell you outright if you ask about it. And anyway, I don't believe in 'House secrets'. There aren't any secrets, it's just obscure information no one knows about because they haven't bothered to read *Hogwarts: A History.*"

Tom had picked that book up at the library, but dropped it as soon as he'd seen the name of its author on the cover. It was written by the same old bag—*ahem*, celebrated historian—who had written their History of Magic textbooks; she had apparently taught the subject last century, before their beloved Professor Cuthbert Binns had taken over.

"The location of the Slytherin Common Room is considered a 'House secret'," Tom remarked. "The prefects told us on our first day that no one outside of Slytherin had seen it in over five centuries, and if they caught us letting anyone in, they'd have a House vote on the penalty as it's been so long since anyone has had to use it that they've forgotten what it is."

"You make Slytherin sound so awful." Hermione shook her head. "None of our prefects gave us any rules like that. It was more, *Don't leave a mess, remember your library due dates, and if you leave a book out overnight in the Common Room, don't be upset if it disappears*. I don't recall any of them saying we weren't allowed to let anyone in, but I don't see how they could have enforced it, with our password system being so simple." She made a face. "They say it's foolproof, but now I understand why they told us our things could disappear."

"You don't have a password every fortnight?" Tom asked. He had assumed that all Houses had a
doorway, archway, wall, or passage that opened to themed passwords, depending on the prefects’ sense of humour. For three months last year, they'd used the names of magical snake breeds.

"No, we have a small test. A word puzzle," said Hermione. "There's an enchanted door knocker that—you know, why don't I just show you? I had planned to go to my room to get something down, but you might as well come with me, since no one has said anything about letting in friends. Certainly not the door guard, as long as it's friends who can pass the entrance test. I don't wear my uniform on the weekend, and I don't think it can even tell."

Hermione pushed herself up from the table and Tom followed. They passed through the doors of the Great Hall and entered the eastern wing of the castle, on the same route that Tom and the Slytherins used to get to their Astronomy classes.

"Does it help if the Sorting Hat said I would fit into Ravenclaw?"

"Did it say that? I'm not surprised," said Hermione. "You rank higher than every other Ravenclaw in our year, except where you tie with me. They've been saying in our Common Room since last year that you should've been a Ravenclaw."

She led him to a circular staircase, which corkscrewed up several storeys to the fifth floor of the castle.

"I told the Hat that I didn't care about Houses," said Tom, breathing a little harder at the top of the staircase than he had at the bottom. "So it put me in Slytherin. But I'm happy with not being in Ravenclaw if I had to do that several times a day."

"Did you know that the Hat offered me Gryffindor?"

"What?" Tom snorted. "You? A Gryffindor?"

He tolerated most of Ravenclaw House, which mirrored the opinion of his fellow Slytherins. They didn't make for diverting company, but they were, for the most part, quiet and polite and well-mannered. Professor Slughorn dedicated a shelf in his office to framed photographs of his favourite students. Over half of them were Slytherins, but there were plenty of Ravenclaws who had gone on to become famous inventors and respected academics. They sent Sluggy signed copies of various research journals whenever they were published, which the Professor proudly showed off at the High Table after the breakfast mail delivery. It contrasted with the Gryffindor sports stars, and the single Hufflepuff, whom Tom recalled was hugging a unicorn in his photo.

"It said I had Gryffindor conviction and Ravenclaw logic," Hermione explained, "and then it let me choose. I said I'd rather be in the House where the members can sit down and discuss their beliefs sensibly. Conviction isn't a bad thing, but you can't do much with it unless other people agree with you. Oh! Here we are."

They'd stopped in front of a wooden door, affixed with a large bronze doorknocker cast in the shape of an eagle's head. Hermione lifted the ring under its beak and knocked once.

The metal shivered, feathers shifting and fluttering. The eagle's fierce eyes opened, and so did its beak, the metal giving a pleasant jingle reminiscent of a shaken cutlery drawer.

"When is a door not a door?" asked the eagle.
Hermione sent Tom an encouraging look. Tom stared at the door for a moment, then shot Hermione a look of utter disbelief.

_Really?_

_This_ was the famous, _foolproof_ Ravenclaw security system?

"When it's ajar," said Tom. He waited, tapping his foot.

"Correct."

The door swung open.

"That was disappointing," said Tom, stepping through the threshold and into the Ravenclaw Common Room. "But _this_ is much better."

Built into its own tower, the Common Room had round, curving walls lined with bookshelves and windows overlooking the Eastern Courtyard, viaduct, grounds and the Lake on one side, and the Astronomy Tower on the other. There were small nooks set into the wall every couple of metres, containing even more bookshelves, and comfortably upholstered reading benches. The largest nook was opposite a fireplace, and it contained a white marble statue of a regal-looking woman wearing a crown. She held a wand in one hand, and a scroll in the other. The domed ceiling was painted like a planetarium, and was accurate to the year and seasons, as far as Tom could tell.

*Why do we have to go to Astronomy class at eleven in the evening if wizards can accurately replicate the stars on a ceiling?* grumbled Tom.

Slytherins and Hufflepuffs lived in the lowest levels of the castle, and the Astronomy Tower was one of the highest. It took around twenty minutes of walking through unheated corridors at night to get to their lesson. And then they had to take the same circuitous path to get back to their beds.

"I read that Rowena Ravenclaw believed anyone who could pass her test was worthy of entry, no matter their House," said Hermione. "Most wizards haven't a single ounce of logic, so the door works, mostly. And I've seen it ask harder questions to the older students, so it's not always that easy."

Tom's gaze returned to the bookshelves. "Can anyone borrow the books, then?"

"If you put them back when you're done with them," said Hermione, glancing around the Common Room nervously, as if she was afraid that a prefect would pop up from behind a sofa at any moment. "But most of them are old textbooks that people leave behind every year, and there's no librarian to organise them. I'm sure no one will notice..."

"Good," said Tom, quite satisfied. He headed to the nearest shelf and began making his selection.
Tom spent the next few evenings enjoying Ravenclaw hospitality.

He suspected that a couple of Ravenclaws passing through their Common Room had wanted to ask what a Slytherin was doing in their Tower, but seeing him sitting in a nook and reading with a pile of books next to him, they left him alone. He presumed there was an unspoken rule that anyone who was busy with a book was not to be interrupted. It was a good rule, Tom thought, and they eventually got used to his presence and started greeting him like he was just another fellow Eagle.

It didn't hurt that he waited a few minutes so that any other Ravenclaw entering the Common Room at the same time he was there got a fair chance at answering the door knocker's question. And if they got it wrong, Tom would ever-so-politely drop a hint or answer for them, in his kindest, most pleasant voice. He even helped with holiday assignments; he had noticed Ravenclaws were more thorough with their essay research, and didn't have the same awkwardness about asking for help as Slytherins.

In Slytherin, if you asked for help with homework, unless you were very close by blood or through family connections, you offered something in return in the same breath. Tom rarely asked other Slytherins for anything, having very little of his own to trade and needing nothing from other people —outside of supplies for pranking, of course. But he'd accrued favours over the past months, as his year mates would rather owe Tom one medium favour for helping them out in five different class subjects, than owe five small favours to several people.

(Because of these favours, this year Tom had gotten the biggest Christmas haul of his entire life. Half of it was useless things like boxed sweets and chocolate frogs and a wizarding chess set—*what was the point of playing a two-person game if your opponent was Tom Riddle?*—but he'd gotten that Numerology textbook he had been eyeing in the summer, and the Grangers had sent him a new winter cloak to replace the second-hand one he'd bought in First Year that was now so short its hem hovered a few inches below his knees.)

Late one evening, when Tom was reading in a window alcove that had the best view of the Lake, Hermione approached him with a wrapped box in her hands.

"May I sit?" she asked.

Tom budged over. The cushioned bench gave a small *poof!* as Hermione dropped down next to him.

"You'll be thirteen tomorrow," said Hermione, holding out the box. "I thought I'd give you your gift a few hours early, since you're here."

Tom looked up from his book, *Introductory Numerology*, and at the box. It was a rectangular box, wrapped in green paper, the edges tucked in and secured with Spellotape.

He peeled open the paper, revealing a metal box with small clasps on either side of the lid, similar in size and dimension to the tins Muggle shops used for holding shortbread or Christmas cakes. Inside the box was a thick slab of chocolate fudge, iced with the words, "*Happy 13th, Tom!*" in mint green letters.

"I know you prefer practical gifts," said Hermione, straightening out her skirt, "so the box has a stasis enchantment on it. You can put food in there and it won't go off—if you're working on something and miss lunch, you can store food at breakfast and eat it later. Or, you could put potions ingredients"
in there to keep fresh, but if you do that, I wouldn't recommend using it for food anymore.

"I read that the Ministry is alerted when an underage wizard uses their wand, but they can't tell when someone uses charmed items, even if it's in a Muggle area. You can't give charmed items to Muggles—that violates the Statute—but it's safe to use them yourself."

"A loophole," said Tom, raising an eyebrow. "To get around the Underage Restriction, all we have to do is fill our pockets with charmed objects before we get on the train."

"We haven't learned to charm objects yet," said Hermione. "We only start learning the basics next year, when we start our elective subjects."

"And by the time we've learned to make an enchantment strong enough to last a whole summer, we'd be seventeen already and the Restriction wouldn't even apply to us," said Tom with a sigh, setting the lid back onto the fudge. "Well, thank you for the box. Can you believe that we've known each other for five years? I was eight when I first met you. It hardly seems like that long..."

Hermione slumped against the wall of the alcove. "And we only have five years left of Hogwarts. It goes by so quickly; we'll be eighteen before we even know it."

"That's a good thing. I can't wait until I can use my wand whenever I want, Apparate wherever I want, and earn my own keep however I like."

"Tom," said Hermione after a few seconds of silence, "do you remember when I wrote about the obligations of British citizenship?"

"You wrote an essay about taxes, Hermione," said Tom. "You're lucky it was me you were writing to—anyone else would have fallen asleep halfway through."

"You're lucky it was me writing to you." Hermione lifted her chin in defiance. "No one else researches like I do. Anyway, the point is that it's more than just taxes worth worrying about. If the war goes on for much longer, they'll start conscripting soldiers." She swallowed. "The government funds your orphanage, so they'll have access to records of all the boys living there, and how old they are, and when they turn eighteen."

"Muggles conscripting a wizard? The idea is ridiculous," said Tom, scoffing. "I'd like to see them try."

"It's happened before," said Hermione. "The Earl of Richmond brought wizards with him to the Battle of Bosworth in 1485."

"Those wizards certainly aren't me," Tom replied. "Most of them were probably Muggleborns, whose families were found and threatened into co-operation. Or they were greedy—"

"—But you're greedy!" Hermione interjected.

"—Hacks," Tom spoke over her, ignoring her glower, "who wanted to win a comfortable spot as the official Court Wizard. I, however, don't have a family to blackmail, and I'd never be anyone's magical trained monkey, least of all a Muggle's."

He'd looked it up, and it turned out that Abraxas Malfoy's great-great-something grandfather had been Court Wizard to a Muggle king. It was illegal now, because of the Statute of Secrecy, but if it
wasn't, he thought it very likely that Abraxas Malfoy would bow under a Muggle if it would give his family another manor house and estate.

(They'd deny it all the way, but that wouldn't stop them from showing off their collection of white-feathered peacocks.)

"I know there's little chance of it happening," Hermione said, "but that's only if you take precautions. It'd be best if you didn't go back to the orphanage after Sixth Year, and you should have a position lined up before you leave Hogwarts so you can move to the wizarding world for good as soon as you can. If the war goes on for that long, and you go back to the Muggle world, they'll wonder why an able-bodied young man is gadding about London. You could Confund everybody who asks, but using magic on too many Muggles will eventually catch the Ministry's eye."

"You don't have to worry about me," said Tom, rolling his eyes. "I can take care of myself."

"You know I worry about these things!" Hermione cried. "I worry about every test we take in class, even though we both know I'll get another Outstanding on it. I... I just—"

She cleared her throat, then looked away abruptly, her eyes peering out through the window of Ravenclaw Tower. It was late in the evening, and on the second-to-last day of December, there was nothing to see outside but mounds of snow and a frozen lake, and in the very far distance, the Groundskeeper's hut with a cheery yellow light in the window. In the reflection of the black glass, Hermione's eyes looked suspiciously wet, until she scrubbed her hand over her face and turned back to him.

"My father was conscripted in the last war," said Hermione, her voice the slightest bit hoarse. "He said it was the worst two years of his life. He was already eighteen when the war started, and he deferred for being in university, but later they took him for an orderly in the medical corps. He couldn't defer forever, you see, and unlike the Old Boys in his form, he didn't have a cousin-twice-removed in the recruiting office. He doesn't talk about it much, but I know he hated it.

"The thing is, Tom, that if the war goes badly and the Germans overrun Britain, they won't give anyone the luxury of waiting 'till they turn eighteen before they take them. I don't think they'd stop at just the boys, either. Someone has to work in the munition factories."

Hermione's arms wrapped around herself. Her shoulders were hunched, and in that moment she looked... small and miserable. He hadn't paid much attention to her appearance before. He knew, from an objective view, that Hermione had the biggest hair of any girl he'd ever seen; she rarely plaied it and never perm ed it or pinned it into fashionable rolls. It fluffed around her face like a mane on a normal day, and now that she was—upset? Afraid? Tom didn't know what to call it; he hadn't ever seen her in this state before—she looked like a cat dipped in water.

He didn't like it that she looked this way. It looked wrong. Unnatural. It reminded him of the few times in his life when he'd fallen ill, and his skin had gone a few shades paler, taking on a grey cast, and his eyes were shadowed bruise purple in exhaustion. His features were still there, recognisable, but he'd been repulsed by how weak he looked.

Yes, he concluded. Weakness.

Hermione shouldn't allow herself to look weak.
But soon Hermione gathered herself together, then spoke in a soft voice, "If they try to conscript us during summer, before we turn seventeen, I'm running away. They'd never let us go back to Hogwarts if they're in desperate enough straits to take children. If they haven't take our wands already, they'd have us locked in the barracks. We wouldn't be the only ones thinking of running."

"I'd run away too," said Tom. For as long as he could remember, he had been tall for his age, and was one of the tallest boys in their year. With his height and facial structure and manner of speech, he knew that by the time he was sixteen, those who didn't know him wouldn't doubt it if he tried to pass himself off as eighteen. He had never thought it might be to his disadvantage.

"We'll run away together, won't we?"

"I wouldn't run with anyone else."

This was true. If he was offered a choice about it, he'd prefer to go alone. He never felt lonely, nor had he ever felt that the company of other people was necessary in any part of his life. If he hadn't a choice, and was forced to take someone with him, it had better not be dead weight like every other child at the orphanage, every boy who shared his dormitory, everyone who... Everyone, basically.

Except Hermione, he supposed.

He had decided she was useful years ago.

It was a purely utilitarian decision.

"Even if we had to share a tent?" Hermione said. "They won't let anyone under seventeen rent a flat in Diagon Alley."

"Even then," said Tom. "As long as it's a magical tent."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

She held out her hand, and he shook it. She held onto it for just a second longer than necessary, but then she seemed to recollect herself and let him go.

The bells within the Hogwarts clocktower rang out into the silence. Twelve chimes. He counted them out, one by one.

Midnight.

"Happy birthday, Tom," Hermione murmured. "Make a wish."

Chapter End Notes

Second Year Hermione canonically had a hard crush on Gilderoy Lockhart after reading
his fictional adventures. Georgette Heyer's Regency era romance novels were published in 1935 and revitalised the genre to a new generation of readers. It doesn't seem unreasonable for Hermione to enjoy them when she reads things outside of textbooks.

For anyone interested in a serious take on a wizarding war story, The Unwinding Golden Thread (50k, complete) is an AU Harry and Tom friendship fic based on the premise that Dumbledore caves in to peer pressure, challenges Grindelwald to a duel, and loses. Britain is invaded, and Tom and Harry become vigilante rebels on the run.
The Christmas holidays came and went, and where Hermione had expected to be buoyed up by seasonal cheer and merrymaking, she was left dispirited. But she was not left entirely hopeless.

She had problems, but she could solve them. It was only a matter of putting in the work.

She had discovered how much work was required, and was, she privately acknowledged, glad that it was being put in the capable hands of an adult professional. She was proud of her academic talents, which were matched only by Tom's, but she, at thirteen years old, knew that it wasn't possible to do everything on her own. So she delegated, one thing she knew Tom had difficulty doing, if he could do it at all.

Hermione was an excellent researcher; information synthesis—her ability to find and devour as many books as possible and combine everything into one central idea—was her greatest talent. Tom, in comparison, was inferior to her in this regard: when he read a book and found an idea he liked, he latched onto it and didn't bother looking into alternatives unless she shoved them into his face and proved empirically that they were better.

Tom's greatest talent, on the other hand, was being an autodidact. He didn't need teachers. Given a few textbooks and enough time, he could teach himself everything the Hogwarts curriculum had to offer—although his method was only a more refined form of trial-and-error, and self-taught learning would take slightly longer than Hogwarts' seven year educational programme. That, he'd said, was one of the reasons why he bothered going to class.

(There was nothing, he also said, that was at all challenging about the Second Year syllabus.)

And both of them were in possession of an excellent memory.

To H. Granger,

The Alternating Ravelin was never intended by Iannis Laskaris to be a comprehensive warding system. It is a defensive foundation, although fallen out of use since the nineteenth century, which enjoyed popularity as a more coherent variant of Bachmeier's Pentagonal Circumscripturn. Laskaris intended that it be combined with a secondary ward layer: either with a supplementary defense, or a contingency offense.

It is highly advised against casting it on your property without trained supervision, unless you possess experience with layered warding. Bachmeier's Principles of Magical Fortification (J. Karel Hentschel Verlag; 1862) is often recommended as a beginner's manual on warding architecture and its fundamentals...

Yours sincerely,
The day Hermione had gotten her Hogwarts letter, she was told that Hogwarts was the best school of magic in the British Isles. It had the best instructors, the best library, and a thousand year history of teaching magic. She was won over by this; secondary education at Donwell Girls' Preparatory was nothing in comparison. What had they to offer that Hogwarts couldn't? Emergency first-aid training? Typist training, secretarial skills, and book-keeping?

That Donwell Prep didn't offer classes in homemaking skills had been a point in its favour, back when the eight-year-old Hermione had been narrowing down her list of future schooling options.

Hermione wouldn't ever scorn the women of the middle classes who found employment opportunities that their preceding generations would never have been offered. She was glad—she was proud—that the modern woman could find success and independence outside of the home. But she couldn't help but recognise that there was a large gulf between holding a respectable position as the manager of an office steno pool… and being a witch.

Once she'd gone to Hogwarts, she had been told that Hogwarts was the best school of magic in the whole world. She treated this statement with some scepticism, because it had been said by her classmates and not by Professor Dumbledore, and Tom was correct (but not very nice) in observing that the majority of the students in their year would never end up becoming the next Merlin.

And it was now that she had received a letter from a trained adult wizard that she was confronted by the fact that Hogwarts, for all its prestige, history, and reputation, did not teach everything about magic, not even in its senior year elective courses.

(Of course, she had some awareness of this already, with that grudge Tom held against Professor Dumbledore for "hoarding" information until he believed Tom was old enough for it. Or until Dumbledore "deemed him worthy", as Tom called it, muttering under his breath about tests of character and whether or not Dumbledore was one of those misguided old men who believed pulling swords out of stones was a signifier of worthiness.

But that was a different, and entirely justified, matter. She didn't want Tom to have that information either, for the sake of his best interests.)

Basic wards were taught in N.E.W.T. years for those students who'd taken their O.W.L.s in Arithmancy and Runes, but it didn't involve anything close to the technical detail of which Mr. S. Pacek wrote. These were wards similar to the ones the prefect, Devina Holbrook, had mentioned: simple Muggle repelling or noise silencing wards. A Hogwarts graduate could cast them, and they would last anywhere from the better part of a day to over a month, and that was good enough for most wizards and witches in their everyday life. But only a fraction of Hogwarts students taking their O.W.L.S. took them for Arithmancy or Runes compared to the more popular subjects like Care of Magical Creatures or Divination, so the number of potential wardmasters Hogwarts turned out over the years was disappointingly small.

It was the same for magical artists and artificers—wizarding artists who painted magical portraits or wove magical tapestries, and craftsmen who built useful inventions like Vanishing Cabinets or enchanted printing presses.
Upon asking the portraits in the corridors of Hogwarts, Hermione discovered that for the last three hundred or so years, most of the magical paintings in Wizarding Britain had been created by Italian and French artists. These artists rotated from manor house to manor house, painting members of the most prominent British families, in a very strange reversal of the traditional gentleman of quality's Grand Tour.

"Oh, my darling girl," said one simpering witch, shaking her head in sorrow. Her powdered white curls, piled high atop her head, swayed dangerously. "Some of us would have preferred an Englishman artist, one who knew us personally, so to get the mannerisms as exact as they were in life. But the Italians, oh! And the Frenchmen! They knew the difference between décolleté and déshabillé, and that was what really mattered to me. I certainly don't regret choosing my dear Claudio or sweet-spoken Laurent if my only other choice was dreary old Mr. Bingham. I'd much rather be preserved for posterity with this—" she patted the lace tippet pinned over her bodice, "—being accurate than anything else."

"Hear, hear," said the old, whiskered wizard in the frame on the opposite side of the corridor. He stroked his moustaches and winked at the witch. The background of his painting was a small, windowless room with nothing but a single desk and a candle.

The white-haired witch giggled and fanned herself.

Hermione felt vaguely unclean by the time she left the portrait gallery.

The interrogations confirmed that qualifications issued from magical schools other than Hogwarts were considered valid and good. Although, one wizard advised her, when explaining what she wanted she should be sure to speak as slowly and clearly as possible—and as loudly, too, which made Hermione scratch her head; they might be foreign, but they weren't deaf. She was told that whilst they were skilled workers, it had to be taken into account that they weren't proper Englishmen.

As much as she was tempted to, Hermione didn't remind them that Hogwarts, and therefore their portraits, were currently residing somewhere in the Scottish highlands. Considering that wizards had difficulty assimilating any modern developments that came after the International Statute of Secrecy, which was put into effect a decade or so before Scotland joined the Union, doing so would likely be poking a factional beehive. (And telling them that Ireland had left the Union a decade or so ago would be like throwing a hand grenade into said beehive.)

Later that week, Hermione confronted Tom about the things she'd learned about the quality of a Hogwarts education.

She knew that Tom refused to subscribe to one of the mainstay tenets of Common Decency, which was, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all". But his honesty came in useful at times. In those situations, he made for a good sounding board for working out problems, so long as Hermione remembered to do the exact opposite of whatever actions he suggested.

Hermione hadn't spent a great deal of time outside the castle, not since they'd taken Flying Classes in First Year and she'd done a few circles of the grounds with the rest of the group. There wasn't much to look at outside: a Lake and a rocky shoreline and a boathouse that was kept locked except for the one day of the year where the newest batch of First Years were given their first impression of Hogwarts. There was a Groundskeeper's hut by the Forbidden Forest they weren't allowed to explore, a grassy sward by the greenhouses and kitchen gardens, and a Quidditch pitch and adjoining
changing rooms. She had gone to one Quidditch match last year, Ravenclaw versus Slytherin, and it hadn't impressed her. She hadn't gone back, and neither had Tom.

"It seems like the primary goal of Hogwarts is turning out well-rounded students," Hermione remarked, ambling along a colonnaded gallery by the Eastern Courtyard. It was a rare fine day in late winter, and for once she'd asked Tom to meet her outside instead of in a musty old classroom in the dungeons. It was still freezing cold, but the sun had revealed itself for the first time in months.

She'd noticed that her skin had paled from being indoors all autumn and winter, but it hadn't yet reached the translucent heights of Tom's skin—he was as fair as a princess. She knew that if she pointed it out, Tom would make a sarcastic retort dripping with either arrogance or anger. Sometimes she could flip a coin with how predictable he was.

"By 'well-rounded', you must mean 'basic'," Tom corrected her. His breath puffed out in a misty white cloud with every word. "And by 'students', let me direct you toward a more accurate term: 'Lowest Common Denominator'."

"You know that we can argue semantics all day without getting anywhere," said Hermione, "but I think the bigger problem is that Hogwarts prepares students for employment in the wizarding community, but due to the size of the community, there isn't a wide range of positions to choose from."

"As far as I see it, there is a tiered ranking of common wizarding employment," Tom said, slowing a bit to allow Hermione to catch up to his longer strides. He was wearing the new winter cloak he'd gotten for Christmas, and it swished by his ankles in a manner that he no doubt deemed appropriately dramatic. To Hermione, wearing wizarding cloaks felt like having a blanket tied around her throat. She preferred coats. At least when you wore one, you wouldn't trip on your own hem going up the stairs.

(She kept waiting for Tom to slip on a combination of icy stairs and long cloak, but he never did.)

"The top tier of jobs after completing Hogwarts includes any position in the Ministry of Magic, St. Mungo's, or joining professional Quidditch. The first-string team is best, but no one will look down on a player fresh out of school making the reserves," said Tom. He held up a hand as Hermione's mouth opened to argue; neither of them thought very much of the most popular wizarding sporting pastime, and to consider it top tier was, to them, sheer absurdity. "These are what the Hogwarts authorities, or Professor Slughorn at least—and most people count him a good judge of these things—consider good, well-paying occupations for school leavers. And it's," he added, as if the words left a bad taste in his mouth, "socially respectable."

"The middle tier," Tom continued, "is shop work. Manning a counter in Diagon Alley, clerking in the back, or filling orders at an apothecary or haberdashery. It wouldn't be so bad if the shop work came with an apprenticeship with one of the better proprietors, but how often does someone like Ollivander offer one to those outside his immediate family? The positions at Gringotts Bank are also considered second tier even though I hear the pay is on a level or higher than what the Ministry's offering, but everyone knows that the place is run by goblins, and that's nowhere near as respectable as working for proper wizards and witches.

"The last and least tier—and I must profess I agree with Slughorn on this count—is magical menial labour," said Tom with a sniff of disdain. "Farming and harvesting potions ingredients, dissecting salamanders and lionfish for parts, or breeding and raising magical creatures. Half of it's work you can't even use a wand for, because of the ridiculous special requirements like 'cut by a silver knife by
the light of a sickle moon’, or ‘plucked in a maiden's palm on the first day of spring’. Nevertheless, it's work even the meanest halfwit can do, with or without a single N.E.W.T."

"It seems almost... mediaeval," said Hermione. "It's not so surprising, is it? Wizarding Britain has the population of a mediaeval town, and in those times, most people whose families owned a business went into that business. Sons of bakers became bakers, blacksmiths trained blacksmiths. And the local lords—they must be the old families." Hermione paused for a few seconds in thought, then went on, "I couldn't place them in the tier system, but it's because they don't have a place there, do they? Employment is optional for them."

"The benefits of generational wealth," said Tom bitterly. His nostrils flared and Hermione could see where a thin stream of white mist escaped from between his clenched teeth. He stopped in the middle of the walkway and peered through the gaps in between the columns, down to the craggy shelf of rock below. "I don't want to be part of that tier system, Hermione. Can you imagine me bowing and scraping to another man for the sake of my daily bread? I can't. I think I'd rather starve. I've never been much of a conformist, as I'm sure you already know. And I don't have any intention of starting—right now, or five years from now, or ever, really."

"What are you going to do, then?" Hermione asked. She refrained from mentioning that the 'bowing and scraping' would merely be a natural extension of his Good Boy pretense, which he appeared to have no trouble employing when it suited him.

She was also developing suspicions of Tom Riddle's harbouring Socialist sympathies. His rhetoric was not exactly original; she'd heard it before, in the context of labourers redistributing power to abolish an oppressive class system. But Tom, she imagined, if he had read the pamphlets they gave away on street corners and left inside public telephone boxes, dreamt of redistributing power in order to give it all to himself. (And he would never discount the usefulness of an eager pool of labourers, especially one that could be swayed by a rousing speech or two.)

"You'd never take a Muggle job as a bank teller or a land steward. I can't think of anything that would circumvent the system, unless, after Hogwarts, you plan not to go into employment altogether. Furthering your education—a formal apprenticeship or studying for a Mastery on your own?" If anyone could master a magical discipline by themselves, it was Tom. "All you'd need to do is create an original masterwork invention and have it evaluated by an established Master."

Original inventions sometimes required dangerous experimentation; Masters were sought out for apprenticeships for this reason, particularly the prolific ones who had been involved in the creation of famous inventions. The modern racing broomstick, the Trace, Omnioculars, the Pensieve. But she hoped—hoped—that by the time Tom left Hogwarts, he would have learned how to be more responsible.

"It doesn't matter what I do, as long as I can earn my own living with it," Tom said, with a careless shrug.

"You haven't figured it out yet, have you?"

"And you've figured out what you plan to do?" Tom turned the question back on her, without giving an answer of his own.

"Before I knew about magic, I'd have liked to study medicine," said Hermione, taking a few steps closer to the edge of the parapet. It was a long way down to the rocks and the frozen crust of the Lake below. "My father still has his old contacts from his army days in the Royal Medical Corps.
I'd hate to be beholden to nepotism, but it wouldn't be strictly nepotism, would it? It would only get my foot in the door, and give me the equal standing I'd have gotten on my own merits had I been born a boy and not a girl. I thought it was something that would allow me to do the most good—to prove what young ladies were capable of, to help the next generation of career women, like the VAD nurses did in the Great War before I was born.

She raised her chilled fingers to her lips and blew on them. There was a spell she'd read about in a book, one that created a portable fuel-less fire. It would have been very useful right now if she had learned to cast it.

"But after I found out that I was a witch, I also found that no one here cares about women's suffrage or advancing the rights of women in work," Hermione continued. It was one of the first things she'd asked about the wizarding world, and a deciding factor in her acceptance of magical society. She liked this part of being a citizen of two nations, but there were other parts she wasn't so keen on.

"That doesn't mean the wizarding world is perfect, though: there are still inequalities—just not the same ones as in the Muggle world. So I figured that making changes for the betterment of Magical Britain would be more effective as a Ministry bureaucrat than as a St. Mungo's Healer."

Tom leaned against a column, and Hermione saw his shoulders shaking. She realised after a brief moment that he was silently laughing.

"I can't say," Tom bit out, wiping his eyes, "that the chinless inbreds would be much pleased with the prospect of the Minister for Magic being a Muggleborn—and there has never been a Muggleborn Minister—let alone one who would lecture them on the principles of common decency."

"I never said anything about being the Minister for Magic!"

"Why else would one bother working for the Ministry?"

"To restructure unfair policies?" Hermione said snippily. "Working up through the Department of Magical Transportation would eventually let me install a Floo connection in the houses of registered Muggle guardians, like my parents. Then we wouldn't have to drive over thirty miles to get to Diagon Alley. And we live in the Greater London area; every Muggleborn family living outside the Home Counties is stuck in a sorrier situation than ours."

"Yes," said Tom, his eyes flashing, "but you could do all that and more as the Minister."

"But would the 'chinless inbreds', as you call them, even let me be Minister?"

"The delightful thing about inbreeding," Tom said in a low voice, pushing away from the column to step closer to Hermione, "is that it has not only rendered them chinless, but spineless, too."

The white plume of his breath wafted over her face, carried by a gust of icy wind. A few windblown curls of hair had fallen over his brows, shadowing his dark eyes. His lips curled up in the corners, in an expression of amusement that was more mocking than anything else.

Skin as white as snow, lips as red as blood, Hermione recalled. But he doesn't look at all like a princess.

"I don't know what that's supposed to mean," said Hermione, fidgeting nervously.

"It means, Hermione," Tom said, his eyes half-lidded, "that if you ever run for Minister, you'll have
It was only when Hermione had returned to her dormitory that she realised that Tom hadn't given her a proper answer about what he wanted to do in regards to his plans post-Hogwarts.

She kicked off her shoes and fell face-first onto her bed with a groan. If there was anyone who was perfect for the life of a career politician, it would be Tom Riddle. He could counterfeit the perfect politician's demeanour; when he wanted to, he could speak with the right touches of confidence and sincerity to make crusty old men reconsider their positions, when before their beliefs had been fossilised from the turn of the century. He possessed a certain persuasive manner that, in a decade and a half's time, would let him rival a seasoned Parliamentarian. Tom's only flaw would be his lack of genuine concern for social progress; in that, he resembled the quintessential politician. In the realistic view of things, how many politicians actually cared about advancing the rights of the ill-treated and downtrodden?

Did it even matter that they didn't care or understand, as long as they supported the ideals of social progress in the end? Many noteworthy Liberal politicians had been alumni of the Old Boys' institutions, were descended from peers of the realm or held titles of their own, and had never lived the life of a working mother, but that didn't stop them from wanting to improve universal working conditions...

"Hermione?"

A voice interrupted Hermione's sequence of thoughts.

Hermione lifted her face from the pillow. "Yes?"

"Your owl brought your mail while you were out." The voice came from one of her dorm mates, Siobhan Kilmuir. She was a girl of reserved disposition, whose hair was so blonde that her eyelashes and brows were nearly invisible. "Here."

Siobhan approached Hermione's bed and dropped an envelope on the blue quilted covers. Hermione picked it up, then turned it around to inspect the wax seal. It was a deep maroon, and pressed with the design of a turret or castle tower with two swords crossed at its base. The wardmaster who'd seen the ad she'd placed in The Daily Prophet had sent her a reply.

"Where did you buy your owl from?" Siobhan asked, sitting down on her bed. "My mum's owl only delivers during breakfast. If I want to check for mail myself, I have to walk all the way up to the owlery. Yours is trained really well if it knows how to deliver right to your room."

"Oh," Hermione said distractedly, sliding her thumb under the seal and peeling off the wax, "Tom trained my owl during the summer."
Gilles was used to running deliveries in the mornings and evenings, and knew to wait quietly on a windowsill until his recipient had collected their mail or written a reply. She hadn't known that all owls weren't like that, but she did know that Tom had proven to have a remarkable way with animals. Gilles didn't drop parcels from twelve feet above the table and splash everyone in the vicinity with milk and hot porridge. He didn't steal bacon or sausage links right off the plate, as she'd seen from the owls belonging to other students. And he never left dead animals or other wastes on her window ledge at home; her mother would never have allowed a pet if Hermione needed to climb a ladder to clean up after it.

"Tom?" Siobhan frowned. "Tom Riddle?"

"Yes, that Tom Riddle."

"You should be careful with him," said Siobhan, shifting uncomfortably.

"Why?" Hermione inquired, looking up from the letter.

"I heard people saying that he cheats on homework."

"What!" Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Where did you hear that?"

"It's got to be true, hasn't it?" said Siobhan. "Riddle gets the best marks out of anyone in our year. If he was a Ravenclaw, no one would think anything about it—but he's a Slytherin. They say Slytherins would do all sorts of things for a good mark."

No one said that Slytherins couldn't be clever," said Hermione, setting her letter down so she didn't crush it with her fist, "or Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors too, for that matter." She remembered that she had almost been Sorted into Gryffindor. "Anyway, I was told that the Hat offered to Sort Riddle into Ravenclaw, and he borrows books from our Common Room library now and then. Without needing help with the door puzzle, or getting kicked out by Holbrook and the rest of the prefects. Who told you these things?"

Siobhan pressed her lips into a thin line, and unable to meet Hermione's glare, blinked and shuffled her feet. "Antonella Everard and Evandina Chuffley in the Second Floor girls' loo. I heard them talking about him from the stalls."

"They're liars," said Hermione firmly. "I think they're just upset that a student who isn't of 'proper wizarding stock' keeps beating them in the academic rankings."

"But neither Everard nor Chuffley are part of the Sacred Twenty-Eight..." Siobhan trailed off. "I've never heard them say the, um, you know," her voice dropped to a whisper, "the m-word."

"You don't need to use language like that to be a nasty person. I know that Everard once said I had the looks of a deformed beaver behind my back, and you're taking them at their word?" Hermione gritted her teeth. She didn't care much if she was called a know-it-all, but she hated it when girls undermined other girls by insulting their looks, as if appearance was in any way an indication of an individual's character or intellect. And she absolutely detested anyone who implied that a girl had to devalue her intelligence to be considered likeable. "Besides, we're in Defense and Transfiguration with the Slytherins. You've seen Riddle's wandwork. Do you think he needs to cheat?"

Siobhan shook her head. "I always thought Everard and Chuffley were alright. I know their families; they don't hold with Muggle baiting. They're a far cry from the families who want to
legalise Muggle hunting."

Hermione was horrified. "There are wizards who want to hunt Muggles?!"

Siobhan flushed a dark red. "It's been illegal for centuries. It's not something anyone talks about in company, and the only people who do are two hundred years old and from certain families. No one would pay any attention to them but for the fact that they have vaults full of gold people are hoping to inherit, when they finally give it up and drop off the twig. Everard and Chuffley are decent families compared to those ones."

She scratched her nose, then added, "It might be rude of them to say people like you and Riddle aren't of proper wizarding stock, but at least they'll never deny that you're both wizards. They'd never say that, not even in private."

Small blessings, thought Hermione.

"Siobhan," she spoke in an assertive voice, "the next time you hear them talking about Riddle in the loo, you should tell them to report it directly to their Head of House. Cheating is a serious accusation, and they ought to let Professor Slughorn sort it out. See what they say about that."

Siobhan nodded. "That's a sensible idea. I don't know why they didn't bring the proof to a professor instead of gossiping about it... Merlin, unless they really were spinning stories about him."

"If you still think Riddle is a cheat, you should keep an eye on him in Transfiguration. You can see for yourself what kind of wizard he is," said Hermione. "Professor Dumbledore wouldn't allow anything but honest work in his class."

Hermione soon turned back to her letter and Siobhan her Potions textbook. It was later that night when Hermione was writing to her mother that she realised she had automatically jumped up to defend Tom Riddle from a perfectly legitimate complaint. She was a proponent of fair treatment to all, but it had taken hearing about gossip from a girls' loo to spur Hermione into a visceral reaction, into an instant defense of Tom's character.

But Tom had done what he had been accused of. He had cheated on homework. It just wasn't his own.

("I enabled cheating," Tom would say. "There's a difference."

She hadn't changed her moral stance on cheating. She didn't like it, whether it was cheating or helping others cheat... But she liked being called offensive names behind her back even less. She wasn't fond of the idea of picking a side—it seemed as if she was condemning the actions of one side while condemning the other—but if she had to pick one, then she would choose the side that wouldn't speak of her as Antonella Everard did.

Tom Riddle was academically dishonest, a cheater or enabler or whatever name he called himself, but the fact of the matter was that he never called her names.

Would he have done the same thing for me? Hermione wondered. Would he have defended me against one of his dorm mates?

She had an inkling of what families Siobhan had referred to, the ones with the old names and the heavily-laden vaults. *The Sacred Twenty-Eight*, a genealogical handbook similar to *Burke's*
Peerage, which had first been published over a hundred years before its wizarding equivalent. Hermione was sceptical of both of them. She bought and saved a newspaper every time she saw T.M. Riddle commended for his yearly academic rankings in the school notices section. She could only imagine what wealthy families did when they saw their names printed in a fancy book, and how an opportunistic publisher could see the profit in indulging their misplaced vanity.

I don't know what he'd do had the situation been reversed. I know he doesn't think of us as friends; every instance where I've heard him use the word "friend", it was spoken with contempt. The conventional expectations of friendship—or what I believe they should entail—don't exactly apply to him.

I know he has standards, Hermione concluded. They're not the same as mine, but we've known one another long enough that he is fully aware there are things that I consider acceptable and things I don't.

It was easier for her to focus on less complicated, more concrete things. She had problems of her own to manage, ones she could understand and find a way to solve, because there was a solution to be found. Unlike whatever strange, convoluted relationship, this lopsided friendship—she couldn't think of any better name to call it—she had with Tom.

Dear Mum,

You've written before about the state of London and the war and what to do when term finishes. It's also been on my mind since the start of the year, ever since I was told that the school is firm on not extending its boarding policy into the summer holidays. Instead of going with the St. John's group to Northamptonshire for July and August, I've found a way for us to stay safe in London. And it will mean that you won't have to use the public shelters anymore; I know you and Dad don't like how crowded and noisy they get, especially when someone starts a panic over food or water. All we'd need to do is clear out our cellar and let a wizard in to ward it.

I've been saving all year, and I know it'll be dearer than I'd expected it to be, but I found a wardmaster who can do the job, without the Ministry of Magic being any the wiser. His name is Mr. Sigismund Pacek and I've included his qualifications in the attachment. I'm told that his alma mater, Durmstrang, is the Hogwarts of Scandinavia and the Slavic states, and the institution that issued his Mastery specialises in magical architecture and construction. He quotes £30 a day for his fees, and I know it's quite a lot, but he says his wards can hold up for ten years at least with minimal maintenance. And he can do other things than just wards—he said he can cast an Undetectable Extension Charm, which, according to A Practical Approach to Advanced Spellecasting, is a spell that expands the dimensions...

The days of spring grew warmer and the moments of stolen sunshine less intermittent. Every morning when Hermione looked out of her dormitory window, she could tell that the Lake was a
different colour as the thick crust of its icy surface melted, darkening from a bright, glacial white to grey and finally to a deep and fathomless black.

Hermione spent more of her weekend hours walking around the grounds with Tom, and every time they heard the bells in the clocktower ring, they stopped to listen. Or rather, she would stop, and he would tap his foot impatiently waiting for her to catch up—he was a faster walker with longer legs, and wanted to get back indoors as soon as he could. But she noted that his hands were shoved into his trouser pockets, and she saw the bob of his larynx as he swallowed and looked aside to study the masonry on the walkway or the heathered hills in the far distance. It betrayed his inner misgivings, and proved that he was not so unaffected as he wished himself to appear; it proved that she was not the only one affected by the creeping touch of apprehension.

She counted down the days until the end of term, but unlike her dorm mates, and unlike the Hermione of the previous year, she wasn't anxiously fretting over how much time she had left to study before the final exams came around.

Well, that wasn't quite true.

She still cared about getting Outstandings in every subject, about picking the right electives for Third Year, and ensuring she was getting the most out of her magical education; she was acutely aware that she'd chosen Hogwarts at the cost of attending Muggle university and becoming the future Dr. Granger. School marks and class rankings and the tranquil pace of life within the halls of Hogwarts, as much as she appreciated the distraction, paled in comparison to the danger that lay outside.

Gilles was getting more than his fair share of outdoor exercise, too. Almost every other day he flew to London and back, bringing letters from home and copies of *The Times* or *The Evening Standard*.

It had been quiet for most of the months of spring, and the British people, as Hermione's mother wrote, were slowly becoming accustomed to the idea of shopping with ration books and living with less. The wizarding market, however, had just as much beef and chocolate for sale as they had the previous summer, so Mum and Dad didn't have to adjust their lifestyles too much. They knew it was preferable if they made some sort of contribution in the name of national solidarity, so instead of serving a cut of meat on the dinner table every evening, they had it five times a week. The average Briton who lacked access to the wizarding market (or a crooked butcher) could only afford meat two days out of the week.

*My dearest Hermione,*

*Mr. Pacek came calling this afternoon to take the measurements of our cellar. We found him to be very professional, well-spoken, a gracious guest, and an excellent young man in all respects. We hadn't even suspected him to be a wizard at first; he arrived at our doorstep in worsted wool, briefcase in hand and nothing about him gave him away. I've found that one can usually tell wizards apart—their hats aren't quite right for the time or season, their buttons are sewn reverse of what they should be, or they are wearing slippers instead of proper shoes.*

*He stayed for tea and had some rather fascinating news to share: he'd left the Continent because there is a rabble rouser who has taken over several Ministries, and Mr. Pacek disagrees vehemently with some of his policies. It appears that the new Grand Minister has been recruiting heavily among the students, present and former, of Durmstrang—*
which happens to be both his and Mr. Pacek's wizarding alma mater. Mr. Pacek states
that he was offered very little work outside of working for this Mr. Grindelwald, a
Hungarian national of German descent, and therefore chose to seek his fortunes
abroad. He is lucky in this, he says, because just last week the Norwegian Magical
Assembly was attacked, and Durmstrang will likely be under siege soon, so anyone who
hasn't emigrated or capitulated may be put under arrest.

Hermione, it appears that the magical world is facing its own set of troubles...

She showed Tom the letter when they were studying for their last exam of the school term. The
library was always busy at this time of the year, so they'd agreed to wake up early and reserve seats
as soon as the library opened its doors at eight in the morning. By mid-morning, it would have been
impossible to get a table, and if any spots opened up, the older students would have had the clout to
snatch them up first. It helped that they could store muffins in Tom's stasis charmed lunchbox; they
weren't supposed to eat in the library, but if they sat in a nook at the very back, they wouldn't be
seen. Besides, the muffins were so delicious when they were kept piping hot, and it wasn't difficult
to look up a cleaning charm to take care of the crumbs.

"'Rabble rouser'?" said Tom, skimming the bottom of the page. He snorted. "That's putting it very
lightly. This Minister Grindelwald is an honest-to-goodness Dark Lord."

"What!" cried Hermione, and instantly her hands covered her mouth and she sent furtive glances to
either side for any sign of a librarian on the prowl. "How?"

"By killing, subjugating, and terrorising a bunch of people, obviously," said Tom, with a quirk of his
eyebrow. "How else do you think one earns the title of 'Dark Lord'? Certainly not by a majority
vote of adult citizens."

"How do you know this, I mean?" asked Hermione, trying again. "I haven't seen it in The Daily
Prophet."

Hermione was the undisputed first in History of Magic. In every other class—other than Astronomy
—it was a great struggle to match Tom in practical demonstrations and theoretical knowledge. It was
a class that involved lots of reading books and essay writing, the longer the better: everything
Hermione excelled at, as much as it bored Tom in equal measure. She'd once heard him complain
that he'd rather make history, or write it himself, than listen to some desiccated old professor mumble
reasons at them for why goblins didn't deserve to live.

She'd read about Dark Lords, of course, and the worst ones were such pivotal points in wizarding
history that she'd expected to see the signs if another one was in the early stages of making an
appearance. It must be in the same fashion as volcanoes, she'd thought. The ground rumbled, and
one could spot the smoke, smell the sulphur, see the animals abandon their homes days or even
weeks before the volcano itself erupted. Hermione read The Daily Prophet on a regular basis now.
Not as religiously as the other students did—only the most important news and official
announcements—and had seen no indication of unusual occurrences in the wizarding world.

But she wasn't surprised, now that she thought about it. How often did the Prophet report on
anything outside of the British Isles? Even Irish news tended to be overlooked, outside of articles
about Quidditch matches played in the Ballycastle team's pitch, which was located in Ulster.
"The boys in my dorm have talked about it," said Tom. "But they're idiots. They don't know anything important; they've only ever repeated things their fathers have said."

"What have they said? Should I tell my Mum?" Hermione asked. Her mother had expressed worries about the safety of Wizarding Britain. A warded cellar would be safe from conventional air raids and artillery, but it wouldn't serve as permanent protection against any group of determined and well-trained wizards. "She's wanted to evacuate the family to the countryside for months."

"This bit about Durmstrang being Grindelwald's alma mater is incorrect," said Tom. "Nott said he attended last century, but didn't graduate, as he was expelled in his final year for..." Tom paused, the curl of his lip showing the barest hint of a scowl, "dangerous magical experimentation."

Hermione's expression was triumphant, but Tom ignored it with a blithe wave of his hand.

"And Grindelwald and his people don't care about blood status, apparently," continued Tom. "Not as much as the Twenty-Eight do, at least—otherwise he'd have many more Slytherin supporters in my Common Room. And he's not interested in Britain for now. It looks like they're going after Norway and consolidating their hold in Scandinavia." He tilted his head and ran a finger down the crease in the paper where the letter had been folded into crisp thirds. "It's interesting that the Norwegian Ministry was attacked only weeks after Norway was invaded by the German Muggles. Something has got to be rotten in the state of Denmark..."

"Denmark was invaded a month or so ago," Hermione offered. "The London papers say they're under German occupation."

Tom nodded. "The Muggles are more worried about war than the wizards, as they ought to be. No Muggle government has anything equivalent to the importance our world places on protecting magical society and its members. In fact, the International Statute of Secrecy never mentions blood status at all. It only ever refers to 'magical persons and beings'."

"We're Muggles for three months of the year," observed Hermione. "I wonder if we should do anything, contribute in some way..."

"I hate living like a Muggle, and I hate the Muggle war even more, but we've no obligation to do anything about it. We aren't Muggles. And before you make any suggestions, you should know that I refuse to go on any door-to-door salvage drives," said Tom. He set down the letter onto the table, carefully tucking it back into its envelope. "The best course of action is to cross our fingers and hope that Grindelwald is still at large by the time we're out of Hogwarts."

Hermione sent him a disapproving glare. "Why would you ever wish for that?"

"How easy do you think it is to get an Order of Merlin in peacetime, Hermione?" said Tom in a bland voice. "It would solve all those pesky issues with our future careers, wouldn't it?"
Laissez-faire

1940

*Returning to London, thought Tom, is even more miserable this time around.*

The grey skies were greyer than ever. The general mood on the street was solemn and harried. The people were an archetypal tableau of urban life: the somber, monochromatic crowds of English yeomanry, with their chins up, upper lips stiff, and their backs straight—but Tom could see where their eyes were just the slightest touch colder, their belts a notch or two tighter. He'd also observed that there weren't as many motor vehicles and young children on the streets, nor as much open gaiety in greetings and conversation, and the few spots of colour that peppered the dismal landscape were limited to recruiting posters placed in the front windows of shops and offices.

Some part of him was darkly exultant that all of Britain had been made familiar with a standard of life that had once been the sole dominion of a wretched minority.

Another part of him was seething because that standard of life had been what his useless mother had condemned *him* to, when she'd stumbled through the gates of Wool's in her ninth month of corporal purgatory. But Tom Riddle, unlike the rest of the creatures who called that place their home, had found a means of escape—and now, slowly and inexorably, he was being drawn back to it like a sinner led to his eternal reward. Perhaps he was being melodramatic about it (Hermione had begun calling him *dramatic* ever since he'd decided that she was meant to be his Foil), but that sense of gloomy finality was much the same.

"If you can suggest anything that will make the summer the least bit bearable, now would be the best time to mention it," said Tom, glaring out of the window at the families waiting at the platform for the arrival of the train. Screaming younger siblings, arms up in the air and waving when the train hadn't even arrived, colourful animated signs reading *WELCOME BACK!* in glittering letters; it was all rather gauche in Tom's eyes and made him glad he hadn't anyone to embarrass him like this.

The Hogwarts Express slowly chugged into King's Cross. The white billowing steam from its chimneys left the windows on the first two carriages warm to the touch. The doors opened, and students pushed out of their compartments, clogging the aisles with their bags and birdcages and brooms and school trunks. The First Years were at the forefront of the rush, pouring out the moment the doors were flung open, eager to see their families after a long and arduous year battling the symptoms of homesickness.

"I asked my parents if you could visit our house," said Hermione, standing up and stretching her stiff limbs. "Petrol is still under ration, but Dad gets extra fuel tickets because of his job."

Tom brought his bag down from the overhead rack. "He's still using a civilian ration book, isn't he? The extra ones are for medical emergencies, and using them to drive friends around seems... a bit dodgy."

"Yes, well," Hermione said, as they lingered in the aisle between compartments, waiting for the crowd to thin, "the whole city is on ration books, but that doesn't stop the rich by getting around it by having their cream tea and steaks at a restaurant. If we only use the car to pick you up once or twice a week, no one will notice."
"Oh, I wasn't objecting to it, of course," said Tom, helping himself to a handful of partially unwrapped chocolate frogs abandoned on the bench of a vacated compartment. It looked as if the person who'd bought them had taken the cards out and left the chocolate untouched. It was wasteful, as opening the box broke the stasis enchantment and the frog soon lost its charmed animation. Most wizards didn't find the inert frogs appealing, the same way they didn't like Muggle chessboards, even though the chocolate was the same flavour, and Muggle chess played by the same rules as wizarding chess.

The casual way wizards used and wasted things was something he had trouble accustoming himself to; on the other hand, the wizarding perspective on physical injuries, as had so appalled Hermione, was nothing he worried himself about. He knew that wizards could conjure matter out of thin air, but his classmates couldn't, and while they might learn to conjure handkerchiefs, floral bouquets, and singing doves by their N.E.W.T. examinations, he doubted that any of them would ever be able to create unicorn hoof shavings or mandrake leaves in their lifetimes.

He'd seen the volume of waste in Potions practicals: when one of his classmates had waited too long to stir, or stirred in the wrong direction, they'd ask the professor to Vanish their work and start again with fresh ingredients—that is, if they didn't just go ahead and double down on their mistake, then hand in a subpar sample phial at the end of the lesson. They could have saved both time and ingredients on their Seasickness Serum if they'd known to stir in alternate directions every twelve seconds while adding crushed rowan berries on low heat. It would reverse the effect of over-simmering and produce a richer pearly green colour in the finished potion.

Wizards.

There were few instances in life where Tom had difficulty thinking up a suitable response, but he found this one in particular to be all-encompassing and always appropriate.

"If you want to drag your entire family into a life of wickedness and degeneracy, by all means, go ahead. I wouldn't dare stand in your way. But," Tom added in a low voice, "I still say that it would've been simpler to borrow from the school broom shed. No one would have noticed if I'd taken one for the summer. It's not like the Quidditch teams would miss a single old Cleansweep, anyway."

"I'm sure you'll be singing a different tune after some overeager reservist in the Home Guard catches you at the end of his fowling piece." Hermione shook her head. "Not to mention, you'd be breaking half a dozen rules on wizarding secrecy."

"You're right," said Tom. "I'll have to learn the Disillusionment Charm first."

"Sometimes I wonder how you manage to show up for breakfast in the mornings," Hermione sighed. "One of these days you'll catch your head on the door from how swollen it's gotten."

By this time they'd collected their belongings from the luggage compartment, and were headed for the entrance of the Muggle side of King's Cross. Students of wizarding family were Apparated directly to their homes by their parents, or used the public Floo fireplaces. Everyone else had to wait their turn to exit through the pillar—it would not be very inconspicuous for twenty people to suddenly appear out of nowhere on the Muggle platform.

Being British, they automatically formed into an orderly queue.
When it was their turn to cross over, Tom turned to her. "You'll write to me again, won't you, Hermione?"

Hermione blinked. "Oh! Of course I will! I was going to ask if you'd like to come to dinner with my family tonight. Mum was going to pick us up in the motor, and then pop in to ask Mrs. Cole's permission for you to visit during the summer, since you live only a few miles from the station. It wouldn't do for one of her charges to disappear for hours on end."

"She doesn't have to do that," said Tom. "Mrs. Cole wouldn't notice a thing."

"It's the proper thing to do," Hermione said, "and she insists. Like saying 'Please' or 'Thank you' and leaving a card if you call on someone who's out, or pouring the tea before the milk. If we went about it differently, society would be on the verge of collapse. Besides," she gestured at his battered brass-bound trunk, "don't you need to drop your luggage off?"

"The less I see of that place, the better," Tom muttered, and then they passed through the brick pillar and into the Muggle world.

Gone were the colourful hats and the spangled robes of the magical crowd; the hooting and cawing of caged birds had fallen silent, the crackle of Apparition halted mid-step. On this side of the barrier, Tom felt as if his life had run to the end of its Technicolor reel, and a sadistic projectionist had swapped in the rest of it in black-and-white celluloid. The contrast was jarring: Muggles wore grey, black, and navy blue in hard-wearing wool and heavy fustian, jacket and trousers and hats with very little variation from one man's silhouette to another. He noticed that there was an occasional spattering of olive drab worn by soldiers disembarking a train two platforms over.

They smelled of tobacco ash and engine grease and too many unwashed human bodies in too small a space. They carried newspapers and briefcases, and they pushed past Tom and Hermione only thinking about getting where they needed to be. None of them realised, or even noticed, the existence of another world on the other side of the pillar.

If Tom had been a lesser wizard and a weaker person, he might have considered throwing himself off the platform and onto an oncoming train at the sudden, shocking loss of everything magical. But he wasn't a little match girl, nor a reveller waking up the morning after midsummer night to discover that it had just been a dream. His wand had remained in his pocket, the bright, polished yew wood warm to the touch, just as it had all through the coldest winter days in the lowest dungeons beneath Hogwarts.

He couldn't use it now, but it was a reminder that his magic was inside him. It could never be taken from him; he had been born with it; it was his birthright, as he could call very little else in his life but his name—his plebeian Muggle-ish name.

(As much as he disparaged the name 'Tom' for being so common, three-lettered names were not inherently bad. 'Leo' had been the name of a dozen Popes, and the first Pope Leo had been known as Leo the Great. And people so revered the name of the Creator that in many books Tom had read, the authors hadn't dared to use all three letters of His name. They called him G—d.

That made him contemplate the potential of T—m the Great'. It sounded so deliciously blasphemous.)

He shoved his way through, the trunk in front of him parting the crowd, with Hermione tagging along in his wake, her empty owl cage rattling against her own trunk. Gilles had been sent on by
himself from the wizarding side of Platform Nine and Three Quarters.

They encountered Mrs. Granger at the side entrance of King's Cross, standing by the Grangers' shiny blue motor car. She was dressed in a long wizarding-style coat of deep violet gabardine, with sharp lapels and a line of pearl buttons down each cuff. While Tom had read in the London papers lent him by Hermione that they hadn't started rationing fabric, it was assured they would do so in the next year or two, so long as they needed the fabric for soldiers' uniforms. It made the wealthier families with the banknotes to spare stockpile fabric and clothing so they would not have to go without a seasonal wardrobe even in the leanest days of a war economy. From this, Tom predicted that donations to the orphanage would not be so generous in the coming years.

"Tom," said Mrs. Granger, nodding to him. Her eyes fell on Hermione behind him, and instantly the frostiness of her demeanour melted away. "Hermione, oh, Hermione!" she cried.

Mrs. Granger encircled Hermione in her arms, and Hermione mumbled something to her, and soon both of them were whispering to one another, Mrs. Granger's cheek pressed against her daughter's, her gloved hand smoothing down the tumbling curls in vain. Hermione's eyes closed, as if the motion was calming. Tom was reminded of animals being gentled, of the rabbit's ears drooping down if its spine was stroked just so; he thought of Peanut and how pinching the scruff of fur at the back of its neck made it shut its eyes and drop the collected coins into Tom's waiting hand.

Watching Mrs. Granger embrace Hermione filled him with an itchy sensation, as if he was one of the many Muggles at the station, unknowing and ignorant of another world hidden within their own. It was less than a yard's distance away, but the distance was in its own way immeasurable. Impenetrable. And even if they had known of it, it would have been nothing but incomprehensible.

But it wasn't the same for Tom, was it?

He knew what it felt like to have Hermione's cheek flush against his own, to feel the whisper of her breath stir the hair at the nape of his neck. It wasn't anything incomprehensible. And yet... he had never associated her touch with one of the many steps of obedience training, as he had used on animals, as had been used on him at the orphanage until he was eight years old and learned how to deflect culpability onto a child who was younger or stupider than he. It was...

He struggled to articulate his thoughts.

...Well, whatever it may have been, it was soon over.

Mrs. Granger unlocked the boot and helped them load their trunks inside. The interior of boot, Tom observed, was larger than its exterior suggested.

"I had an Extension Charm placed on it," Mrs. Granger explained, lifting up a false bottom to show the extra space beneath. "We keep the spare tyres in here—we're only allowed one spare per family now. They'd have taken them otherwise, and it would have been an unconscionable waste as we'd paid full price for a whole set last year. Here, Hermione, put the cage here, and move your trunk to the side for Tom's..."

Luggage stowed, Tom and Hermione sat side-by-side in the back, with Mrs. Granger driving. Riding in a motor car was a luxury for Tom. He didn't know any other family but the Grangers who owned their own. Everyone else he knew took the trolley or the Underground if they needed to get...
around London; outside London they traveled on the railway, which the residents of Wool's used on their annual seaside trip. They never bought first class tickets, but by now the Hogwarts Express had set Tom's standard for posh transport. It was one of the rare experiences in his life, meant to be savoured, much like watching a newsreel at the cinema, or being waited on in a restaurant.

The drive to the orphanage was short, and when they arrived, Tom noticed that the building was a little worse-for-wear. There were no children playing in the yard, no shouting to be heard from the other side of the gate. Hermione sent him a guarded look, but she pushed the door open on her side and got out without a word.

Mrs. Granger entered first, her heels rapping on the tile. The halls were empty, the floors swept clean and spotless, an unusual sight in a building that normally housed dozens of grubby children. They didn't pass anyone else on their way to the administration office, which seemed to be the only occupied room in the place. Inside the office, Mrs. Cole was reading a magazine, her shoes propped up on a chair and a glass of something clear at her elbow. It smelled like medicine mixed with turpentine.

"Sorry, we're not taking any new placements," said Mrs. Cole, not looking up. "Any enquiries should be sent to the children's home in Whitechapel."

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Cole," said Mrs. Granger. She reached for the door handle. "Hermione, go back to the motor. Tom, get anything you need out of your room and bring them out to the motor, then wait for me."

She moved to shut the office door.

"Mum!" Hermione dug into her jacket pocket and retrieved a sheet of paper, which she pushed at her mother. "Can you get the matron to sign this before we leave?"

Mrs. Granger took the paper and skimmed its contents. "Very well. I'll be out in a few minutes, darling."

The door shut with a firm click.

Hermione gave a Tom a pleased smile. "See? Now your summer won't be so bad after all."

"Bad?" said Tom. "I'll reserve my judgment until I know I won't be sleeping on your sitting room settee."

"Don't be so disagreeable, Tom. We have a guest room," said Hermione, patting him on the shoulder. "And you owe me your Hogsmeade permission slip, since I just gave mine away."

The Grangers, Tom confirmed, were the epitome of the English middle class.
Their house was built of brick, semi-detached, and had two storeys, with an attic above and a cellar below. The interiors were clean and new, the walls painted in shades of eggshell and cream, without any of the lumpy layered overpainting Tom saw in older buildings in the areas around central London—where if you took a pocket knife, you could scratch down to the original arsenic-based paint laid down over a century ago. This house had none of that, and he could bet that none of their windows were painted shut, and all of their toilets were indoors and flushing.

They also had no pretensions of aping the upper classes: he didn't see any darkly stained antique-replica furniture, heavy crystal chandeliers, uninspiring nineteenth century oils set in gilt frames ([bought for a song at auction!]), or God forbid, stuffed antelope heads and tiger rugs with those awful, staring glass eyes. Instead, their living areas were functional and modern; Mrs. Granger had too much taste to think that lace doilies and dried flowers were the height of home decorating.

As for the preponderance of linoleum on the first floor—well, Tom could take it or leave it.

He met Hermione's father for the first time upon joining the family for dinner. Dr. Granger was a thin man who wore spectacles when he was reading, and kept them on a string about his neck when he wasn't. His hair was brown and curly, though it was combed down with pomade in the back, and thinning on the top. He was clean-shaven, and dressed neatly in a thick jumper over his necktie and shirtsleeves when he came to table, in lieu of wearing his suit jacket, so apparently the Grangers didn't care to make a big to-do about dining formality. And since he didn't say any prayers before carving up the roast, it looked like the Grangers didn't care about G—d either.

If Tom still cared about having a father of his own, he supposed that Dr. Granger wouldn't do too bad of a job at it. The man wasn't as much of a useless Muggle as the rest; he was educated and a bit awkward, but that just meant he was light-handed when it came to parenting, which was a good thing as far as Tom was concerned. Tom would never be able to tolerate the authority of a strict disciplinarian. But if having a father resulted in Mrs. Granger being his mother... Or, even worse: Hermione Granger as his older sister.

No. Definitely not.

He was rather grateful to be an orphan now, thank you very much. He preferred being plain old Tom Riddle if the alternative was Tom Granger.

After dinner, Tom was shown to his room on the second floor of the house. It was comfortable but impersonal: a metal bedstead with brass posts and legs in the centre of the room, an armchair and desk, a radiator and a bookshelf in the corner. The bedclothes were done up in a pale and sterile shade of blue, and to his relief, there weren't any framed needlepoint samplers on the wall with Bible passages or that 'Home Sweet Home' nonsense. His high expectations on Mrs. Granger's taste in décor had not been misplaced.

"My room is down the hall," said Hermione, showing him into the room. She set a pitcher of water and a glass on the nightstand. "The loo is right across. Mum and Dad have a bathroom connected to their room, so you only have to share with me. Laundry goes in the basket, and there's extra soap and toothpaste in the cupboard under the sink."

"I suppose this isn't all bad," Tom conceded, unlatching the clasps on his school trunk. "You live thirty miles from central London, so we can't visit Diagon Alley all the time like we did last summer, can we? I could have walked there from Wool's, but you'd have to take a bus or the motor."
"I'll ask Mum if we can go with her when she does our grocery shopping," said Hermione. "But there's something better than sneaking around Diagon Alley and hoping no one catches us levitating books. We can practise magic in the cellar now!"

"Really?" asked Tom, perking up. "Have you tried it yet?"

"No." Hermione's nose scrunched up in the faintest trace of a scowl. "Not yet. Mum wouldn't let me. She said to make sure until Mr. Pacek came by to check on the wards." And then her expression brightened in anticipation. "He's coming tomorrow. I can't wait to meet him, I've got so many questions! I've never met a foreign wizard before; I've always wondered how the Ministries in other countries do things. I mean, what kind of licenses do they have on magical transport? And they don't keep up with modern politics, so how do you think the Ministries on the Continent decided on their geographic borders? Wizarding Britain still includes Ireland, and the Holy Roman Empire would have been around when they set up the Statute, wouldn't it..."

She babbled on, while Tom nodded along as he unpacked his clothes and books. Hermione, although he didn't know the extent of her career aspirations, he couldn't picture as a cut-throat politician, a true Prince of the political landscape as ascribed by Machiavelli. No, not a politician—but she was a born bureaucrat. She ate books and breathed rules; she read heavy legal codices for entertainment. Tom had only picked them up to skim the relevant sections—his own priorities had been placed on figuring out what he could get away with according to the letter of the law.

They shared some of the same opinions on Wizarding jurisprudence (How many wizards knew that it was illegal to charm goats inside a house? Why and how had that even been passed?) but in the end, it was Hermione who admired the institution of the law. The ideal of it, if not the reality.

Tom set his wand on the nightstand by the water glass before he got into the bed. He missed the Slytherin dormitory, and it was hard to believe he'd been sleeping in his regular bed—he thought of that bed as his 'regular bed'—just that morning. It was strange not to have the deep green velvet canopy curtains cocooning his bed at night, cutting off the low conversations of his dorm mates, or the view of Nott in the next bed over trimming his fingernails with a quill knife. He'd already caught himself reaching for a nonexistent curtain in an act of muscle memory.

The next morning, Tom was surprised by an extra place setting at the dining table. It wasn't the plate and chair set aside for him opposite Hermione's. It was a fifth seat. He hadn't been able to deduce the precise nature of Mrs. Granger's social origins, but he'd been confident that she was aware of the etiquette around receiving house-guests. She knew how to count places, so what was this?

The mystery was solved with the arrival of a breakfast guest: the wardmaster.

Mr. Sigismund Pacek was a young man, somewhere between twenty to thirty years of age, who looked like he wanted to appear older and more serious than he was. His whiskers were trimmed into a neat moustache and goatee, and his catalogue-bought shoes had that precise toe-tip shine often seen when a firm's junior clerks wanted to mimic its senior partners. The cut of his coat was longer than fashionable, and his collar was rounded instead of starched into sharp arrow-like points; he would have been unremarkable on a London street thirty years ago, but in the here and now, he looked distinctly out of place. It didn't help that the lapels of his waistcoat were embroidered with a striking pattern of red flowers and intersecting geometric shapes.

"Good morning, Doctor! Good morning, Madam!" he said, hanging up his hat in the vestibule. "You do not know how difficult it is to get a good meal in London. The restaurants only want to serve their old patrons, or they do not want to serve foreigners, and the only place I can engage in
some good conversation with my fellow magical expatriates is a dingy tavern where they only serve blood! I will never order their Jägerschnitzel in brown sauce again, that is for certain."

He sat down at the Grangers' dining table and tucked a napkin into his collar, muttering to himself, "I do not like Knockturn Alley, not at all; the ambience is terrible."

"Mr. Pacek?" said Hermione. "I'm Hermione Granger. How do you do?"

"Very well, thank you. Might you pass the bacon?" Mr. Pacek replied, emptying the toast rack onto his plate. He glanced up, just now noticing that there were other occupants at the table than Dr. and Mrs. Granger. "Ah, the little ones are back from school?"

"Yes, we're on summer holidays from Hogwarts," said Hermione, who didn't seem bothered at being called little by a man who was hardly older than she was. "Are the holidays much different at Durmstrang?"

"The summers, I believe, are a few weeks shorter, and the winter holidays longer than the British way of doing things." Mr. Pacek loaded bacon onto his plate with the tongs. "And in the dining hall, they served the smoked bacon with pickles and raw onion, so all students were taught the Breath Freshening Charm from the first day."

Tom felt it was his turn to interrogate the man. Hermione couldn't have all of his attention. "Is it true they teach Dark Arts at Durmstrang?"

Mr. Pacek stopped mid-chew, fork hovering halfway to his mouth. He studied Tom for a few seconds, his gaze penetrative, and his eyes narrowed. "The theory is taught as an elective in the senior years, to those who pass the academic pre-requisites. And it is not a subject one lightly discusses at the table, young Mr. Granger. I thought your lovely mother would have taught you better manners."

"I'm not—" Tom spluttered.

"He's not—" Hermione spoke at the same time.

"Mr. Pacek," said Mrs. Granger calmly, observing the conversation with a bemused detachment shared by Dr. Granger, "this young man is Tom Riddle, Hermione's friend from school. He's staying with us for the summer."

"A fosterling? Madam, you are as beautiful as you are generous; Doctor, you are truly blessed." Mr. Pacek nodded at Hermione's father, before turning to Tom. "Mr. Riddle, then, if you prefer that name: what Britons call Dark Arts has less of an association with darkness and evil and more of an association with tradition at the Durmstrang Institute. There is a class they teach for senior students, traditional Divination, where one can foretell a glimpse of the future by casting the haruspex. The future can be read in this way, the ancient Roman way, in the entrails of anointed sheep and sacrificial bulls.

"They do not teach this way in all but a handful of schools now, because everyone has moved onto crystal balls or decks of cards these days. The old way is considered messy and barbaric in comparison, as it is known that the best readings come from the wizard whose hand also held the knife." Mr. Pacek took a sip of his tea and continued in a solemn voice, "But there is an even older way, demanding the knife of a wizard and the flesh of a man—and that is barbaric, and that is what we, even us onion-eating foreigners, call Dark Arts."
"Sir," said Hermione timidly, "surely they didn't teach that at Durmstrang?"

"The general theory only," Mr. Pacek assured her. "But it is enough to give the school a certain reputation."

"Does it work, though?" Tom asked, who wasn't at all disgusted about the discussion of human sacrifice at mealtime. By 'flesh of a man', he surmised that Mr. Pacek meant a Muggle, and had avoided using the word at the table in order not to offend the sensibilities of his hosts. "If people today are using crystal balls, it seems to imply that they work better. Like choosing a motor engine over a horse: the motor has twenty-five horsepower, while the horse has, well, just one. The less efficient one is quickly made obsolete."

"Human flesh does not work any better or worse than with a good bullock," Mr. Pacek said. "Often worse, in my opinion. The bullock is raised its entire life by a wizarding gamekeeper, anointed with oils and fed fresh magical herbs during certain times of the year, enhancing its magical properties. Then when the divination is finished, it is served to the students at dinner. You are correct, Mr. Riddle, in that there is indeed a difference in efficiency between one and the other."

"What about the bullock to the crystal ball? How do they compare?" Tom knew one couldn't be scientific about magic, because magic was an art beyond science, but it didn't hurt to try.

"That," said Mr. Pacek, looking a bit put-out at the sight of his cooling bacon and untouched toast, "rather comes down to the skill of the Seer. A true Seer can divine the future from the light of the stars, the fall of wheat in the wake of a scythe, or the flight formation of geese in the autumn. Only laymen need tools. But I imagine that as tools go, crystals are the cheapest out of the lot."

"Are you a Seer, sir?"

"Tom!" Hermione hissed at him, nudging Tom under the table with her toes. "Let him eat!"

"No, I am not," said Mr. Pacek firmly. "If I were one, they would not have let me leave the country."

That shut the conversation down for the next five minutes.

It was after breakfast that Tom saw the the Grangers' cellar for the first time.

A set of sturdy wooden stairs led down to the cellar, whose design matched the look of the house proper. It was clean, with a plaster ceiling and walls built of clay brick, the mortar still a fresh white without a hint of dampness or moss, laid only a decade or so ago. There were support pillars spaced every few yards across the floor, pipes running across the ceiling, and three empty outlets where lightbulbs could be screwed in.

But there was one very obvious sign of magic: the floor space of the cellar in square feet was more than twice the area of the house above. It echoed like a factory floor with all the machines removed, the ceilings soaring twenty feet above his head. If Tom hadn't known any better, he would have assumed that the cellar encroached onto the neighbours' land. But because he did know better, he was silently marveling at the power of an Undetectable Extension Charm. An illegal one, at that. Knowing that it was forbidden made the display of magic more impressive; it made Mr. Pacek's skills as a wizard—his knowledge on Dark Arts having proven anticlimactic—worthy of respect.
"As you will be using this space as a bunker, then it shall be furnished as such," said Mr. Pacek, drawing his wand and waving it.

Lights flew out from the tip of his wand to glass hurricane lamps hung on hooks from the walls. He swept his wand to one side, and a folding screen flew back from a corner of the room. Behind it was a brass bedstead, identical to the one in Tom's room, but this one had bedding in soft pink and purple. Mr. Pacek duplicated the bed frame and mattress, laying the second bed right next to the other, and started on the blankets and pillows.

"Do you want the same colours, young Mr. Riddle?" he asked, looking over his shoulder.

"Can you do them in green?" said Tom.

A swish of Mr. Pacek's wand, and the bed covers became a mint pastel green. "Like so?"

"Darker, perhaps?"

"Would you like to try it yourself, young sir?" asked Mr. Pacek, stepping back from the bed. "'Colovaria', I believe—it has been some time since I have needed the words for such a simple spell."

"What about the Ministry?" Tom pointed out. "Won't they know if I'm doing magic underage?"

Mr. Pacek winked and tapped his wand against his nose. "I have set the wards: this room has the full line of privacy wards to conceal sight and sound and magical residue. On top of that, a mail ward to redirect those troublesome official owls, and a bit of tricky magic with a layered variation of Henderson's Thermobaric Pylon because Madam Granger worries so desperately about the dangers of Muggle artillery. You could breed dragons in here, and the neighbours will never know, though I do not recommend opening the door once the sire has caught scent of the dam, hmm?"

Hermione had promised that they could do magic this summer. And this was her house, so if any owls did come from the Ministry, any warnings would go to her name. Hermione was the only witch registered to this neighbourhood; according to the official paperwork, Tom was still living at the orphanage, thirty miles away.

"Colovaria!" he incanted, and one half of the mint green faded into the deep emerald of the Slytherin dormitory blankets.

"It is not just the final result one must envisage, but the process of change itself. Think of the green darkening to the colour you want; think of the shadow of dusk as it draws over the late afternoon, or the soft spring buds unveiling their summer glory," suggested Mr. Pacek, raising his hands and spreading his fingers out like the petals of a flower.

"These elementary transfigurations are all about one's acceptance of change and transition, and harnessing that power. If you want to practice more, you might try different patterns. Indian paisleys and the Moorish zellige always gave me such trouble when I was not much older than you. I remember," he said wistfully, "that the edges lost their crispness by the third day, and had faded away completely before the week had passed."

Tom frowned and tried again. The blanket darkened, though it wasn't as rich a tone as he really wanted. "Sir, if you're a wardmaster, why are you bothering with... interior decorating? I would have thought warding would be more profitable."
Mr. Pacek had taken up the task of duplicating nightstands and transfiguring the extras into chairs and tables. "It is a long story," he said, growing out the legs of a chair and extending the back in a lattice of carved tulips. "My family has produced many a wardmaster, those who built the walls of the wizarding ghettos and old towns south of the Oder." He clarified by adding, "Like your Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, I think. The places open for only those of wizarding blood, though I do not recall hearing Britons use the word 'ghetto' themselves.

"But," he continued, settling himself down onto the chair and smoothing out the tails of his coat, "with the situation in Europe as it is, a man cannot depend on employment when, these days, it is not considered acceptable for a wizard to want to hide his magic from Muggles. So I arrived to Britain, where I have found that most households have no need for powerful defensive wards, but many want their front parlours renovated, or their wardrobes protected from doxies."

"You sound like you don't much care for Grindelwald, sir," said Tom as innocently as he could. He had some idea of Pacek's allegiances already. The man had had no issue with sitting at a Muggle family's table, eating their Muggle food. From speaking to students outside Slytherin, he knew that many of the wizarding families of his classmates, though they believed themselves to be of a liberal slant, rarely ventured into the Muggle world, let alone dined with or spoke to Muggles as actual people.

(There were very few of any designation who counted as actual people in Tom's eyes, so they might have a legitimate point with that line of thinking.)

These wizards might go for sightseeing and window shopping in the area around Charing Cross where the Leaky Cauldron was located, but they fumbled their way around shillings and pence converted from galleons by the Gringotts goblins. If they didn't get swindled in the Muggle shops, it was only due to the honesty of the merchants.

"I do not care for politics," said Mr. Pacek, brushing a non-existent speck of dust from his pressed trousers. "I was born in the Kingdom of Bohemia, and the Bohemian life is the life I choose to live. This Lord Grindelwald—" he snorted in derision, "—does not value the idea of *laissez-faire* as I do. If I had my way, I would be enchanting the stained glass windows in the cathedrals of Prague's Old Town; if he had his way, I would be setting the wards to the doors and windows of his *magnum opus*, his 'Nurmengard'."

"I have never met the man himself," Mr. Pacek went on, twirling his wand in one hand in what appeared to be a nervous tic, "but I have read his writings about 'freedom for wizardkind'. I do not think he understands the meaning of the word 'freedom'."

"I've never read his writings myself," said Tom, sitting down on the green blankets of his new bed, fingerling the soft fabric and the perfectly spaced stitches that had once come from an industrial sewing machine, and had now been replicated by magic. "And I've only heard about his policies from second hand sources—and not the most reliable ones—but I believe his idea of 'freedom' is not so much 'freedom for' as it is 'freedom from'. Freedom from persecution, from living in hiding, and from dedicating so much of our time and resources to protecting ourselves and our communities. The Ministry of Magic has dozens of wizards and witches working to clean up accidents and modify memories, when those same people could be inventing new potions and authoring books, or even, for instance, enchanting cathedral windows. But society has decided that they're needed more for Obliviating witnesses to preserve magical secrecy."
"You have a very clever mouth, Mr. Riddle," remarked Mr. Pacek. "I have heard it said that the young Herr Grindelwald spoke with that same kind of fire when he was sixteen. If you choose to join his crusade when you are grown, I hope that clever mouth will serve you well when the time comes for you to explain to your little Miss Granger why all children like her must be raised as fosterlings in the name of Grindelwald's greater good."

"What do you mean by that, sir?" said Tom. "Fosterlings?"

"Wizards born of Muggles." Mr. Pacek's eyebrows lifted up, and his grey eyes glowed in the light of the dozen lamps. He met Tom's gaze straight on, and unlike most people who tried to stare him down, Mr. Pacek didn't look away. He made no silent, instinctive signs of accepting Tom's power, as others yielded to Tom's natural place in the pecking order with the lowering of their heads or the slouch of their shoulders. Tom was slightly taken aback; he was so used to dealing with the endless flocks of starlings that it was shocking to encounter someone who wasn't one, although he had made no display of his talons.

"You do not think," said Mr. Pacek, "that in Grindelwald's great vision, the future of wizardkind would be left in the hands of slaves and animals, do you?"

Tom's mind raced for a response that wouldn't incriminate him in any way. Mr. Pacek seemed close to the Grangers, close enough to be invited to share their meals. Hermione respected him, and it wasn't hard to see why: she'd made a habit of it whenever she encountered adults who showed themselves to be well-read and intellectual. These kinds of people were rare relative to the overall population of wizards, but at the same time were too common for Tom's comfort.

He thought it was incredibly undignified for Hermione to fawn over them in admiration. They were years older—of course they'd read more books than she had. Yes, it was a rare occurrence considering Hermione's insatiable appetite for books, but it wasn't anything to make a fuss about. Red was the rarest of naturally occurring hair colours but no one saw Tom Riddle worshiping the likes of Albus Dumbledore. Tom had reasoned that it was the same way people treated Christmas, when he personally didn't care a whit about 'seasonal cheer'.

"I wouldn't say that having magic is the sole decider of a person's worth," said Tom, trying to sound diplomatic. "But if we must throw around terms like 'superior' and 'inferior', and if there must be a designator of superiority, a base requirement before one is allowed to participate in magical society, then it should be magical blood, not magic."

In his first year at Hogwarts, Tom had been told magic ran in families, and from that he concluded he and Hermione must have got their magic from somewhere. He found it easy to accept that—the idea that Hermione's parents were of a separate class than the dregs of South London like the misbegotten children of Wool's and their useless progenitors. In terms of social class, that was true, for all the Grangers' idealistic egalitarian opinions and open denial. If there was an inborn, physical difference between one group and the other... Well, Tom's disdain for his inferiors would be fully justified, wouldn't it?

He'd read of the case of 'Typhoid Mary', a woman who had the disease, could spread the disease to others, but showed no symptoms of the disease herself. Why couldn't magic work the same way?

He had seen no evidence to disprove such a theory, but then again, he doubted there had been much work done in the field of magical heredity. He had looked in the library for information on his own talents and had found very little worth his time. Of course it was interesting to know that wizards could produce magical offspring with humanoid species such as goblins and veelas, but it wasn't
very useful, was it?

(Some part of him wished he hadn't known, because now he would never be able to read about centaurs without wondering where they came from.)

"In Britain," he spoke in a confident voice, "control of the national currency supply is granted by treaty to the goblins, so it wouldn't make sense to limit worthiness to only wizards and witches, while designating everyone else as beasts or slaves. Not unless wizards want to understand the true meaning of what Muggles call a Depression. Besides, I wouldn't ever fight for Grindelwald's cause," Tom continued with utter certainty. He would never fight, not at the risk of his own life, for anyone's cause but his own. "His platform is the 'future of wizardkind'. Something like the 'future of magic' would come across as much less divisive, and would alienate fewer potential followers."

At this point, Mr. Pacek did the unexpected. He laughed. "God in Heaven, boy! You are not thinking of becoming a politician in a few years, are you?"

"You'd support me, if I did?" asked Tom.

"In ten or twenty years?" said Mr. Pacek. "I would not oppose you. I do not believe that I could, were I even to try."

Tom was very pleased upon hearing that. It seemed the wizard knew his place, after all.

"Why wait twenty years?" said Tom. "Why not now? Surely you plan on returning to your home some day soon, and not in a decade's time?"

Mr. Pacek shook his head, letting out a small chuckle. "You are not even halfway through your education. Though you may dream of politics, as of now you are a schoolboy, not a politician."

"Not everyone needs a school education to do great things," Tom argued, thinking of the whispered discussions in the Slytherin boys' dormitory where Nott told them what he knew about the Dark Lord's expulsion, and all of them had thrown their guesses in for what exactly he had to have done to earn his marching orders. "Some people are the exceptions to the rule. They are exceptional—"

"—You think you are exceptional, boy?"

"I know I am," said Tom, his eyes glittering, his face alight with hunger. "I can prove it."

It was a moment later that Hermione clattered down the stairs with a large, shapeless sack dragging behind her.

"Look what I have!" she cried.

"It's not a body, is it?" said Tom, blank-faced.

"It's a magic tent!" she said, flinging the sack at him.

Tom spent a few seconds drowning in fabric before it gave a loud WHOOSH! and smoothed itself out, the walls climbing up around his head, stiffening into rigid lines and expanding outwards until he found himself sitting on the floor of a small carpeted room, unfurnished and rather plain looking.

A flap on the side opened, admitting Hermione and Mr. Pacek.
"Mum and Dad got a magic tent for the cellar," said Hermione excitedly, dashing around the room and uncovering several other flaps on the walls that turned out to be doors. "For the wards to work, we had to disconnect the electricity and plumbing. If we're to spend any length of time in here, we need a bathroom—Dad says he can't count how many times someone soiled themselves during a drill in the public shelters. It's even got a magical cistern with running water in the kitchen. Did I mention there's a kitchen?"

"Interesting," Tom said in a flat voice. "Do you know what this means?"

"What?"

"Your cellar is officially a better place to live than your actual house," said Tom, getting to his feet and circling the interior of the tent. When he poked the walls with a finger, they flexed and buckled but quickly snapped back into shape. "I already have a bed here. So what are the chances of talking your parents into letting me move down here for the rest of the summer?"

"What about sunlight and fresh air?" Hermione asked, chewing on her lip in thought. Tom could tell she was considering putting forth an argument on her own account. "We have only the lamps for light. They might be magical, but it's not the same as going outside."

"I live in an underground dungeon for ten months of the year; I don't mind it at all," said Tom.

Mr. Pacek cleared his throat. "I could offer a magical solution for this—a window that replicates the view from your bedroom window. It is similar to those in the imperial palaces of Vienna, created when one of the old archduchesses wanted a view of the gardens outside her summer lodge in Bolzano. It is not a true window that will open and close, only a pretty picture that moves. But it does give you that natural sunlight."

"Can you create more than one?" said Hermione eagerly. "Is it difficult? Does the distance between windows affect the spell's stability?"

Tom sighed. This was going to take a while.

_Bearable_ was a good way to describe Tom's summer.

Throughout the summers of his past, he had been able to go without speaking anything but basic pleasantries for days at a time. He'd had his own room at Wool's, his own corner table in the communal dining hall, and he didn't have to go to school during the holidays, so talking to the other children was an option, not a requirement. He and the other orphans had come to a silent agreement years ago that if they didn't bother him, he wouldn't be forced to return the favour.

But this summer, Tom found he had no choice but to put in effort to maintain relationships with other people—to think of things to say beyond commentary on the weather or the war, the two topics that
had in recent times become the centrepiece of casual smalltalk.

It was endurable, because this time around, Tom had magic.

He considered it a test of fortitude to survive middle class suburban life and come out sane and unscathed. If Hermione could do it for ten years, then he could do it for ten weeks.

Some things were more of a test than others.

Mealtimes were one of these. Tom preferred to spend as much time as he could in the cellar, reading and practising spells from this Third Year textbooks. But eating was, to his great annoyance, *unavoidable*, so three times a day he'd have to drag himself upstairs, sit at the table, and tear his thoughts away from magical subjects to follow the conversation. News reports from the wireless were a common topic at the table. Shortages, National Service, evacuations, Luftwaffe raids in Scotland and Wales. It was Muggle news that Tom would have deemed irrelevant to his own interests just last year, but was now uncomfortably familiar.

Life had been so much easier at Hogwarts, where his Housemates knew Quidditch held no interest for him, and being at the top of their year, he had no need to exchange class notes. Since they were at school, it was acceptable to bring a book to the table; many of his dorm mates did their homework during breakfast, scrambling to finish the last few inches of their essays only minutes before the deadline.

At Hogwarts, he knew he was different. He shared meals, a dormitory, a Common Room, and seven classes with the students in his House, but he maintained a certain distance, a polite but impersonal demeanour. He was helpful and sympathetic, but not particularly friendly. No one used his first name. No one touched him, or touched his things without permission. To be fair, this was considered basic courtesy by most Slytherins, who'd been raised in traditional, conservative households where the standards of social conduct had been frozen in place from the early nineteenth century. He wouldn't be the least bit surprised if Edmond Lestrange's mother addressed his father as 'Mr. Lestrange' instead of his actual given name.

At the Grangers' home, his differences—and his self-imposed distance—were ignored in the name of hospitality. Dr. and Mrs. Granger wanted him to feel welcome in their home, with their family, and it was one of the most disconcerting experiences in Tom's life. It wasn't like his first time at the opera, where he had immediately settled himself in as if he had belonged there, feeling no awkwardness at being treated with deference by adults two or three times his age, who took his coat and poured him drinks and called him 'Sir'.

This was the opposite. It was awkward for the Grangers to pretend that he was part of their family; they had to be aware of it, how artificial the additional member of the 'family' was. Tom studied their faces when they smiled and passed him the marmalade in the mornings, looking for the signs of strain in their eyes and the lines of their mouths, the tells of insincerity in their affected greetings. One of these days he'd catch them as they slipped; he would prove to them that their ideas about altruism were nothing but lies they told themselves to feel like better people.

Until then, he took them up on their hospitality. There was no reason why he couldn't make the best of his current situation. For now, he lacked the options to go around turning his nose up at the prospect of a bed and three square meals a day.

And it helped that Mr. Pacek joined them for dinner on the weekends. He was an adult, treated as an intellectual equal by Dr. and Mrs. Granger, acknowledged as an expert in his field—but he was
nevertheless an outsider to the family. He was born and raised amongst wizards, and he was astounded by electrical contraptions like the telephone, the doorbell, and Mrs. Granger's electric toaster, which he had got into the habit of timing with his pocket watch. It turned itself off after ninety seconds every single time, to the man's vocal admiration.

He was also European, which meant hearing news of the British front from the wireless didn't affect him.

It was only natural that Mr. Pacek didn't react to the news that the Germans had dropped a bomb in London, a week before the start of the school term. It had landed in an area of central London that was three miles from Wool's Orphanage.

Tom didn't react either, book propped open on his lap from an armchair in the Grangers' sitting room, but he could feel the weight of Mrs. Granger's pointed looks; she was the first one out of the family to have calculated the distance in her head. No one said anything for a few minutes while the wireless announcer urged all residents of Greater London to proceed to their nearest emergency shelter. Dr. Granger got to his feet and turned the wireless off.

"Shall we retire to the cellar?" said Dr. Granger, folding his newspaper.

"I'm so glad we had everything finished in time," Mrs. Granger murmured to her husband, picking up her sewing basket and following him to the cellar door.

For the rest of the evening, Tom didn't make a single complaint about the Grangers, not even in his private thoughts.
Hermione couldn't think of a good name to call the holiday between her Second and Third Year. So in her mind, it went by "The Summer That Tom Riddle Lived In My House".

She hadn't noticed until now that she'd divorced her life into two distinct categories: Magical Life and Muggle Life. They were separate entities in her mind, not ones whose separation she acknowledged on a day-to-day basis. But they were always in the background, in the shape of her thoughts, as natural and intrinsic as the distinctions she made between Right and Wrong or Like and Dislike.

Magical Life was Hogwarts, her future, a new world to explore, an escapist fantasy for a lonely girl who liked books more than people, and had been called 'Peculiar' since she was eight. Muggle Life was London and the house in Crawley, living with Mum and Dad, a world of familiarity and logic, with sensible rules and adult supervision.

Now the categories were converging, the solid lines between the groups intersecting, knotting together into a tangled cat's cradle of mental associations.

Tom Riddle had been a form of escapism for her when she was ten years old. He was the boy on the other side of the letters whose passion and fire made her forget that he was a penniless orphan living on the rougher side of London. On paper, it didn't matter who he was or who he wasn't; she never saw his face, only his words—and such beautiful words he wrote! From there, she'd built an image of him in her mind of what she thought he was, an ideal of sorts. But paper was paper, and reality was more than two dimensional, and although her image been shaken in the first few weeks of First Year, it hadn't crumbled. The distance had closed somewhat the following year, after they'd made their peace with each other.

...But now, the remaining distance was fast disintegrating.

How could it not?

More than one morning, she had trudged across the hall half-asleep, and stumbled into Tom Riddle in her bathroom, brushing his teeth in his pyjamas. His hair wasn't combed into its normal ruler-straight side part, but dishevelled from sleep, in a way that was more windswept and debonair than outright scruffy. Tom was never scruffy.

"Good morning," said Hermione, reaching for her own toothbrush.

Tom rinsed his mouth and dropped his toothbrush into his cup with a clatter. "I may be used to sharing a bathroom, but I don't think I will ever be used to seeing foot-long hairs in the drain."

"Not all of us were lucky enough to be born with perfect hair," Hermione retorted. "And don't you think it's too early in the morning for sarcasm?"
Tom shrugged. "I always make time for it, somehow."

That about summed up Hermione's ten weeks of close quarters interactions with Tom Riddle. Infuriating half the time, enlightening the other half, but at no point during the holiday did she ever feel like Tom would have been better off at the orphanage. She wasn't heartless; despite her belief that his descriptions of life at Wool's were mostly hyperbole, she certainly wouldn't want to live there herself. And whilst Tom allowed his natural caustic charm to shine in her presence, he never forgot his manners around the adults.

Close quarters interactions with Mr. Pacek were a more interesting experience.

The wizard reminded him of their Potions Master, Professor Slughorn. Mr. Sigismund Pacek didn't slaver over famous names and prominent families like Horace Slughorn did, but similar to the professor, Mr. Pacek seemed to have been born of good family, and was accustomed to good living. He liked his comforts: hot food in quantity, top shelf drink, and quality company, and for the first time in a long while—perhaps for the first time in his entire life—he'd resorted to working for it, instead of expecting it as a given due to his social position or the prestige of his occupation.

Like Slughorn, Mr. Pacek was knowledgeable beyond the field of his qualifications. Professor Slughorn, Hermione remembered, was reputed to be an excellent consultant and advisor, a deft hand at guiding his protégés from entry level employment to fully fledged professional careers. He had a silent partnership in a profitable apothecary enterprise, Slug and Jigger's on Diagon Alley. Tom had looked up Potions Mastery programmes, and it turned out that whilst Professor Slughorn didn't take many apprentices of his own, being too busy with teaching and collecting dinner party invitations, he did funnel promising ones off to his business partner, Arsenius Jigger.

("If he's such a successful businessman," Tom had grumbled, "then why can't he buy his own pineapples?")

Mr. Pacek was a qualified wardmaster by trade, but the breadth of his knowledge extended beyond that. He had a good eye for colour—"And I can lay enchantments on house fittings and furniture," he'd said, "because what is enchantment but warding on a smaller scale? The fundamentals are very similar, just the runes compressed here and inverted there, with a few reversed incantations to keep the magic in and stable instead of on the outside—but do not ask me to do your jewellery and lock boxes and pocket watches; I do not like dealing with the fiddly things!"

Besides that, he knew quite a lot about wizarding culture and history.

When Mr. Pacek was in her room, a carpenter's pencil tucked behind one ear, and his wand behind the other, it was then that Hermione had worked up the courage to ask him about magical academia... and the less academic side of magic.

He was, as he'd promised, creating a linked window for the cellar, using her bedroom window as the base. It was good that Mr. Pacek was doing this now, as Mum wanted to install blackout curtains on all the windows of the house, and until then, Hermione wasn't allowed to turn on the electric lights after dark. It was advice given them by a government pamphlet that came with the month's ration booklet.

If Hermione wanted to read after sunset, she'd need to go down to the cellar—where Tom all but lived these days, ever since her Mum had put her foot down and told him he needed to sleep in the guest room and eat at the dining table, because she wasn't going to make up a tray for him and leave it on the cellar stairs, as he'd had the nerve to request. When Mum had told him off, Tom had sent
Hermione a sideways glance, one eyebrow raised, and she could tell he was running a mental commentary on the uncanny resemblance between Mrs. Granger and her daughter.

Mr. Pacek was pencilling in numbers and symbols on the wooden frame and sash of Hermione's window, a step ladder propped against the wall. Hermione had asked to observe, since she'd picked Runes and Arithmancy as her Third Year elective subjects, and had already started reading the textbooks, with the older wizard patiently answering the thick stack of jotted-down questions she'd saved up for his weekend visits.

He was a good teacher, she'd told him, and asked why he didn't advertise tutoring services in the Daily Prophet.

"Most students do not need tutoring except for their two exam years," he explained, laying out his tools on a drop-cloth on Hermione's bedroom floor. She'd spotted a bow compass, a pair of set squares, and a rattling tin which turned out to be full of coloured chalk. "And I have not taken the British qualification exams. What do they call them here? B.A.T.s and F.R.O.G.s? No matter; I can tell you that wizarding parents would not hire me to tutor their children specifically for the exam unless I could provide proof of my own exam scores. And to take them at your Ministry of Magic is not so simple—I would have to take several months off per exam to study to the British examiners' standards. Of course, I have passed them all with high distinction at the Durmstrang Institute, but the theory is taught differently there, although the principles have much in common no matter what school teaches the subject.

"We, for instance, studied Norse runes like you shall in your class, but not the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon runes as you have shown me in your textbook. Contrary to the Hogwarts syllabus, we were taught the Slavonic alphabets, and in my senior years, we studied Semitic and Phoenician scripts. I believe the French school of magic teaches Celtic and Phoenician scripts, but not Norse runes—so as you can see, this inconsistency in standards goes both ways."

"That sounds unfair," said Hermione, who considered herself a self-appointed ambassador to Fairness and Justice. "You can cast the same spells and create the same wards as a British wizard, can't you? The tools might be different, but you're able to build the exact same things."

"It is to the discretion of the governing body," said Mr. Pacek, with an unconcerned shrug. "It is just the way things are. I do not believe your father would be allowed to practice his craft on the same day, if he moved to Argentina." He tied a knotted rope to Hermione's curtain rail and marked off the lines with his pencil, his lips moving as he counted in a language that Hermione didn't recognise. "But I daresay that if he moved to France tomorrow they would not complain much, if at all. France is hard up for doctors at the moment."

"In fact," he continued, rifling through his leather roll of tools for a chisel, before he began to chip small divots into the paint of the window frame. "The French Conseil is openly seeking wands and warders to defend their official buildings for when the Grand Minister decides to turn his eyes to the west. I have had letters from my classmates saying that they will not look into one's papers or past, or even species. I am sure they would offer me a place in their Légion étrangère, should I wish it—but the dowagers and housewitches of Britain pay me just as handsomely, and do not ask me to leap headfirst into the dangers of war."

"Is it that dangerous?" Hermione asked, and then stopped herself. Of course war was dangerous. "I—I mean, I know about the casualties in the Muggle war—my father served in the Medical Corps twenty years ago—but I also know wizards have all sorts of potions and healing spells, not to mention they can Apparate. Is it that bad?"
She knew Tom wanted to join the fight when he was old enough, and though she personally disapproved of war as a concept, she acknowledged that sometimes one had no choice. It was not always possible to be a pacifist when there was an enemy knocking at the gates. But Tom had not wanted to join for patriotism, and he cared little about the preservation of Magical Britain. He didn't want honour and glory so much as he wanted other people to honour and glorify him.

And he wanted an Order of Merlin. First Class preferably, but Third Class would do. A gold medal was a gold medal, and according to the book he'd found in the library with the current list of recipients, it was only the colour of the silk ribbon that differed between the Orders, and not the medal itself.

("You'd hardly notice the difference between ribbon colours, wouldn't you?" Tom had remarked, his eyes lingering on the coloured illustration plate in the centre of the book. Like most magical pictures, it was animated. "Once you've got that shiny bit of gold winking from your chest. I bet wizards don't bother with gold plating or alloys. It'll be solid gold all through, with a hardening charm or something, to keep the design from rubbing away after a few polishings.")

"It can be," said Mr. Pacek. He scratched his goatee and gazed out through Hermione's second floor window, deep in thought. "A capable wizard can cast an Anti-Apparition Jinx, which can be dispelled if one knows the counter-incantation. An even more skilled wizard can create an Anti-Apparition Ward, which takes longer to anchor, but does not risk being dispelled so easily. And with that you have taken the average wizard's advantage of mobility. If your opponent loses his leg with the right curse, he must resort to more mundane transportation to get himself to a Healer or infirmary. If he tries to Apparate, despite the Ward, despite the pain of his injury, then he will splinch himself and lose the other leg and perhaps half of his body.

"And that is fighting someone with knowledge and preparation, which many wizards are, especially those who call themselves soldiers of fortune. It is an entirely different matter to meet Minister Grindelwald on the field."

Hermione swallowed. "I heard he was expelled as a student, before he even graduated. He must not have been a good student, mustn't he?"

"Good?" Mr. Pacek laughed. "A man like the Minister does not need papers and certificates to prove what he is capable of. He was never good. He was—is—brilliant. That is what makes him so formidable: illegality is no obstacle to him; neither is immorality. I have heard that he has, or has sought a means to, bring puppets of the dead to the field of battle." He gave a low chuckle, drawing his wand out from behind his ear and twirling it between his fingers. "But these things are difficult to verify—there are never any witnesses to it, you understand? However, it is too easy to believe for a man of his capability."

Illegality is no obstacle to him.

In that moment, Hermione was uncomfortably reminded of Tom Riddle. She took a deep breath and sat herself down on her bed. The quilted blankets were patterned with pink and purple flowers, the exact design replicated on the blankets over her bed in the cellar. Mum and Dad's bed and furniture had identical copies too; their corner of the cellar looked like their bedroom transferred to an open plan studio apartment the size of the house's ground floor.

Hermione decided to ask the things she had wanted answers to for ages. She would have written them down with her big list of school-related questions, but wouldn't have put it past Tom to read her
notes when she was in the loo. And now that he could do magic in the cellar, he could duplicate them wholesale with a wave of his wand. It was best not to arouse his suspicions if she didn't have to. She knew Tom was very touchy when it came to trusting other people. For someone who didn't care about laws or codes of conduct, it was funny how he considered betrayal as the worst crime of all.

"Is there such a thing as a ward that acts as protection against being mind controlled?" Hermione asked. "I've read that there are spells—illegal spells—that can do it, and if there are dangerous wizards roaming about who don't care about what's legal and what isn't, surely someone would find a way to protect themselves against it?"

"You are referring to the Imperius Curse, are you not? The third, but no less dark, of the Unforgivables?" said Mr. Pacek, his wand stilling in his hand. He straightened up, joints creaking, and peered at her intently. "An unexpected subject for a young lady of your age to be reading into, I should think."

She wasn't going to tell him that she had been looking into it from the first week of her First Year.

But... The Imperius Curse? The Unforgivables?

Mr. Pacek had inadvertently given her more information to continue her search, one she had been contemplating putting off until her Seventh Year, when she could apply for the teacher's note and gain legitimate access to the Restricted Section. She knew that the lack of information had stalled Tom as well, and he had been forced to skim through shelves of dusty legal tomes for any extra nuggets of knowledge.

"I..." Hermione began, wishing she was as good a speaker as Tom, "I think that as wonderful magic is, it's also... terrifying. And there is nothing more frightening to me than having my will, my agency, my freedom of choice, and sovereignty over my own mind and body stripped from me. I think that it's the most horrific thing you can do with magic. If it is called Unforgivable, then I fully agree with that. Sir, I only want to protect myself, and my family, if it's at all possible."

"The main reason why they are called Unforgivable," said Mr. Pacek carefully, still watching her, "is because there is no way to block them once cast, short of conjuring a physical barrier. Standard Shield Charms, defensive wards, and most enchanted artifacts will not work against them. The secondary reason why they are Unforgivable and illegal is that casting them, like most spells, requires a concentrated power of intent. One must want to strip away the autonomy of another living being; they must truly desire the act of domination. If such a defensive ward against the Imperius existed, someone with the power and ability to cast it would be determined enough to find an alternative. An overpowered, mass Confundus, perhaps. Or a potion laced with hallucinogenic ingredients, administered in the form of a vapour, or an unguent absorbed through the skin."

"Sir," Hermione choked out, feeling her toes curl in horror, "you're saying there's no way to protect myself against being—being taken over, if someone really wants it?"

"There are ways," said Mr. Pacek, in a soft voice, his eyes softening at her shocked reaction. "You must be careful with yourself, Miss Granger. You are a young witch brought up as a Muggle—you know what I mean by this. Trust the right people, and keep your friends close. And do not make the wrong enemies. Why do you think I choose to stay away from the war? I do not seek to make enemies when I know my weaknesses too well. I know I am a good wardmaster—and widely recognised in Bohemia as a master of the craft—but I was never a great duellist, and that is also known by anyone who studied at Durmstrang when I was there. These are spells one must have the
reflexes and spontaneity of a duellist to neutralise."

"It wouldn't go amiss to brush up on my Defense skills," Hermione said, half to herself. She was great in theory for every subject, but in wandwork she was not nearly as perfect as she wished. She could memorise the class spell lists, but she didn't have instantaneous reflexes, which she'd found out the first time she'd gotten on a broom in Flying Class and had almost rammed face-first into a Quidditch goal hoop while everyone else was turning the corner.

"Your young friend appears to have a natural aptitude at Defense," Mr. Pacek remarked. "I have noticed that he can produce a tangible Shield Charm, which I recall studying in my own Fourth Year. It was a small thing, but it was symmetrical around the axis, not ovoid and dim as were my first attempts; his were impervious to minor to moderate attacks both magical and physical, which indicates a very powerful caster." He gave Hermione a considering look, and when he spoke, it was in a low, tired voice. "He would be a good friend to keep close, if you trust him. I do not think you would enjoy him as an enemy of yours."

*If you trust him.*

The implications behind that were puzzling.

*Did he think that Tom was untrustworthy? Had Tom done something?*

Tom usually behaved himself around adults, most of whom thought him a charming lad with good prospects and good wits about him, whose parentless background made him endearing and brave, instead of an object of scorn and pity. Tom acted as if the fawning disgusted him, but she knew it ruffled him something terrible if he didn't get his special sympathetic treatment on a regular basis.

Perhaps that explained why he hated the orphanage so much. Wool's and the likes of Mrs. Cole couldn't provide him with the kind of stimuli that Hogwarts offered.

Tom liked that Hermione was honest around him, and refused to give him 'Special Treatment'. He encouraged her to be brutally honest, particularly when it came to their professors and classmates, and her sorry attempts were amusing to him. Not that she indulged him by trying very hard. She didn't care for senseless cruelty. Or Tom's sense of humour, for that matter.

He'd told her that watching her struggle with criticism—even if it was valid—was on par to the entertainment value in watching one of the orphans eat soap.

("*I can tell you're just about frothing at the mouth,*" he'd observed. "*It's not quite as good as the real thing, but I'll make allowances for you.*")

"Why wouldn't I trust him?" Hermione asked.

"Do you?"

"Yes?"

"Why is your answer a question, Miss Granger?"

"I don't know?" said Hermione. She wrinkled her nose and attempted to explain herself. "I don't think he's my enemy, or that he ever would be." She made no mention of their being friends. "But I do know that he wouldn't hurt me. Not knowingly, or intentionally."
That... sounded slightly bad once the words had passed her lips. Caveats and exceptions made a statement refutable. They were like missing bricks in a structure: take out one too many and you wouldn't have a house anymore. And when it rained, you had better hope you had another house tucked away somewhere.

Tom would never hit her, push her down a staircase, or tear the ribbons out of her hair, as had been done in her primary school days by other children during their lunch recesses. He wouldn't call her the names they used, or denigrate her physical appearance; he considered that sort of behaviour shallow and juvenile, and above all, Muggle.

That didn't preclude the possibility of using magic on her, if he was experimenting on something and thought it was for a good purpose. He wouldn't use any lethal spells on her, or non-lethal ones with lethal intent—she still remembered that conversation from two years ago where he'd contemplated the possibility of using a Knockback Jinx on a moving staircase. They had used the Knockback Jinx on one another in a later Defense class, and practising together for their First Year exams. Nothing had happened.

But a magical accident wasn't out of the question, she concluded. A calculated risk gone wrong.

"Such a double-edged sword is one's freedom of choice," Mr. Pacek sighed. "Ah, the vagaries of youth."

"Do you not trust him?" asked Hermione, who was perplexed at his reaction, and still trying to work out why. She wasn't sure she was comfortable with someone making insinuations, however subtle, about Tom's character. Who were they to judge him? They didn't even know him!

She was allowed to judge him, though. She, out of everyone else who thought they knew him, actually knew him.

"I'm a guest in this house; I am employed by Madam Granger. I do not see it as my place to trust or distrust a stranger's child," he said, turning to the window and resuming his work. "If you asked me if I liked him? I could not say. But I... I am conscious of reasons to be wary around him."

"Has he done something?" Hermione frowned. "If he's pranked you, I'll talk to him about it."

"So," replied Mr. Pacek, as he picked up the tin of coloured chalk. "It appears that you do not know."

"I'm sorry?" said Hermione, "I'm afraid I don't understand what you're getting at. You think Tom is evil and you don't like him, but you can't tell me why?"

"I was merely being tactful about it," he said. "Magical theory about illicit subjects is one thing, how they relate to individuals in one's acquaintance is another. Are you not aware that Mr. Riddle is... particularly perceptive in a certain manner? Sensitive around some people, able to deduce their intent, and mistrusting of others?"

"He's always like that," said Hermione, defensively. "He doesn't come from the best part of London, so of course he's learned not to listen to anyone trying to lure him into a dark alley."

"Have you ever looked in his eyes?"
"Y-yes," said Hermione, her sense of certainty wavering ever so slightly.

Tom's eyes were a few shades of brown darker than her own. Indoors, out of direct light, they looked black. It reminded her of the Lake in early spring, the dark waters still and placid, the squid and merfolk tugged away and waiting for warmer days. Black water, twenty feet or two hundred feet down—there was no way to tell—but she was drawn toward it for some inexplicable reason, until he blinked and the moment passed and she found herself wondering why she was staring at him.

"I do not know what names the English use for it. But the boy has what some call a form of 'true sight','" said Mr. Pacek. "A gift such as true Seers have, a type of magical perception that can be taught and learned, but most effectively in those with some natural proficiency. It is an illicit subject at Durmstrang, more than even the Unforgivable Curses, which is permissible to discuss in their theoretical aspects. But the theory of this form of perception is heavily restricted—and it is as valuable as it is dangerous. He should not be using it so openly."

*He's talking about Tom's ability. The one Dumbledore knows about, and has warned him about. The one she had warned him about, because she didn't want to see him expelled just when he'd gotten his chance at a better life than either the orphanage or the Muggle world could offer him.*

"Will you tell him you know about it?" said Hermione. "One of our professors at school knows about it, and knows what he's doing, but won't teach him until he's older."

"Your professor is wise," said Mr. Pacek. "And a more experienced mentor than me, I expect. I can tutor, yes, but I am no one's parent. I shall not tell him."

"If he suspects you know anything," Hermione spoke unhappily, wishing she didn't have to, "he'll try to persuade you. And he can be quite persuasive when he wants to be."

"I can protect myself, Miss Granger. I have learned enough of the magical arts to divert his attention elsewhere if he comes to me seeking knowledge," said Mr. Pacek, and her concerns were pushed aside with a dismissive flap of his hands. "But you should consider protecting yourself."

"How? Is there a way?"

"You must know when not to look him in the eyes when he speaks to you. And if you do speak to him, think of something with no relation to your words. The pattern of warp and weft on the bedcovers, or a flickering tongue of flame of a candle in a dark room—think of one thing, imagine it in perfect detail to the exclusion of all else, and speak of another."

"I don't know if I can do that..." said Hermione dubiously. It seemed as absurd as rubbing her stomach while patting her head, one of the exercises she'd done in primary school when the teachers had taught a lesson about brains and muscle co-ordination. She'd found out later that they had also been checking to see which of their students were left-handed, but that was another story...

...The point was that her thoughts flowed on connections and strings of associations, drawing from her personal experiences and books she'd read and half-memorised, and the things she'd heard other people saying, but Mr. Pacek wanted her to—to *detach* her thoughts like a caboose from the end of a train, and send it down another track, while she was in another carriage altogether, in the midst of holding a conversation with someone else.
"Many things require practice to master," he said. "It is the way of the world."

For a few minutes they spoke of practical exercises that would help expand one's mental flexibility. Mr. Pacek was a good teacher, as Hermione had noted earlier, but he was incredibly unconventional. She was used to studying from the dry step-by-step descriptions given her by a textbook author, and even in class, the teachers followed the general techniques as described in the book. Except for Flying Class, where there was no textbook, just skill and aptitude and a head for heights, of which Hermione had none—but Flying hadn't been a real class anyway; they weren't marked or examined like a proper class subject.

Mr. Pacek, for all his imparted knowledge, didn't resemble anything like a textbook. His hands fluttered when he spoke, like darting butterflies in front of his face. He was always moving around, doing something with hands, working or drawing or gesturing for emphasis.

"You have heard of the artists, the Impressionists, Seurat and Van Gogh?" he asked, wiping his hands of powdered chalk with a stained handkerchief. "They employed a technique called 'Pointillism', where the final image is made of thousands of individual dots of paint. From far away, you see the picture, but up close, only patterns of dots. Consider the process of the artist putting down each dot, deliberating on its placement and texture and colour, and how he holds this process in his mind parallel to the final image he wants to create. This is the level of thought one must master."

Later that night, at dinner, Hermione watched Mr. Pacek as he ate with her family and steered the tone and direction of the conversation with a few pleasant comments here and there. He was like Professor Slughorn, but not like him at all. He enjoyed simple pleasures; he ate their food with hearty appetite, praising Mum's cooking at every remove. He lauded the quality of the coffee she served with the pudding course, which was a brand of roasted bean that he had personally recommended at the Continental supermarket.

But unlike their Potions Professor, Mr. Pacek wasn't blinded by favouritism; he didn't see dinner company as a means of aggrandisement or self-congratulation. And unlike Professor Slughorn, he wasn't smitten by Tom's perfect manners, his perfectly phrased answers, his perfect hair—in that same irritating way that butter didn't melt in his mouth, Tom's perfect hair never got stuck in the drain—or his perfect—false!—smiles.

The wardmaster was different than what she'd expected from the first letters he'd sent her. She had expected a scholar, and had got an... an Epicurean. He was scholarly, that couldn't be denied, but he was a worldly one, when she hadn't known that scholars came in more than one type. She'd always thought that true scholars were those who loved books so much that everything else paled in comparison, even—especially—the company of other people.

Like her. And like Tom.

She and Tom didn't really have other friends, or "friends" in his case, except for one another. In Tom's case, it wasn't that he couldn't make friends. He just didn't want any. (Hermione was prone to bouts of self-consciousness, which made introducing herself to new people a nerve-wracking endeavour, while Tom's innate arrogance granted him a blanket immunity to social awkwardness.)

By the end of summer, Hermione supposed that she respected Mr. Sigismund Pacek, and even liked him. He was of an amiable disposition, and a good conversationalist; he presented a certain evenness of temper that she saw hints of in Tom, but Mr. Pacek's was genuine, while Tom used it as camouflage for the bitter dregs of dissatisfaction that roiled beneath his skin.
She might even miss Mr. Pacek's company by the time September arrived and they had to return to Hogwarts.

Although, this year, the return to Hogwarts wouldn't be such a drastic transition between Muggle and Magical Life, not when they could freely use their wands by descending a flight of stairs, and she could show her family everything she'd learned in the ten months a year she was gone. And while she'd miss her parents—of course she would miss Mum and Dad terribly—they knew, and she knew, that it was better for her to go away to Scotland where it was safe.

Because the war was no longer confined to Germany, or Norway, or France.

It had reached London.

For most of the summer, Tom had sequestered himself away as often as he could, only appearing above ground to eat his meals, change his clothes, and sleep in the guest room. The last week of holiday, after the bomb scare, he'd taken to sleeping in the bed made up for him in the cellar, and Hermione's Mum hadn't opposed it. Mum had even asked if Hermione wanted to join him. Hermione had.

Although there was a folding screen enchanted with a Silencing Charm between her bed and his—it was a similar level of privacy to the Hogwarts Hospital Wing—she could tell by the glow of light through the semi-translucent screen that he kept late nights. He wasn't just studying ahead for their regular subjects and the three electives each they'd picked for Third Year, he was prioritising Defense to a level beyond the upcoming year's curriculum. She only knew this because she'd seen him scribbling in his textbook on the way back from the bathroom.

She'd observed how he'd kept to himself for the last fortnight of their holiday, especially the last few days, devouring his books and practising magic with the frenzy of an O.W.L.s student the night before the exam. She would have called him out on his lack of sociability, but he wasn't so far gone as to treat her parents poorly or ignore their requests. Besides, she'd reminded herself, it wasn't like she hadn't been much different the first few weeks after receiving her Hogwarts letter.

Tom had tested the wards in a corner of the cellar by flinging Incendios at the walls, while Mr. Pacek reclined on a conjured velvet fainting couch with a half-smile on his face, his eyes cast down on the rune-carved wooden frame that was to be Hermione's bedroom window. Now and again, he would offer advice to improve Tom's spellcasting, in his usual whimsical way.

"Your casting intent is incomplete—it is not just an image of fire you must focus on, but a true facsimile in your mind. Think of not just the height of the flame, or the richness of colour, not only what you can see, but what you can feel: the radiant energy, the exchange of light and heat for fuel and air; think of the brightest summer day at noon, when you lift your face to the sky and the light has strength enough to bring tears to your eyes," said Mr. Pacek, his voice rising and falling as if he
was reciting a player's soliloquy. "Gather that light within you and then speak the incantation."

It seemed overdone to Hermione, who'd learned to cast *Incendio* in class last year, and had gotten a small, controlled jet of flame each time. Enough to light candles, dispose of scrap parchments, or work the burner under her cauldron in Potions class.

With the right visualisation and intent and many hours of practice, Tom eventually turned his version of *Incendio* into roaring fireballs the size of his head, splashing off the walls and dissipating, leaving shimmering waves of heat that whistled like a kettle on the boil. Then the energy of the spell was drawn out by the wards, and Tom was left panting, his cheeks pink and his hair plastered to his forehead with sweat.

Tom didn't even say *Thank you*.

Hermione wondered if he even liked Mr. Pacek. In fact, she wondered if Tom liked her parents. He was polite to them, but then again, he was polite to their teachers, but that didn't stop him from making uncharitable comments outside of class, on their Transfiguration teacher's choice of attire wrought with custom animation charms, or their Herbology professor's off-key singing voice as he watered the Tentaculas.

Tom didn't exactly get along with most adults. Tom Riddle and authority figures was like oil and water, or as he would put it, "like Professor Slughorn and sobriety".

The journey to Hogwarts was the most subdued that it had ever been—even more than the first time, when Tom was nursing that petty, month-long grudge about nothing.

The whole family had driven to King's Cross, which had triple the number of soldiers as there had been a few months ago at the beginning of their summer holiday, many of whom looked quite young to Hermione's eyes. They were young men not much taller than Tom, with soft faces, smooth skin, and only a shadow on their upper lip showing that they couldn't even grow proper whiskers.

There were also very few children. The First of September was the day of the year that most schools across Britain began the school term, and the station should have been packed with well-to-do families sending their children off to boarding school. But the children of London had been evacuated months ago, and the local schools closed for the interim. Today, she and Tom and Mum and Dad made a rare group of civilians, surrounded by serious men in drab uniforms aiding the war effort.

Dad shook Tom's hand, and Mum gave Hermione one last hug, pressing a kiss to her cheek before pushing them off to the hidden platform and the scarlet locomotive.

"I'm joining the Duelling Club this year," Tom announced, after they'd locked the doors of their compartment and shoved their bags into the overhead rack.

"You have three electives on top of your regular class load!" said Hermione reproachfully, taking out her Arithmancy textbook and starting from page one for the second time that week. In her first year at school, she had looked into what kind of extracurriculars Hogwarts offered, but none of them had appealed to her. The student choir, the Quidditch reserves, Gobstones Club, and an invitation-only tea salon run by the upper year Slytherin girls.

(The fact that she wasn't good at any of their activities, and had no acquaintances among the current members of any club was not a factor in her decision to focus on her schoolwork. Yes, definitely.)
"You'd have to cut off my wand hand before I'd have a chance at dropping from O's to EE's," said Tom. "And even if you did, Slughorn would write me a note to let me re-sit my exams. Not that I'd need to, of course, but the thought still counts for something."

"You know, Tom," said Hermione, with a loud sigh of exasperation, "I wouldn't mind so much that you get better marks than me in half our subjects, if only you were more modest about it."

"Like I am with everyone else?" said Tom, propping his feet up on the opposite bench. Hermione noticed that his shoelaces were green. "'Oh, just read over the textbook and take good notes each lesson, maybe you'll get first next time around, eh?' He let out a mocking laugh. "I think you know the reason why you ever earn first is not because you've read the textbook and taken notes. All the Ravenclaws read the textbook and take notes, but there's only one top mark."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Yes, alright! But it's not nice for you to rub it in like that."

"What's the harm?" asked Tom. "Silencing Charm on the door. No one's going to hear. And you aren't going to tell everyone that Big Bad Tom Riddle slaps kittens around when no one's watching, are you?"

She was relieved to see that he was back in top form. No longer the silent and almost manic version of himself, but the regular old Tom who'd torn himself out of his books... to tear into other people. She'd never admit to enjoying his comments; it wasn't light-hearted comedy, and he wasn't a light-hearted person.

But it was him.

And Tom without his misanthropy was like Professor Slughorn without his nightly tipple.

When they arrived at Hogwarts, the holidays soon became a distant dream under a barrage of essays and assigned readings and half-awake evenings spent charting the rise of Mars in the Astronomy Tower. In the quiet peace of Scotland, the London newspapers arrived only sporadically. There was not a single wireless set in sight, and not a single air-raid siren had broken her sleep. The dangers of the Muggle world seemed far away. Even the unrest on the magical side of Continent under the rising Grand Minister felt like it would never reach them.

The first half of the school term flew by, their teachers emphasising that this year would be the most intensive they'd had yet. First and Second Year were introductions to magic and basic technique, as well as studying habits for all the students who'd been taught at home or with the village tutor until they'd gotten their Hogwarts letters. Third Year was the beginning of their O.W.L.s preparation. Hermione found that she excelled at Arithmancy and Runes. It hadn't been much of a surprise: Tom had spent his holidays challenging himself with intermediate Defense spells and learning to cast the lower-level ones at full power—although why he wanted to be able to cast *Lumos* brighter than a bundle of railroad flares going off at once, and in different colours than the standard blue-ish white, she didn't know. She'd only ever used it for reading books at night, or going to the loo in the dark.

In comparison, Hermione had spent her holiday going through her electives' textbooks. She'd spent two years on her core subjects, but this would be her first year with her three electives. She wasn't going to start on the first day without knowing a single thing. And her family had a professional wardmaster calling on them once a week, an opportunity for advance preparation that not even her wealthy, wizard-raised classmates could boast.
Not that she boasted about it. Tom couldn't understand modesty, but Hermione could.

(That didn't sound like boasting, did it?)

She cared about fairness—or the outward observation of fairness, at least—and personally, she would have been irritated if one of her classmates went on about their private summer tutoring, having tea with members of the examinations board, or hands-on lessons with a notable textbook author. Even if they had enjoyed such an advantage over the rest of their year, and she was sure that a couple of her Housemates did, or had a wizarding parent on hand or an owl away, ready to explain their coursework—which none of the Muggle-raised students had—it was in poor taste to make it public.

Well, it would have served them quite right if, for all the perks of their wizarding connections, they still couldn't take the coveted first rank in any subject.

Even with the extra classes, school seemed duller this year than it had the previous. She put it down to not having an extracurricular project weighing on her mind, as she'd had when she worried about the war, the safety of her parents, and her own well-being during the summer. The war had come; there was no longer any political bickering about appeasement or concessions. Mum and Dad were protected now, and so she could relax, but somehow she felt... listless.

Because she'd found her solution, and yet Tom was still chipping away at his own personal projects.

Hermione decided that the best course of action was the one that had never failed her: going to the library. She'd learned the name of the spell she'd discovered back in First Year, and she was aware that the most comprehensive information would be locked away in the Restricted Section for the eyes of older students only. Well, it wasn't as if she wanted to cast those illegal spells anytime soon. Or even better, at all.

So it didn't matter to her that none of the books would teach her how to cast them; in fact, she thought that it was probably better this way. Tom would have found them in First Year otherwise. She wanted to know more about the general magical theory, more than the glancing references she and Tom had found from reading law proceedings published over a century ago. Because, truthfully, some part of her was still very anxious about the concept of magical mind control, and the many forms it could take in the hands of wizards.

And having it confirmed for her by a trusted adult authority?

It was frightening, and she didn't want to be frightened. She wanted to be well-informed, and well-prepared.

If she could find information in the regular sections of the library—and not in the Restricted areas—then it would hardly be dangerous information, would it? They wouldn't let dangerous information be accessible for anyone who stumbled upon it.

Mr. Pacek had said that the theory of Unforgivable Curses, if not the practice, was not against the rules to discuss when he had gone to school. It wasn't against the rules at Hogwarts, as far as she knew, because there were books about them in the library, albeit restricted. She also knew that Durmstrang had a reputation for the Dark Arts, but the wardmaster had studied there, and it was very clear that he was a wardmaster, and not a Dark Wizard.
With a research project to focus on, Hermione felt a renewed sense of purpose.

She would *make* Third Year interesting. She was far too young to be jaded about the magical world.

And later, Hermione rescinded her judgment of Third Year being boring when Tom Riddle set a wardrobe on fire in Defense, along with a good half of the classroom.
BIRDS of a FEATHER
Chapter End Notes

*Birds of a Feather* now has cover artwork! They turned out just how I imagined them!!!
Baby Tom and Baby Hermione from First and Second Year, 1938-1940. Tom is the perfect Good Boy. Wouldn't you believe him if he said he didn't torture orphans or kill rabbits for entertainment? And Hermione's hair is too big for the frame. Soooo floofy.

Should I pick one and stick it on Page 1/Chapter 1? Or should I pick both of them? Is it too spoilery? I intended the first couple of chapters to be about Muggle life, so it unintentionally sets expectations if you know they're both going to Hogwarts and Hermione ends up in Ravenclaw. Please let me know what you think!!

And yes, I know that most Tom-fans like looking at pictures of adult Tom Riddle (before he turned into a nose-less weirdo), but Baby Tom is just too adorable, and is my favourite version of Tom.
1941

Tom had the misfortune of being invited to the Deputy Headmaster's office for tea, not long after Christmas. It appeared that he had made the mistake, once again, of drawing Professor Dumbledore's eye.

The invitation was delivered by a school owl at breakfast, so early in the morning that many of the other students who'd stayed for the holiday hadn't even woken up. Why should they? It wasn't as if they had classes to go to, so most of them preferred to sleep in until noon. Winter in Scotland meant that following a school day routine would have them getting out of bed before the sun rose, and few of them were motivated enough to do that.

Tom was motivated. The library opened at eight o'clock. Wasting time with sleep was throwing away his education.

That motivation, however, began to fade at noon, and was gone completely by three in the afternoon.

His feet had dragged across the stones of the castle and down the stairs to the First Floor where Dumbledore's office sat at the base of its own tower. Tom's arm, as if laden with a great weight, hesitated at the heavy, iron-bound oak door when he raised his hand to knock.

The bells in the clocktower chimed the hour.

*One, two, three.*

The echo of the last peal faded away into the howling winds of a Scottish winter.

He knocked.

The locking mechanism clicked. The door swung open.

Dumbledore was inside the office, sitting behind the desk, his fingers laced together and thumbs twiddling to suggest that he had been waiting for a while, but didn't mind it in the least because he was having a jolly time twiddling away by himself. He wore robes in a rich aubergine purple; the inner lining of his wide, trumpet-shaped sleeves was in watered silk the colour of antique gold, which caught the light with every movement of his hands.

The lamps in the room were lit, casting a warm golden light over the desk, and the office was arranged as it had been the last time Tom had seen it: the phoenix on its golden stand preening its feathers, the snowy scene behind the high, arched windows, the bookcases and magical instruments, and the squishy armchair in front of the desk, upholstered in red leather with gilded wooden lions' paws for legs.

There was a tray on the desk containing a full tea service and tiered cake stand. The teapot was
"Good afternoon, Tom. Please, have a seat," said Dumbledore. The interlaced fingers unlaced, and one hand gestured grandly to the chair in front of the desk.

Tom sat, adjusting his robes so they wouldn't wrinkle.

"Professor," Tom began, his lips parted, his eyes wide and guileless, in that innocent expression that Hermione called his 'Wheedling Face'. It worked well on adults, and he'd used it during the summer to stay up another quarter hour past his official bed time. At Hogwarts, it allowed him to borrow one or two extra books past his ten-book limit at the library.

"Is this about what happened in the Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson? Professor Merrythought cleared it up right away, and said I was excused for it. Emotions running wild, in the heat of the moment." Tom looked down at his hands, abashed. Then he glanced up through his eyelashes at the disappointingly indifferent Dumbledore on the other side of the table. "It was just a bit more literal in my case, you see, sir."

"As a matter of fact, Tom, that is what I wished to discuss," said Dumbledore. He reached over the desk and slid the tea tray closer to himself. "But first, let's start with something more important. Tea!"

Dumbledore picked up an upside-down teacup and turned it the right way around with one hand; he held the other hand over the tray, his fingers wriggling like flobberworms in a bucket, and the cup and saucer closest to Tom lifted up and floated over to him. The spoons clinked, the teapot poured, and the dish of lemon slices made its way to Tom's hand, the silver serving tongs opening and closing like the jaws of a tiny crocodile.

A basic, single-function animation charm, thought Tom, watching the proceedings with an assessing eye. Now that he knew more about magic than he had back in First Year, he was more critical about other people's spellcasting. A minor one that most witches and wizards past their O.W.L.s can perform, and most that have passed their N.E.W.T.s could do wordlessly. I've seen it done in half the shops of Diagon Alley. But he did it wandlessly.

And Hermione calls me a braggart.

Tom served himself lemon. When he set the tongs back onto the dish, it lifted up and returned to the tea tray. Dumbledore picked a few biscuits off the cake tray and placed them on the side of his saucer, next to his cup.

"Lemon shortbread, Tom? No? They are excellent, if I do say so," Dumbledore said, munching on a biscuit. "To return to the topic of discussion, I'd like to hear your perspective on the incident during the lesson. I've heard from Galatea, of course, who says it was an overenthusiastic reaction from a student who's always been keen on the wandwork, but in all my years of teaching, I don't think anyone has reacted quite like you."

"What would you like to know in particular, Professor?" asked Tom. He considered drinking his tea, but thought it might look like he was trying to buy time to fabricate a story. Better to keep his hands in his lap. "The lesson was... distressing. I don't think I was the only one who thought that. Plenty of students went to the Hospital Wing afterwards for Calming Draughts."

"I want to know how you set the classroom on fire. Where did you learn that spell?"
"Charms class, last year," answered Tom without a moment's hesitation. "Incendio, the fire-making charm." He gave the professor a wavering smile. "I suppose I got a bit carried away there. It was a uniquely disturbing situation for me."

Dumbledore nodded. "I will not deny that facing down a boggart for the first time can be disturbing. But, Tom, you destroyed it."

"A boggart is an amoral being, according to Slinkhard's *Defensive Magical Theory*. Similar to a poltergeist, it's neither alive nor dead, so I can't have killed it," Tom quoted from the textbook. Hermione did it all the time in class, and the teachers tossed House points at her like they thought Ravenclaw deserved a chance at winning the House Cup. "And I can't say I'm sorry for... destroying, as you describe it, a creature—a magical object—that only exists to make people feel bad. Am I wrong? Am I a bad person, sir, for not being worried about it?"

"In my view, I think you should be more concerned with the students accidentally Vanishing or disfiguring their specimen animals in your Transfiguration class. Those beetles are definitely alive." Tom coughed for emphasis before he continued. "Or were, that is. I always treat mine with respect. I, for one, saw Merton Bancroft poke his beetle so hard with his wand that its wing fell off. If anyone needs watching, it's him—there's something not quite right about how quickly he goes through his practice animals."

"I will make a note of that when lessons resume next term," said Dumbledore genially, before he adjusted his spectacles and leaned forward. "However, it seems to me that your moral qualms would not be an issue at all, if you simply used the spell Professor Merrythought taught in class. *Riddikulus*."

"In hindsight, perhaps. But, sir, is it unreasonable for a person to confront their worst fear in the face, and not be able to call it ridiculous?"

"Would you like to talk about it, Tom?"

"No, sir," said Tom. "I'm not sure how that would help my situation."

"Nevertheless," Dumbledore spoke in a tone that wouldn't permit further quibbling, "I'm afraid that you haven't explained the 'situation'—" and Tom could hear the emphasis on the word, as if Dumbledore thought the situation they were in right now was ridiculous, and Tom's reluctance to speak about it baffling. "—As you see it. I should like to be enlightened, if you don't mind."

But Tom did mind, so he decided to give Dumbledore the abridged version.

The 'Situation', as Tom settled on calling it, not having any better name to use, had its roots in the summer holiday.
There was no definite single moment or act during the summer that had directly led to the incident in Defense class. It was a number of things, a compilation of abstract ideas and images that Tom saw as weaknesses, brought out into the light and paraded in front of half the students in his year, to be 
laughed at.

The first moment was when it had sunk in that he was out of the orphanage, the place that he hated, but for most of his life, was the only place he'd ever known and had expected to know until he was eighteen. He was in the Grangers' house, and the implications of that offer of hospitality had not struck him until he'd woken up the next morning in an unfamiliar bed, washed his face in an unfamiliar bathroom, and when he was more than half-awake, he'd looked into the unfamiliar mirror.

The mirror was a single rectangular pane, uncracked, no signs of mildew growing between the glass and the silver backing. It was fogged up from someone having showered a few minutes before he'd gone in. When he tore back the curtain on the shower, he saw a clean porcelain tub—no suspicious black rings around the inside of the tub, and again, no mildew or a line of mossy green under the faucet fixture—and then the foggy steam spiraled out, smelling sweetly of flowers.

A floral scent—a very familiar scent—and in that moment, Tom felt ill.

Ill wasn't exactly the best way to describe it, but he couldn't think of what else that it could be, as he couldn't remember experiencing this particular malady before. It made him uncomfortable, as if there was something caught in his throat, not a lump of phlegm, but words trapped inside his chest like a consumptive cough; he felt as though he was meant to say something, but he had no idea what to say and why he should speak at all—

He'd already begun dissecting his symptoms and possible causes—diphtheria, tuberculosis, asthma, anaphylaxis—didn't Dr. Granger have a bookshelf in the sitting room filled with medical textbooks he could run down and borrow without anyone noticing?—before he realised that while the discomfort was strange due to its unfamiliarity, he wasn't exactly screaming in pain, coughing up chunks of bloody lung tissue, or having a seizure on the bathroom floor.

That scent followed him around the rest of the summer. He chose to avoid it where he could, and focused his thoughts on other, more important things when he couldn't. In the end, he considered it one of the many ordeals of surviving middle class suburban life, in the same category as making mealtime conversation, and offering to help clear the table each time, even though he preferred to go back to his room to study.

He considered himself lucky to have come out of it unscathed.

(In the back of his mind, he still associated that scent with his first summer of unlimited magic.)

The second moment was the day the Germans attacked London.

He'd known already that the German airplanes had targeted other parts of Britain in the weeks preceding the attack on London. Airfields and supply bases and ports, logistical centres that only made sense to Tom to go after first. The kind of tactics the Germans had used against their neighbours were those that disabled their opponents before the opponents had a chance to retaliate.

He had supposed, along with most of the British civilian population who weren't actively engaged in the war effort, that they could keep their heads down and let the soldiers and generals sort out the conflict. The German agenda wasn't their own, and the politics behind entering the war, whatever personal opinions they might hold, was the dominion of ministers and statesmen. They would ration
their resources, follow the news from overseas, but for the most part, life went on, and they weren't
directly affected beyond the rising prices of basic goods at the grocery market, and the complete
disappearance of luxury goods.

Then the bombings began, a week or two before the start of the school term, each night-time raid
growing closer and closer to the centre of London.

Tom spent his evenings wondering what would happen if the cellar door was blocked on the outside
by fifty tonnes of rubble. A Levitation Charm was one of the first spells he'd learned at school, but
they'd practised by lifting feathers and textbooks in class. Tom knew he could lift his bedstead if he
pushed himself, but that was a single solid piece of metal. Lifting a thousand crumbly bits of brick
and asphalt and broken glass was another challenge altogether. How would one use the charm
without having to levitate one brick at a time? Was it a matter of focusing his intent, or a different
wand movement beyond the standard swish-and-flick?

He experimented with variations on simple First and Second Year spells to fill in the hours between
dinner and breakfast. He succeeded in non-verbal casting for a few of them, because after so many
repetitions he didn't need the words to focus his mind on the spell. But as productive as he could be
—and he chose to be productive when he otherwise would have spent the night staring at the ceiling
—some part of him couldn't help wonder if all this effort would be for naught.

The magic tent had a bathroom that ensured they'd never run out of fresh water, but they only had a
limited supply of food, and the only person in the household who could duplicate food and Apparate
was Mr. Pacek, who wasn't really a part of the household at all.

(Neither was Tom himself, for that matter.)

Tom had gone to the Defense lesson tense, without the confidence he'd had in every other lesson,
where he'd known without a doubt that he was the best in the class.

He headed straight for the back of the queue and ignored the pushing and back-thumping bravado
that the other Slytherin boys used to disguise their insecurities. He didn't care about what might pop
out for them when they stood in front of the wardrobe in the centre of the classroom. It was probably
something as stupid, trite, and insignificant as a broken racing broomstick, or their mothers'
 likenesses telling them that they were illegitimate bastards who were never going to inherit the family
holdings.

Poor babies, thought Tom. It was pathetic that their sense of self-worth was completely dependent
on their surnames.

Tom was the last to face the boggart.

He stood in front of the wooden armoire, watching the double-leaved doors creak open to reveal the
face of his worst fears.

It wasn't a face at all.

It was a formless pile lumped on the floor in front of his feet. Masonry, loose bricks and powdered
mortar, chunks of torn concrete baring great spears of steel rebar like the ribs of a beached whale.

This isn't very scary, thought Tom, raising his wand and revising the wand movements.
A pebble shifted off the pile and rolled over to Tom's left foot. He glanced down at the rubble, and his eyes widened.

There was a hand, smeared with blood, coated in dust, scrabbling around the debris. Pale skin, slender fingers, short-trimmed nails, scraping away at the crushed brickwork, to reveal a gnarl of white wooden flinders. The bodiless hand dug at the rubble, frantically now, uncovering more bits of wood, all of them smashed into thin splinters, then a bedraggled orange feather, and finally, a dirty and tattered bit of pink cloth. A piece of someone's clothing—what appeared to be the sleeve of a little girl's coat, with gold buttons on the cuff winking under a layer of grime...

Tom wasn't afraid when he stared down at his boggart.

He was angry.

He couldn't remember ever feeling as angry as he did in this moment. This wasn't the kind of bitter aggravation he'd have felt at being sent to bed without supper, or being smacked by the schoolmaster for speaking out of turn. This was pure outrage, the kind of all-consuming, blinding fury he would have felt had he returned to Wool's for the summer and seen some grubby little orphan in his room, sprawled over his bed, dirty shoes planted flat on the blanket, perusing his books, his trinket collection, all his belongings and worldly possessions...

The stupid boggart was wearing his form.

He'd forgotten he was supposed to cast Riddikulus while thinking of something funny to turn it into. In that moment, humour was the furthest thing from his mind.

Tom pointed his wand at the wardrobe, and the first spell he thought of, a spell that came automatically to his hand and mind, was one he knew would make it go away for good.

He cast it without a second thought.

A few seconds later, he felt a wave of heat billow up in front of him, like a thick woollen blanket pressed against his mouth and lips, squeezing the breath from his lungs; he heard a shrill squeal, and then clanking from within the wardrobe, like the sound produced by turning on a rusty, half-frozen tap in the middle of winter. He heard screaming children behind him, the thunder of their feet as they backed away from the boggart's pyre, and then Professor Merrythought was yelling at everyone to calm down and step back, and head on out into the corridor until she could get the mess cleared up.

He hadn't meant to cause the desks behind the wardrobe to go up in smoke, but the wardrobe itself was definitely deliberate.

When Merrythought had set the classroom back to rights, she'd patted him on the shoulder and told him that since he was the last, and everyone else had had their turn, there was no harm done. Then she asked him for his wand.

"What for?" asked Tom, in the midst of brushing the soot off his robes.

"I'd like to see what spell you used," said the professor, "since you cast it non-verbally."

"Oh," said Tom. He could do Lumos, Wingardium, and Silencio, and he was working on
Alohomora, but he hadn't gotten to the point where he could cast *Incendio* without speaking the incantation. Well, apparently he could now. He reached into his pocket and drew out his wand. "Here you go."

Merrythought tapped his wand with hers, and a small, transparent tongue of flame wobbled out of the end of Tom's wand like the head of burning matchstick.

"*Incendio*," pronounced Merrythought. "Yours was so powerful that it almost looked like a *Confringo*, which won't be taught until your N.E.W.T. years. I'd have had to report this incident to your Head of House for further review if that were the case."

"Sorry for causing all the trouble," said Tom ruefully, shuffling his feet. "But, Professor, I read that *Confringo* had a kinetic aspect; it produces fire and force, while *Incendio* produces only the fire."

"You're correct, Riddle. Two points to Slytherin," replied Professor Merrythought. She handed his wand back to him. "A *Confringo* that produces force in ratio with the fire of your *Incendio* would have sent the desks flying to the opposite wall, broken the windows, and caused a tornado of splinters to blast the whole classroom. It's a spell best used outdoors. So, Mr. Riddle, stick to the curriculum next time, if you please. If you have difficulty completing the class assignment, ask a teacher before you attempt something on your own."

"Of course, Professor." Tom bobbed his head, the anger having faded away to leave his regular dosage of low-level annoyance at the people around him. He'd rather not have to smarm it up with his professor, but he didn't regret setting the boggart on fire one bit.

"We'll call this one an early mark," she sighed. Then she pointed him out the door and told him to inform the other students that they could go to lunch ten minutes early.

"—And it wasn't so much that there was a body under that rubble, but the fact that it was mine," said Tom, setting his teacup back on the saucer. "It reminded me that with the Muggle war going on, a bomb falling on me while I'm asleep isn't out of the realm of possibility, at least compared to the other students' boggarts. I admit, the grindylow one was scary, but the one with the giant talking centipede was just absurd."

"Are you afraid of it coming true, Tom?" asked Dumbledore. He'd eaten his way through two trays of biscuits during Tom's (abbreviated) recounting of the Defense class incident.

"Who wouldn't be afraid of it?" said Tom. "Students aren't allowed to stay at Hogwarts during holidays, magic isn't allowed out of school, and the majority of Muggle-raised students don't have access to the same safety features that their wizard-born peers have. Sir, of course I think it's alarming."

"Is it the Muggle bombs or the concept of death itself that troubles you?"
"Death, of course," said Tom. "The bomb could easily be something else—being gassed in the streets, a mis-aimed mortar landing in the wrong place, or being shot in the back and bleeding out during an actual invasion. There's quite a lot of variety actually, although I do have my doubts on whether they'd offer me a chance to pick and choose."

He had hated his boggart's appearance, but the pile of rubble was preferable to seeing a magical representation of Private Fritz stepping out of the wardrobe and pointing a loaded machine gun at the class. His dorm mates had been respectful of the Incident afterwards, the Slytherin boys pretending that they weren't curious about why Riddle's greatest fear was a midden, and Tom pretending that they hadn't screamed like girls on their way out of the classroom. He didn't think that they would be quite so respectful if they'd seen what was obviously a Muggle man in a strange uniform as Tom's weakness.

He knew he could produce a decent Shield Charm, but it was *shield-shaped*, a flat half-dome that appeared in front of the caster's wand. It wasn't a full protection. He knew from attending meetings with the Duelling Club that while he could protect his front, someone could always aim and hit him in the back when he wasn't looking. In London, it wouldn't be a Tickling Charm or Tripping Hex he'd have to watch out for, but an actual lead bullet or shrapnel grenade.

"Death is not always the worst fate to befall a person," said Dumbledore, calmly gazing at Tom over the remains of the tea tray. "One tends to enjoy their life more when they accept that it's not always a final end, but rather, a fresh beginning."

If Tom had been three years younger, he would have gaped at the professor upon hearing those words; had Tom been six years younger, he would have pushed his chair back and walked out, as he had done during Reverend Rivers' regular Easter visit to the orphanage. The good Father had told the flock of orphans that their parents might have left them, but they shouldn't let it bother them, because Mummy and Daddy were sure to be happy in God's blessed arms, and one day they would reunite... but only if they were good little boys and girls who listened to Mrs. Cole and remembered their bedtime prayers.

But Tom was fourteen, and he had become wise to the ways of the world. He knew that some adults were so self-important as to think that they had been given a greater calling, and if they were ever placed in a position of power, saw it as their duty to safeguard their lessers. Queen Victoria had forced her values on British society for over half a century; Professor Dumbledore was now doing it to Tom. And the next thing he knew, Dumbledore would be slipping Tom pamphlets inside his marked homework, inviting him to join a wizarding Freemasonry society or something.

If Slughorn could host his own mentoring club right under the Headmaster's nose, then Dumbledore could do it too.

Tom knew that he was sensationalising the situation, but nothing made him want to pull out his Devil's Advocate pitchfork as much as someone attempting to set themselves up as his morality supervision.

"A fresh beginning?" said Tom, cocking his head and mentally sharpening the tines of his pitchfork. "I'm afraid that I'm not very well-informed on the nature of wizarding religion. Do wizards believe in re-incarnation?"

"Not a religion as such, but it's my personal belief—and one shared by the majority of wizards and witches—that the soul of a magical being is immortal and continues on after the physical passing of the body."
"That sounds like religion to me," Tom remarked. He was tempted to ask if boggarts had souls—he guessed that since they weren't classified as 'beings' in the textbooks, they didn't. But making a point out of it, and gloating over the moral implications of the Incident, or lack of them, was pushing the envelope too far for his comfort. "Are you sure there's not a wizarding Heaven? If there is, I don't think my Housemates would want it unless they were sure they wouldn't have to share it with Muggles."

"What happens in the beyond is up to your own imagination," replied Dumbledore, watching Tom carefully. Tom's expression didn't twist into a sneer of derision as it would have for Reverend Rivers. He met Dumbledore's eyes calmly and refused to look away or blink, even when he started feeling his eyelids prickle from holding them open for so long. "But personally, I think of death as the next great adventure."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Tom, hoping that he didn't sound as incredulous as he felt, "are you saying that I'm supposed to look forward to dying?"

"I'm merely suggesting that when the time comes—as everyone's time must come—you shouldn't face it in fear," Dumbledore said, giving him a pleasant smile.

"Well, I suppose I'll keep that in mind when I go back to London for the summer," Tom said in a flat voice.

"Tom, you have my sympathies. The situation isn't ideal, and I understand if you've felt that the school authorities are not people you're willing to turn to," Dumbledore spoke earnestly, his eyes imploping behind his wire-rimmed spectacles, and for a few seconds Tom almost found himself believing the old man. "I know that I wasn't able to offer you a solution in your first year here, but it would be remiss of me to disregard your concerns now. I believe I can offer you a solution that will grant you some peace of mind."

"'Peace of mind'?” echoed Tom. "It's not conclusive proof of wizard Heaven, is it?"

Dumbledore slid open his desk drawer, rooted around for a few seconds, and drew out what looked like a button on a piece of string. A large button in the style one would find on an overcoat or mackintosh, round and made out of wood instead of Bakelite, with four holes punched in the centre where it could be sewed onto a garment.

Dumbledore held it up over the desk, turning it over and showing it to Tom. It really was just a wooden button, strung on a bit of twine as would be used for tying parcels for owl mail.

"This is a single-use Portkey," he said, "one that will activate if you tap it with your wand and say the word 'Dumbledore'. I expect you to use it only in the direst emergency. Hogwarts will be closed for the summer, and I will be travelling abroad during the summer once again, so I cannot be present to meet you. Instead, this Portkey will transport you to Hogsmeade, to the front step of one of the taverns. The barkeeper there will grant you lodging until it's safe enough to return to London."

Tom took the button and ran his fingers over it. It looked like a button and felt like a button, not like anything magical at all. "And you're giving this to me now, sir?"

"The incident in your Defense class made me hope that you would seek help from others if you were given help in return," said Dumbledore, closing his desk drawer and setting his hands on his desk. "I have viewed Galatea's recollection of what happened that day, and the non-verbal casting technique
you demonstrated is one I believe I have seen before. It's a method of casting that puts power before precision, and is one favoured by schools that teach martial magics—an offensive approach that isn't taught at Hogwarts, where we emphasise defense. I'm curious as to where you learned it."

"It seems intuitive to me," said Tom, who had some suspicions of what Dumbledore was trying to tiptoe around asking. "Strange things used to happen to me when I was younger, but I know now that it was accidental magic. I didn't know any incantations, nor did I even own a wand for the proper movements, so it always seemed possible to perform magic without having to follow the directions from a book. Just wanting or needing something was enough to make things happen."

"Is there anything else you can tell me about it, Tom?"

"No, sir," said Tom. "Nothing."

"Very well," said Dumbledore. "I must ask you to be more careful with that kind of magic in future. Refinement and precision are useful magical skills that a wizard cannot properly learn if he only ever relies on raw power. And there are some solutions that cannot be found just by applying more power. Alchemy, the magical discipline I teach N.E.W.T. students, is an example of such."

"Thank you for the advice." Tom squeezed the Portkey button in his hand, feeling the rounded edges digging into his palm. "Is that all, sir?"

"I look forward to seeing you in class next term," said Dumbledore, standing up and brushing crumbs off his purple robes. He pulled his wand out of his sleeve and tapped the tea tray, which disappeared with a small pop. "You'll find out officially next week, but I am happy to tell you that you achieved the top score out of the year on the end of term exam."

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The Wardrobe Incident, as it was called in the Slytherin Common Room, helped solidify Tom's reputation in his House. Taking first place in his age bracket in the Duelling Club, and pushing Fourth Year former-first Abraxas Malfoy to second, cemented it.

It hadn't even been that difficult.

Malfoy was ahead by a year in the Defense curriculum, but Tom had already read through the textbooks in the library, so he could counter every standard jinx and hex. They were relatively even in speed and reflexes—Malfoy held a position on the House Quidditch team—but Malfoy's advantage came in the form of obscure spells Tom had never heard of, likely from his family's own library.

Tom decided to match him with personal innovation: he cast a silent Wingardium on Malfoy's robes—the Levitation Charm was most effective cast on inanimate subjects rather than living things—and immediately followed it up by clipping him with a precisely aimed pair of Knockback Jinxes on shoulder and elbow, each wand movement swift, the final flick of each spell flowing efficiently into the beginning of the next, well-practised from his sleepless nights of private training. Malfoy spun
around like a human pinwheel and missed his aim on his next counterspell, whereupon Tom hit him with a final *Petrificus* and sent him toppling off the edge of the duelling platform.

From an observer's point of view, Tom's speed and silent casting made it look like he'd only cast *one* spell, not four. Afterwards, younger students pestered him in the Common Room to teach them his "Spinning Jinx", which they couldn't find in the Defense textbook. Even some of the older students were curious about it.

His reputation had also been helped when Lestrange had let slip that Tom was a half-blood, mentioning the meeting in Diagon Alley in the summer before Second Year. The majority of his House thought it was disgusting for a witch to mate with a Muggle, which was why they'd assumed "Riddle" was his surname instead of anything more magical—but a witch was still a person of magical blood, so they kept their mouths shut. Tom didn't correct their assumptions; the best way to lie and get away with it was to allow other people to build their own lies for him, with him nodding and tutting at the right points to suggest one thing, but at the same time ensuring his own deniability. It was better that they think this, as he hadn't the same proof to show them that it was his father who was magical.

He certainly wasn't going to tell them the "witch" who was with him was Mrs. Granger, because if a witch mating with a Muggle was bad, then a Muggle with another Muggle was even worse. But if anyone was bold enough to insult his blood status behind his back—because he'd made them stop saying it to his face by the end of First Year—they weren't doing it now.

Another thing that happened, although Tom didn't know how exactly it had come to be, was that he had somehow taken leadership over the boys in his dormitory. It had just sort of... become the status quo over the course of Third Year for the Slytherin boys to defer to Tom, and to stand by him when anyone tried to slander him in the Common Room—though this was less and less common as the months went on, only limited to some of the girls in his year.

Tom didn't understand girls as well as he did boys. They didn't respond to open, straightforward displays of power like the Slytherin boys. If he had tried his classic "conditioning tactics", a boy would bear the pain until he snapped, and then Tom was there to pick up the pieces and put them back together in a manner closer to his liking. A girl, on the other hand, would think it was some form of feminine ailment and go straight to the Hospital Wing for a potion, and that would be the end of it.

So he'd turned them on each other by sending Peanut into their dormitory—because there was a jinx preventing boys from entering the girls' dorm, but a loophole for male *animals*. Peanut had gone through the contents of their nightstands, collecting earrings, bracelets, and jewelled hairpins from all the girls, then hid them inside the trunk of another girl. It was a timeless technique that had served him well during rainy days at the orphanage.

(And the screeching had been so satisfying that he hadn't even Silenced his curtains for the night.)

Several weeks later, Everard was still not speaking to Sidonie Hipworth. That was the funny thing about girls that Tom would never understand—their singleminded stubbornness about the most insignificant issues. Of course, Tom himself could be stubborn with his personal grudges when he had reason to be, but his reasons were always *significant*. There was a difference.

The younger students didn't try anything against him, having found Tom less intimidating and more helpful with schoolwork than the prefects, and the oldest students were too busy preparing for their exams to bother with the "games of children".
(It was the in-between students like Malfoy and Hastings who were the most trouble, but Malfoy had been put quite thoroughly in his place, and Hastings had never gotten over his public humiliation and subsequent nicknaming. He still had his family connections, but had nonetheless lost Slughorn’s eye, and the prefect position he’d apparently had his heart set on had gone to someone else.)

The first sign of the status quo changing was when Avery began taking the seat next to Tom at breakfast, trying to wheedle hints about the answers to last week’s homework that he was trying to finish up before class started in thirty minutes. Then it was Lestrange sitting on his other side the day of the Welcoming Feast in Second Year, the other boy still convinced that Tom cared about his medical conditions. Travers and Rosier began picking up on the way Lestrange and Avery fought with each other to be Tom’s Potions partner, before Tom had set up a system where they took turns and paid for any ingredients that weren’t in the student supply cupboard.

Nott, for all his father’s beliefs in blood purism, had kept to himself for most of First Year, and had not suffered the same level of disciplinary pranking that Tom had administered to the other boys. It was only when they’d discussed Grindelwald’s march on Europe late one night when the other boys were asleep—Tom’s bed was next to the window, and Nott’s was the one beside it—and Tom had laid out his own arguments as to the feasibility of Grindelwald’s agenda, as well as its applicability to the social structure of Magical Britain, that Nott had grudgingly begun to associate with him in public.

None of that meant that any of them liked each other. The other boys had realised that Tom wasn’t just some no-name Sorting fluke, not a mistake made by a threadbare old hat whose enchantments were wearing out, but someone who truly embodied Slytherin virtues. And they recognised from the growing number of convenient accidents that it was better to be on Tom’s side, or behind him, than to stand in his way.

"I don't agree with lumping Muggleborns in the same category as Muggles. Grindelwald is right about his 'Magic is Might' slogan; it doesn’t make sense to limit his wizarding nation to purebloods and half-bloods only," argued Tom. "I'm not sure if the Ministry of Magic takes a population census —and if there is one, I haven't seen it, so I'm only going off how many of our classmates have siblings. But I know for fact that the average Muggle woman in Britain has three children, and if she has enough dormant magical blood to produce a magical child, then each child she bears has a chance at being a wizard.

"Grindelwald, no matter what he might personally believe—he went to Durmstrang, where Muggleborns aren't allowed to enroll—must recognise that Muggleborn recruits are a guaranteed way to bolster his army. Their families wouldn't put up a fuss the same way an old pureblood family would at losing their heir."

It was the same reason why older orphans and the lowest tier of manual labourers went to enlist as infantrymen in the British army, and why the powers within the recruitment offices would never give the same first-line trench-digging assignments to The Honourable James Aubrey Fairweather-Dickson-Smythe III, finding him a much less exposed situation as a minor subaltern in one of the cavalry regiments, where he’d have a chance to wear a spiffy uniform with gold pips on the shoulders, but no chance of seeing proper action.

"Besides," Tom continued, "it goes against his agenda of a united wizarding nation if he's split it up into purebloods and half-bloods plus the honorary Muggleborns who've passed some manner of arbitrary qualification scheme, and then the rest who haven't. I'm not sure what would even happen to the legitimacy of such an agenda if a Muggleborn passed the qualifications and publicly refused to
take the rank up."

"That's a pragmatic way of looking at it," whispered Nott from the opposite bed. They had their curtains pulled closed around their four-posters, except for where their beds faced each other. "But most pureblooded wizards wouldn't like being in the same rank as anyone who wasn't one."

Tom stood up and tapped his wand against Nott's curtain, casting a wordless Silencio. Instantly, the volume of Lestrange's snoring from the other side dropped. They would still hear him until they closed their curtains all the way, but with this, they'd know if any of their dorm mates woke up.

Nott's eyes flicked to Tom's wand, then to his face, his gaze cool and assessing.

"I expect there must be a reason why the Hat put me in Slytherin," Tom replied, sitting down on his own bed and setting his wand on the nightstand. "I'm only looking at it in terms of what I would do were I in Grindelwald's situation. If it were me, I would offer equal rights to anyone who can prove magical blood, and then offer special privileges on top of that to anyone who can prove... exceptional." Tom's lips curved into a thin smile, then he added, "Most people would be happy with fair treatment, but you'd have to find some way to recognise the ambitious within the system, or they'd try to undermine the system from the outside. It's only sensible."

Napoleon had his Garde Impériale, his élite personal bodyguard. The emperors of Rome had had a Praetorian Guard for their imperial households, which the Emperor Tiberius had put to good use by pruning his political enemies... although they'd later turned on the Emperor Caligula and assassinated him. Tom had read of Caligula's eccentricities, but he didn't care how or why the historians tried to justify it post facto. He was more interested in what kind of precedent it set; it made him conscious of the possibility of betrayal.

He knew that magic had limits, as it had been one of the first things he'd looked up once he'd gained access to Hogwarts' library. The five exceptions to Gamp's Law had stated that it wasn't possible to produce love with magic—but it said nothing about using magic to ensure loyalty. The idea of rewarding the talented and deserving, and above all, the loyal, sounded immensely appealing to him. If he ever became Emperor Tom the Great, then he would have to find some way to share his victory with Hermione, his first... minion?

No, he thought. She would never accept being my vassal, and I would never make her one. It's too close to 'peon' for my personal taste. No, there must be a better analogy for what we would be.

I think, if I were a Dictator, I should have a Consul.

Tom the Great, Dictator for Life, because an Emperor by any other name was just as powerful. And his loyal companion, Consul Hermione the Just, who was accorded the power of veto, but only used it for good reason—and not every other morning because she thought the great dictator was taking too long in the bathroom.

He tried to picture how she'd look in laurels. Maybe they'd get so tangled up in her hair that he'd have to cut them out with a pair of gardening shears, and she would yell at him about how his ideas always sounded good on paper, but he had no head for the practical aspects. (That was what she was for.) But it wouldn't matter, because Hermione with golden leaves in her curly hair was not an objectionable sight, not at all; he thought it would be—

"'Exceptional!,'" murmured Nott, laying back on his bed and folding his arms beneath his head. "What exactly do you mean by that, Riddle?"
"I mean that a good leader should always find suitable positions for the intelligent and competent," said Tom, re-gathering his thoughts from its strange tangent. He wasn't ill again, was he? He plumped up his pillow and pulled back the blankets.

"And not the pure of blood?"

"If purity of blood makes one exceptional, then there should be no issue with passing a test for basic competence."

"Only sensible," Nott agreed. "You might not be aware of it with wherever you came from, but granting or revoking privileges is a... sensitive subject. A political issue, to those who have had theirs for generations."

"Hmm," Tom mused, pulling the blankets under his chin. "I'll have to find out what Grindelwald did with the European old families. He's taken half a dozen Ministries already; he must have found a way to manage them."

Or keep them in line, more like, he thought. Grindelwald is a Dark Lord; there's only so far he would go to appease anyone.

"I could ask Father if he knows anything?"

"Don't bother," said Tom, yawning. "I've got my own sources."

"You are a singular fellow, Riddle."

"Good night, Nott."

Chapter End Notes

You know how every time someone writes a fanfic about Tom Riddle, Billy's rabbit has to die?

Well, it turns out that wardrobes work the same way.
When Tom was young, no more than four or five years old, the orphanage had had more babies left outside its gates than it had carers to watch them. They were lean years, his earliest memories, and most of them were centred on food: barley soup with turnips, porridge and potatoes, and milk thinned with water, because the proper stuff was reserved for the babies. They should have had their mother's milk, but their mothers were long gone, and no one of their ilk could afford a wet nurse. Feeding one was too expensive, when it was cheaper to buy a nanny and feed it on potato peelings.

A nanny, Tom had learned, was a she-goat.

The smell of the nanny was sour and grassy; it reeked with the organic odour of a penned beast who lived and ate a handful of paces from where it evacuated itself. In other words, it was disgusting. To a boy who had been born and lived his entire life in a city, who had learned of the importance of hygiene and sanitation in living a long and healthy life, the animal was the antithesis of everything he valued.

(He didn't turn down the milk when it was offered, so long as he didn't have to retrieve it from the animal's body with his own hands.)

He recognised that smell when he ventured to Hogsmeade that spring, when the snow began to melt and it was not nearly so painful to tear himself out of the comfortable warmth of the Slytherin living quarters.

The tavern and inn that Professor Dumbledore had offered him as a safe refuge from the Muggle war was not what he'd expected. When Tom had heard the offer, he'd expected the bright and well-lit Three Broomsticks, the very popular public house operated by a friendly landlady who could make haggis taste good, and always poured the house butterbeer with the creamiest, thickest layer of foam that wobbled over the rim of the glass without spilling a drop.

The Three Broomsticks was rustic, but his Slytherin Housemates didn't seem to mind the atmosphere or the clientele; Tom was told that at home, their servants' idea of quality service was to offer a menu of elaborate dishes served in five to seven courses, or fourteen while entertaining, dished out in small morsels because their dear mothers had placed orders with the dressmakers and wanted to fit into them when the gowns arrived. Cod and battered chips was a treat to them—and it was to Tom as well, since he never ate takeaway in the Muggle world, and the Hogwarts meals followed a more balanced meat and two veg format.

The other tavern in Hogsmeade, like most of the businesses in the village, could be described as "rustic" if one was generous. But if it was rustic, it was rustic in all the worst ways.

It smelled like goats.

The Hog's Head was some way off the main street of Hogsmeade. It was three storeys tall, but that gave no indication of the size of the rooms inside with how wizards used subtle Expansion Charms. It was built of dark stone—although whether the stones had been quarried that way or stained from centuries of ground-in soot, Tom couldn't tell. The roof was thatched, which would have made a
twee postcard scene in the winter when covered in snow, but in mid-spring, he could see where the moisture and constant rain had produced soggy black patches, interspersed with green where moss had begun to take root.

It looked run-down, and scarcely any better than the orphanage. It looked like the kind of place that was built before indoor plumbing was invented, and owned by a proprietor who looked like he didn't care about his customers' comfort. The kind of place where a wizard was expected to use a bucket in a shed out back in the stable yard, then Vanish his own mess. Tom appreciated the many practical functions of magic, but this was too far, even for him. He had standards.

There was a small yard and an open-walled shed behind the inn, where visitors were meant to stow their broomsticks, flying horses, carpets, or familiars before entering. There were no horses now, but there were half a dozen goats, milling around inside, lying down on piles of straw, or eating hay from a trough. There was a separate trough containing steaming grain mash, topped with chunks of fresh apple and kept warm with a heating charm. The goats appeared well-cared for, even more than the actual human customers.

Tom walked back around to the front, hesitated under the swinging sign of a decapitated boar's head dripping blood, then pushed open the door and entered the inn proper. His eyes adjusted to the darkness.

Too cold in here, why is it so cold? I'm so sleepy, I want to go to sleep... but I smell food...

Tom's head turned. A cloaked figure was sipping a drink in the corner. Something rustled from hip height, and Tom saw the glimmer of scaled skin in vivid green and striped black. The customer had a snake, and from the size of the scales and the circumference of the bit of it he'd seen, it was at least a few feet long. The pattern of skin was familiar. He'd seen it in the back of Slughorn's Potions classroom, kept in a jar in the glass-fronted cabinet at the back, behind an Age Line. For the N.E.W.T. students only.

He approached the bar, his eyes flicking from table to table, observing the calibre of the clientele. There were no other students, just what he presumed to be adult witches and wizards, but he couldn't tell for sure. For some reason, every other customer had the hoods of their cloaks on, even in the dimness of the inn where the windows were small and grimy, made of hand-blown glass that was opaque and hazy with swirling patterns. At the Three Broomsticks, patrons hung their cloaks up in the coatroom, because the interior was warmed from the three fireplaces and Floo connections they had going at once.

The barkeeper was wiping the surface of the bar with a dirty rag.

"Are you the owner?" asked Tom.

"Yes," said the barkeeper. The man had long hair—not unusual for the traditional type of wizard, as Tom had found, and more common among the older set. Tom personally thought long hair on men was unseemly, as most of them didn't take the same care as girls did with their daily brushing and washing. A cleaning spell could remove dirt and grease, but did nothing to make one's hairstyle look good. The barkeeper also had a beard, but it was so dark in the Hog's Head that Tom couldn't discern what colour it was. It just looked grey. "If you're not here to order anything, then get out."

"Do you have butterbeer?"

The barkeeper reached under the counter and pulled out a dusty bottle with a faded label and a cork
stopper bound to the top with a wire catch. The metal was dark, and Tom guessed it was either very dirty, or very rusty.

_Tetanus or botulism?_ thought Tom. _No thank you, I'm not interested in either._

"On second thought," said Tom, "how about milk? Do your goats have milk?"

"Yes," said the barkeeper. Or Tom thought that was what the barkeeper had said. It sounded like an affirmative grunt.

"Is it any good?"

"Of course it's good!"

"Can I have some?"

"Seven knuts a glass."

Tom put the coins on the counter. The barkeeper swept them up and stomped off to a back room. He returned a few minutes later with a clean glass—it didn't have any visible fingerprints on the rim as far as Tom could tell—a crockery jug, and a thin square of white cloth.

The barkeeper set the glass on the counter, placed the cloth over the mouth of the glass, and poured the milk from the crock. Squishy, yellow-white lumps collected on the fabric.

"I've got to take the fat out," said the barkeeper. "Saving it for my homemade cheese recipe." He lifted up the cloth, waited for the last few drips to fall, then pushed the glass over to Tom.

"I see." Tom picked up the glass and drank, hoping he hadn't gambled and lost, and if he _did_ lose, it wouldn't be over his uniform and pressed robes.

Goat milk was different from cow milk, and both of them differed from ration booklet powdered milk. Goat milk had more depth of flavour, a certain tanginess which became more prominent when the milk was served at room temperature or warmed. This milk was chilled, very fresh, and rich with cream, made by goats provided with good feed in generous amounts. It wasn't anything like a cherry soda squash with white glove service during an opera intermission, or a house special foamed butterbeer with cinnamon sprinkles, but it wasn't _bad._

"It's good," Tom proclaimed, setting the glass back down. The barkeeper hadn't offered him a coaster. "Very buttery. It'd be interesting to taste it in the form of an ice cream, maybe with an added flavouring; I shouldn't think most people would appreciate the goaty aftertaste. By the way, did you know that the patron in the back corner by the window has a boomslang in his pocket?"

"Is that illegal?" grunted the barkeeper, arranging bottles the bottles behind the bar.

"Magical boomslang are a protected species, licensed harvesting only," said Tom. "So not exactly illegal."

"None of my business, is it then?"

"Why shouldn't it be?" asked Tom. "He's on your property. At the very least, he owes you a convenience surcharge for not going over there and asking him to produce his papers."
"Those who want to conduct private business in my inn hire the rooms upstairs," said the barkeeper. "I don't charge a 'business fee' for those who only come to inspect the wares, so long as they pay for their drinks."

"Interesting," Tom remarked, sipping his goat milk. "How entrepreneurial. Are there limits to what kind of business you allow on premises?"

"Why are you asking, lad?"

"Curiosity?" said Tom innocently.

"I don't tolerate hunting unicorns," the barkeeper replied. "Hair is fine, but no flesh, no blood. Now if you're done with your drink, you can get out."

"I was just asking. I meant no harm," said Tom. He shrugged, then pushed his chair back and stood up. "Have a good day, sir."

Tom left the barkeeper to his grunting and muttering.

Inside his head, Tom had plenty of muttering of his own to do. What on Earth was that? This was Dumbledore's idea of a safe refuge away from the war?! It was a dingy pub, populated with questionable customers, and an ill-tempered barkeeper that reminded him of the Hogwarts caretaker, Mr. Pringle. But the difference was that Mr. Pringle actually cared about hygiene and cleanliness and keeping things shipshape, while the proprietor of the Hog's Head very clearly did not.

What was Dumbledore thinking? Was he even thinking when he made that Portkey and set the location?

Wait a minute. Tom's thoughts shuddered to a halt. I think I know what this is.

It's a test of character.

He wants me to spend a summer 'building character'.

Tom could imagine it: fair-skinned, city-born Tom Riddle moving in with a grumpy old man in a small country village. Tom Riddle learning how to milk goats and clean stables and bale hay, working from sun-up to sunset, wiping down tables and serving customers and learning the meaning of humility. Finding fulfillment in doing an honest day's labour with the sweat of his brow and the strength of his limbs, because magic wasn't permitted during the holidays. The grumpy old barkeeper softening up with a young charge under his wing, a beautiful inter-generational friendship formed in the dark landscape of a world torn apart by war.

Then on the last day of August, the last day before the start of term, Albus Dumbledore would appear on the doorstep to the Hog's Head, freshly returned from his travels. Tom Riddle would serve him a hearty homemade cassoulet with crusty bread and goat milk gathered that very morning. Dumbledore's first bite of the delicious stew would bring tears to his eyes; he would proclaim it as good as his mother used to make, and then he would clasp Tom's now-callused and sun-tanned hand in his own and tell him how proud he was of such a fine young man that Tom was growing up to be.

"I always knew you could do it, Tom," said Imaginary Dumbledore, a single pearly teardrop shimmering on his wrinkled cheek.
"Jog on, old man," replied Imaginary Tom, blowing a loud raspberry and upending the table with the force of his new imaginary muscles.

Tom grimaced in disgust. He kicked a rock on the path in front of him, but his foot slipped on fresh owl droppings smeared over a wet patch of pavement on the Hogsmeade street, a few yards away from the owl post office. He stumbled; his shoulder knocked into another body, who squeaked and tumbled to the ground, scattering their bag and parcels.

"Tom?" Hermione asked, picking herself up and brushing the mud off her skirt.

"I didn't know you actually went on Hogsmeade weekends," said Tom. "Isn't the library empty on those days?"

"Oh," said Hermione. "I'm going back to the castle now. But I, um, I needed to visit the post office first."

"But don't you have your own owl?"

"Gilles is in London with Mum," she replied, not quite meeting his eyes. "Anyway," she continued, her eyes narrowing, "you're the one who said Hogsmeade was a waste of time and money, like a Muggle gambling den, preying on the weak of will and the lacking of sense."

Tom bent down to help her pick up her parcels. They were thick and rectangular and heavy, wrapped in brown paper, tied with black ribbon, and stamped with an unfamiliar logo on the top right corner. A torch, a scroll, and an illuminated letter G in gold, in the style of a mediaeval manuscript's initial capitals. He didn't recognise the logo as one representing any of the main shops in Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade.

Gambol's at Diagon, he recalled, had a G-shaped insignia, but they sold novelties and knick-knacks, like expandable one-size-fits-all pet collars and colour changing bubble bath. What would Hermione want with anything like that?

"Riddle!" called a voice from a few paces up the path.

Tom looked up, shoving the parcels into Hermione's arms. "Avery. Lestrange. Good afternoon."

Lestrange was a holding a paper shopping bag from the joke shop, and sucking on a sugar quill. Avery had both arms occupied with a big square pasteboard box, pink and printed with blooming flowers, the budding roses opening and closing every few seconds. It had the Honeydukes seal embossed on the front. Tom assumed it was from their deluxe line of chocolate gift samplers.

"What are you doing, Riddle?" said Avery, his eyes darting from Tom to Hermione and back again. "Why are you helping a mud—"

Tom whipped out his wand and cast a non-verbal Silencio on Avery. "Excuse me?"

"—A Ravenclaw," said Lestrange. He shoved his hands in his trouser pockets and avoided eye contact with everyone present, scuffing his mismatched shoes over the cobblestones of the path.

"That's better," said Tom. "You know, if a prefect had heard you, Avery, you would not only have lost us the House points I've spent all week earning, but you'd have been sent back to the castle for
detention. You might even have your Hogsmeade privileges revoked for the rest of the year."

"Yerble hurrrfff, mmmph hnnmph," said Avery, shifting his gift box.

Lestrange glanced at Avery. "I think he's saying that no one heard him."

"Only because I made sure of it," said Tom. "I think it best that he break such a nasty habit of speaking like that in such a public place. It's not gentlemanly of him to talk to a girl in that manner. Besides, if I wasn't here, I think we all know what he would have said, and who knows who would have heard? What if it wasn't a prefect, but one of the teachers?"

"Avery would be sent back immediately, without having a chance to mail those chocolates." He took a step nearer to Avery, head tilted, his smile thin. "Are these for your mother?"

Avery blinked, then jerked his head in assent. The chocolates rustled inside their box. Tom could smell them from where he stood: sweet vanilla, cream and honey, toffee fudge, rum and cherries.

"How do you think your mother would feel when her beloved son seems to have forgotten about her on her birthday?" Tom spoke in a low, controlled voice. "You know how she worries about you. She knows you have trouble with your schoolwork, when you go through two private tutors every summer. And disciplinary trouble on top of that? And then not a word from you on her birthday, only a letter from Professor Slughorn, writing out his concerns with your academic record, your difficulties at school, your disgraceful conduct. Such a blight on your father's reputation, Avery. You'd break her poor heart."

Tom stared into Avery's eyes, compelling the boy not to look away, to remain still, to not move a single muscle, and ignore his base animal instincts to run when faced with something as unnatural and invasive as a foreign entity digging through his fears and bringing them up into the light. Peeling back the surface, exposing things that no one else was ever meant to see. Fear and dread, wrapped in layers of self-doubt and an aching sense of inferiority.

Obedience, Tom knew, could be trained in mice as well as men. "You're too young to break your mother's heart. Aren't you, Avery?"

Avery nodded, his shoulders hunched.

Lestrange chewed loudly on his sugar quill, pretending that he wasn't listening in. He looked sick.

"And you're a gentleman, are you not?"

Avery swallowed. He nodded again.

"I'm glad you understand," said Tom solemnly. "We should all strive to better ourselves."

With a flick of his wrist, the Silencing Charm dissolved.

"Go on then, your mother is waiting. Be a gentleman and write to her."

Lestrange grabbed Avery by the elbow and hurried him into the post office, neither of them looking back.

"What was that?" Hermione asked, wide eyed. Her skin was pale, with two bright flushes of colour
on her cheeks. "What did you do to him? Did you—?"

Tom shrugged. "Did I teach him to mind his manners? Yes, I did. Someone should have done it years earlier, in my opinion. But the real question, however," said Tom, his eyes flicking down to Hermione's parcels, "is what those are. Care to enlighten me, Hermione?"

Hermione cleared her throat. "Books. I wrote Mr. Pacek about what kind of books he used when he was at school, since he took Runes at Durmstrang. I wanted more supplementary texts for extracurricular reading, but the library didn't have them, so I had go through owl order."

"You're making more work for yourself," said Tom, sighing. "And if it's not on the Hogwarts curriculum, it won't be on the exam."

"Well," said Hermione, her jaw set in stubbornness, "the exam isn't the only thing that matters."

"Who are you, and what have you done with the real Hermione?"

Hermione snorted and bumped him on the shoulder. "Come on, if we get back to the castle before everyone else, we can reserve the best table in the library."

"Hmm, that's more like it."

On the walk back, Hermione fished a bar of Honeydukes chocolate out of her bag, broke it into halves, and shared it with him. She'd even remembered that he hated chocolate with nuts.

The rains dried up as the season changed to summer.

The spring buds bloomed. The Forbidden Forest, woken from hibernation, rustled with strange sounds at all times of the day. The terns and geese returned to their yearly nesting grounds, though what omens could be read in their flight patterns Tom didn't know. He hadn't signed up for Divination as an elective, having dismissed it as a waste of his time, for anyone who hadn't been born a Seer.

As far as inborn talents went, Tom had rolled triple sixes in terms of magical power, mental acuity, and mind control.

(But he had rolled a one with regards to his domestic situation—the only way he could have landed a worse situation in life than 'orphaned street urchin' was 'orphaned farm boy'. Which couldn't be that bad when he thought about it, as he already had a talent with animal training, and could talk to snakes. Tom hated other people enough that the life of a vaquero or cattle drover in the Australian bush sounded appealing... No need to worry about prying eyes or the Statute of Secrecy when the nearest Muggle neighbours were fifty miles away. But there was something ignominious about an Emperor who held the power of life and death over two hundred subjects, with a hundred and ninety-nine of them being cows.)
He regarded his looks as useful, but not as important as his other talents. Being pretty wasn’t that rare. Mrs. Granger was pretty, actresses in the pictures were pretty; since Muggles could have it and wizards could counterfeit it with the right potions and charms, it wasn’t exactly Special.

Tom didn’t complain—beyond the first few days after finding out that wizards could see the future—about not having the Sight. None of his classmates had it either. But despite his inability to interpret migration patterns, he could tell that change was in the air. He wasn’t pleased. Change was something that Tom wasn’t fond of accepting; in his experience, change was always for the worse.

He was proven correct when he and Hermione disembarked the Hogwarts Express at the end of the school term. They walked out past the entrance foyer of King’s Cross Station and into the London street. In that moment, they saw that the London they both knew was no longer recognisable.

The skies above the city were dark and grey, but it wasn’t from an imminent rainstorm, a staple of English life no matter the season. It was a pall of smoke, stinking of burnt fuel and carrying with it a mist of fine soot that grimed the skin and blanketed the ground like dirty snow.

The Royal Mail depot at the other end of the road was a pile of bricks and rubble, the top few storeys blown out and sagging over the first floor and the kerb. The London skyline was different; it looked as if it had bald patches, spaces that Tom vaguely recalled hadn’t been this empty the last time he’d seen it. Like a row of teeth in a rugby player’s mouth before and after a scrum. With the blacked out windows, and the golden letters of the nameplates and signage coated in dust, the buildings of central London had lost some of their sheen, their grandeur and character, and more than a few had been lost altogether.

London had been... disfigured.

Tom heard Hermione's sharp intake of breath. He felt something brush against the sleeve of his coat, then the touch of something soft against his left hand.

Her hand squeezed his; their skin pressed together. Her palm was small and warm, her fingers slim and dainty next to his own.

Tom's natural instinct was to jerk his hand back and smack her across the knuckles.

He had always felt that hand-holding was either childish or improper. The youngest children held hands playing patty-cake in the schoolyard, or walking to school or church in assigned pairs. The older orphan girls, a few months from leaving for good, held hands when walking out with a fancy man. The proper way, according to the donated etiquette textbooks, was for the gentleman to offer his arm, not his hand. And there wouldn't have been any skin contact by accident either, since ladies of quality and refinement wore gloves when they left their houses.

Even in the wizarding world, people followed the rules of conduct. Some were more rigorous about it than Muggles, among the conservative families where a witch of good breeding was expected to be settled with a family before her twenty-fifth birthday. (In the Slytherin Common Room, he’d heard Sixth and Seventh Year girls disparage the vulgarity of Muggleborn girls in other Houses, though how much was due to making public faux pas versus stealing away unattached young men he couldn't tell.)

There was a line between childish behaviour and proper conduct and Tom didn't know on which side he should stand. He refused to be called childish. He’d never played patty-cake and hopscotch
with other children, and he hadn't considered himself a child since learning to read and feed himself. And when had he ever cared about propriety, other than paying lip service to it out of social expectation?

Hermione's hand was warm. Her presence was comforting and somehow soothing; he had forgotten his worries about the state of London and the war...

He didn't slap her away.

He squeezed her hand as they made their way to the line of parked motor cars, passing uniformed men and women bearing armbands of one regiment or volunteer service or another. All of them had small rectangular boxes tied with strings around their necks or swinging from their belt loops.

Gas masks.

There were soldiers on every corner, rifles on their shoulders. He could see bayonets. He felt uneasy with the number of weapons openly displayed, any of which could be dropped or misfired. It made him want to draw his own wand, at least that way he could cast a Shield Charm at a moment's notice—and damn the consequences of doing magic in plain sight of Muggles. It was reassuring just to have his wand on hand, as much as it was to have Hermione on his other—

"Tom!"

He blinked. "What?"

She jiggled his hand. "I need both hands to get my trunk into the boot."

He let go. The warmth, that press of skin, disappeared an instant later.

It was almost as unsettling a feeling as taking turns being disarmed in Duelling Club. Whilst he knew it was necessary in order to practice casting technique, and that the loss of his wand was by choice and it would only be a few feet away from him, there was something he would never like about it. A wand and a wizard were one. A wizard could perform magic without a wand, but it was always easier with than without.

A wand was a guide, a focus, and a companion.

He helped Hermione load her school trunk into the expanded boot of her family's motor car. Her empty owl cage followed it.

"Now yours," said Hermione, reaching over him for the handle of his trunk.

Tom hesitated. "I don't need—"

"A hundred thousand people sleep in the public shelters every night," said Hermione, pushing past him and grabbing his trunk. "Many of them because they haven't anywhere else to go. You won't be one of them. I won't let you."

"I still think—"

"Shut up, Tom."
They loaded his trunk into the back, then Hermione flipped down the false cover and shut the boot.

When Tom held the door open for her, he caught a flash of silver in the driver's seat. Mrs. Granger was re-applying her lipstick with a powder compact, but for a second he'd thought she was watching them through the rear window, in the reflection of the mirror.

He wouldn't be surprised in the least if she had.

Mrs. Granger was much like Hermione. But they differed in certain ways: Mrs. Granger had half the tactlessness, but was twice as officious. It was a bad trade either way.

There was a type of person who gave their children middle names they hoped the child would exemplify when it was older. These names were usually virtues, abstract concepts the parents valued, like 'Charity', or 'Prudence', or 'Patience'. If the Grangers had followed that sort of custom, and if Tom hadn't already known that Hermione's middle name was 'Jean', he would have guessed it was 'Interference'. It would have suited Mrs. Granger's character very well.

Thus began his third summer in the Muggle world, in the back seat of the Grangers' motor car.

The drive out to the suburbs took longer than it had the previous year, as they had to take several detours around streets where the road was made impassable by uncleared debris. The largest thoroughfares had been cleared, but the authorities hadn't gotten around to removing all the detritus; it appeared that they'd shovelled the gutted remains of fallen buildings into convenient piles in the areas where the bombs had blown through to street level.

He could see into people's basements from where he sat in the moving motor car. He could see the architectural arrangements of whole houses, like children's dollhouses unfolded, all the floors laid open like an anatomical diagram. Here was a servants' attic garret under the sloping eaves of the roof, but no maids were present, only the collapsed remnants of a chimney. There was the mistress of the house's guest parlour in the middle, the silk drapes scorched by fire and fluttering out through the shattered windows. At the bottom was a kitchen, filled with chunks of broken tile and gleaming lumps of metal where iron pans and steel sinks had melted together into a single solid mass.

It looked like his boggart before he'd set it on fire, but on a scale a thousand times larger. A thousand times worse.

A boggart, for all its magical shape-shifting abilities, had a limit to its mass. The pile of debris that had been Tom's boggart looked imposing on the floor of the classroom, but when he'd meditated in his dorm room that night, reliving the day's Defense lesson and savouring the frightened squealing of his classmates, he'd observed in this detached state that it was around the same volume of material as would fit inside Professor Merrythought's wardrobe.

This would never fit into a wardrobe.

The smell, the smoke, the sun of high summer veiled by drifting clouds of dust, the clean-up crews with kerchiefs tied around their noses and mouths, the scavengers bent over the wreckage with wheelbarrows, hiding their faces beneath upturned collars and caps pulled low... None of it could be replicated by a mere boggart.

That scene in the classroom seemed trifling and insignificant to this.

When the motor stopped, no one questioned him when he took his luggage out of the boot and went
A few days later, Mr. Pacek dropped by for a visit. He brought with him an expanded picnic basket filled with rationed goods: tea, sugar, cooking oil, eggs, and butter. The brands were unfamiliar to Tom, who was used to the matrons buying the cheapest of everything, and in bulk quantity. The printed labels on these packages were in foreign languages.

"Danish butter," said Mr. Pacek. "The Danes have not had the same supply troubles as the English—since they surrendered last year to the Germans, they have no need to maintain a standing army, nor conscript soldiers. I find the Continent to be a more restive place these days than England, at least for Muggle civilians. London is not looking so well, eh?"

"London has been through worse," said Hermione fiercely, putting her hands on her hips. "The Great Fire of London burnt most of the city in 1666, and it fully recovered. This isn't nearly as bad, and Mum says they've stopped with the nightly air raids for the last month or so."

Mr. Pacek left the food on the kitchen table and followed them down into the cellar, which was different from the last time Tom had seen it. The picture windows had been installed, showing the outside of the Grangers' house from multiple angles, and there were several windows that didn't match any of the views of their neighbourhood. A grassy hill overlooking a burbling creek, a sun-washed courtyard filled with potted plants and chirping parrots, a placid sea with a weather-worn wooden dock and a small jolly boat tied to the pier.

Mr. Pacek pulled up a chair by a new fire pit in the centre of the cellar, which he lit with a wave of his wand. "Ah, I remember that fire when I was studying for my Mastery. As I recall, the casualty rate was very low because the local Muggles were given shelter under magical wards—the Statute came thirty years later, so it was not illegal then. After that, most ministries made it policy to require fireproof wards around wizarding settlements and villages."

"And people think that Grindelwald is raving for wanting to do away with the Statute," said Tom, glaring into the fire. "I don't agree with everything he believes in, but I think he's on the right track with that. Sir, if you're breaking the Statute by warding a Muggle property, then you must agree with me on that count."

"Doctor and Madam Granger knew about the existence of magic before I ever met them," said Mr. Pacek, taking a small silver case out of his coat pocket, out of which he drew a cigarette and a cigarette holder. "I did not violate the Statute, but I will admit that I did break British wizarding law on the improper use of magic." He set the tip of his wand to the cigarette, which caught alight. "Though I should like to see them arrest me. If they did, they would tie themselves into knots trying to convict a citizen of another nation."

"It is interesting that you profess your sympathies with Minister Grindelwald's ideals now, Mr.
Riddle," continued Mr. Pacek, his gaze meeting Tom's. He breathed out a fine mist of smoke that vanished with a flourish of his wand. "These last few weeks, I have undertaken a task warding a building for an old friend of mine in Leiden. He runs a publishing house—now an underground press—and he has in recent years amassed a collection of leaflets. Last year, you professed not to have read Grindelwald's words by his own hand, and that is a lack I am capable of making good."

He set the cigarette holder between his teeth, and his hands dipped once more into his coat's interior pocket, coming out with a sheaf of papers. He spread them out on the thick, stone-walled edge of the fire pit. It was a set of handbills and pamphlets, the lettering on the coloured cardstock covers uneven and somewhat blotchy on the edges, nowhere near as fine a job of typesetting as in the school textbooks he'd bought from Diagon Alley.

A Unified Vision for All Wizards.

On the Advancement of a New Era of Magic.

Für das Größere Wohl: The Duties of Good Governance.

Paternalism: Sine Qua Non of the Wizarding Nation.

"May I?" asked Hermione, reaching for one of the booklets.

"By all means," said Mr. Pacek with a magnanimous gesture of his hand.

"'It has been said, and collectively agreed upon, that the last golden age of great sorcerers has passed us centuries ago, and that we will never again encounter an individual with the might and power of Emrys Ambrosius. With utmost resolve, I discount the notion that we must wait for the birth of an Emrys to bring us to another golden age. Why must we wait for one single wizard when we, as a society of wizards, are entirely capable of creating wonders?'

Hermione read aloud from a random page of a pamphlet, her brow furrowing in thought.

"'I present the idea of a unified nation that transcends geography and language, a global confederation of wizards that shall supersede any existing institutions, which on the whole are rife with ineptitude and stagnation. The International Confederation, a feeble alliance of squabbling politicians, has only one purpose: to enforce a shallow set of century-old ordinances—and not to facilitate a new era of prosperity for which we as a modern magical society are sorely in want.'"

Hermione closed the pamphlet and set it back onto the pile. "He writes like a demagogue. Like a Republican. Or an Anti-Monarchist."

"Like a rabble rouser," corrected Tom. "I expect it sounds better in person than on paper. Ideologies are easier to spread if you use big words like you know what they mean, and don't give your listeners enough time to think about what you're saying."

"It sounds better in German," said Mr. Pacek, puffing at his cigarette and siphoning away the smoke. "The English translator does not give him the right tone and rhythm. There are some words that just cannot be properly translated—the concept of 'Angst' is one such. But in this instance, I can attest the spirit of the speech is the same in all versions I have heard and read. Grindelwald identifies
a common enemy, and emphasises the same ideas: unity and greatness. Who would not be drawn into that?"

"You, of course," said Tom.

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Pacek, flicking ashes into the fire pit. "But I studied Philology and language construction in school, and I notice every time the good Minister uses 'we' or 'us' in his writing. He is not subtle at all—nor does he have any reason to be. The average wizard whose family cannot afford a prestigious institution attends a village day school and takes what he reads at face value. Is it not the same in England?"

"People buy The Prophet in droves," said Hermione. Her nose wrinkled in disdain. "It's the most widely-read publication in the country. And it's utter nonsense."

"You can't account for taste," Tom remarked. "Think of the people we share our classes with. What do you think would happen to the Prophet's readership if they started reporting objectively about things that actually mattered? These people want to see articles on Ministry hit wizards getting into a firefight with unicorn poachers. Preferably with photographs of the action, followed by a public naming and shaming. They don't want to see the minutes of the bi-quarterly Wizengamot review."

"I want to see that," said Hermione, pursing her lips.

"Even if you sat in during the session, wrote an article, and mailed it in without asking for a knut in royalties, they wouldn't publish it," said Tom. "I think Grindelwald has a point. It's obvious that he's pandering to the public when he's praising them for having the potential for collective greatness. He's doing it to make them listen. And once he has them listening, once they recognise his face and his name, he throws in the real meat. It's just like putting breadcrumbs in sausages: you have to cheapen your fodder if you want the common man to take it."

"You are correct," said Mr. Pacek, nodding. "These papers are re-printed from originals that are twenty or thirty years old. The Minister no longer spends his evenings holding debate in local taverns or guild halls. He already has his legitimate power—though one might question that legitimacy when his ascension came by holding the voting members of national assemblies at wandpoint."

"The power he had when he was just a writer is undeniably legitimate, isn't it?" asked Tom. "In a legal sense, I mean. There are no laws against having opinions, are there?"

"To a certain extent," confirmed Mr. Pacek. "But I cannot say what will happen if your opinion verges on slandering some important personage or other."

"You'd run into the same problem as me," Hermione put in. "The same way that the popular publications wouldn't print my opinions, they'd never touch yours."

"I'll make them," said Tom, speaking with certainty. "It's only a matter of making myself palatable."

"Well, go ahead," Hermione said dubiously. "But don't come to me when you get your first rejection letter. I'm not sure I want to listen to you complain about how everyone is too shallow-minded to comprehend your magnificent plan to limit childbearing licenses to those who pass your silly test."
"It's a sensible solution to a great many social ills, both Magical and Muggle," Tom protested. "I don't understand why you're so bothered about it; I've already told you that you'd pass."

"It's not enforceable!"

"Not yet."

"Tom! Eurgh!" Hermione cried. "I don't mind being deemed 'shallow-minded' if it means I won't have to listen to the rest of it."

"They're good ideas. And I don't think I'm the only who's come up with ways to make improvements around here," said Tom, inspecting his fingernails for signs of dirt and soot. He observed Hermione out of the corner of his eye. "Aren't you the one who wanted to go on a march when you found that over three-quarters of the out-of-print books published in Britain are held in private libraries?"

Hermione sputtered and flushed. "Knowledge should be accessible! It's not fair that so many rare books are locked away by families who don't even read them!"

"Don't you see how great we could be if we combined our ideas?" said Tom. "For example, a trade of rare books for the privilege of continuing the line."

"You can offer all the incentives you want, but you still have no way to enforce a law like that if people refuse," Hermione griped, folding her arms over her chest. "Which they will. And what are you going to do? Dump potions into the food supply?"

"Oh, I see," said Tom, his mouth curling up in a feral smile. "Now you want to listen to me?"

*What does it take to earn an audience of my own?* he thought to himself. *How easy is it to fool Magical Britain into taking me at my word?*

To be sure, he still wanted that Order of Merlin. He wanted to open a textbook fifty years from now and see his deeds written down for future generations of children to memorise. He wanted people to speak his name with reverence; he wanted a hush to fall over a crowded room when he opened the door.

Most of all, he wanted *power.*

But—

He was years away from Magical Britain's age of majority. There were few places where he could use magic outside Hogwarts. He couldn't Apparate, so, should he leave the castle, he'd be limited by distance: Hogsmeade, where an adult resident or shopkeeper would report him if they saw him wandering about on a weekday, and Dufftown, the nearest Muggle village where he'd have to worry about the Ministry's Trace. Neither of them were places he could rack up deeds of valor and daring.

However... there was more than one flavour of power.

He had always seen himself as the shepherd, and everyone else as the sheep.

And what had Hermione once said?
“You think too often in terms of extremes. You give yourself ultimatums when you don't have to.”

Life was more complex than that. The real world involved more than just those who were shepherds and those who were sheep.

(There were also wolves and sheepdogs, though the only difference he saw between them was that one wore a collar and the other didn’t.)

*If Grindelwald can pander to an audience, then why can't I?* Tom wondered. *Am I not reading his words today, from a speech he made in Germany, printed in Leiden, and brought to a cellar in London, thirty years after he made it? These words are his legacy, and will still be even after he meets his defeat.*

Napoleon had met his defeat at Waterloo, and whilst the Emperor had been discredited in the field of battle, the field of modern civil governance still owed much to him a century later. The Goths had sacked Rome, but doctors and lawyers and schoolboy toffs—and himself, for that matter—studied Latin declensions even after a millennium and a half.

He came to a realisation then.

*There is more to power than what can be done with magic...*

He came to a second realisation, an instant later.

*...I want it.*
When the holidays ended and the school term resumed, Tom found himself browsing the section of the Hogwarts library dedicated to household spells and charms.

In First Year, he’d skipped past this section and headed straight for advanced Defense. It wasn’t because he thought household spells were pointless—after living as a Muggle for years, Tom appreciated the value of magic, and thought all magical disciplines had their uses, even the menial ones like Care of Magical Creatures where one touched creature scat more often than their wand.

No, as useful as they were in the context of maintaining a proper wizarding home, Tom had once thought that household spells just weren't relevant to him. They simply weren't as important to his well-being as knowing the official Defense spell lists up to Fifth Year. But now, he had revised his opinions. There was relevance, value even, in knowing his way around domestic charmwork, all those esoteric spells for peeling potatoes, potting fruit preserves, or mending the lumpy little signs of pilling on the elbows of knitted jumpers and woollen winter robes.

Pretending to be an expert in magical home care gave Tom an instant audience.

And knowing these things did improve his quality of life in small ways.

According to the theory of basic spellcrafting, the creation of new charms came down to a combination of words, intent, and wand movements. (Creating powerful curses and hexes was not quite as simple; potion invention and item enchantment were whole fields unto themselves.) With the right conditions: specific syllables, spoken with the right intonation, a simultaneous swish of a wand in the right pattern, a wizard could create a unique magical effect. It stood to reason that reversing the process—a slight alteration of the established pre-conditions with the aid of arithmancy—would allow the effect itself to be altered.

He found in one book, *A Wizard's Guide to Crup Care*, a grooming spell that a wizard could use for his rough-coated crups when they shed their thick winter fur in the spring. The book had a diagram of the proper incantation and wand movements, but Tom had found that shortening the vertical flicks produced a lighter, weaker cut. Extending the wand movement in a flatter, horizontal stroke made the cut trace around the contours of the skin instead of going straight across and producing jagged edges.

A closer shave, as it were.

He practised it on the pet cats he found in the Common Room, and when he'd stopped leaving large bald patches on their fur like the coat patterns of a Holstein cow, he'd moved to testing it on Peanut. And when he could trim Peanut's fur and whiskers without any unexpected results, he tried it on his legs, and finally on his own throat and chin, where the pale, wispy imitation of a man's whiskers had begun to sprout, to his great annoyance.

What he had long been dreading had arrived: *pupation*.
He. He had seen the signs of its approach in the scratch and crackle of his voice. He saw it in the sharpening line of his jaw in the Grangers' bathroom mirror, the straining stitches on the shoulder seams of his shirts and jumpers, and the hem of his uniform trousers revealing more of his socks and ankles at the end of each term than at the beginning.

He was changing. He was growing older.

While some part of him relished being seventeen and being freed of the constraints of childhood, at the same time, it was a reminder that life at Hogwarts was finite. And that there were things, no matter how Special or powerful he yearned to be, that he was not powerful enough to halt or control.

Because he knew what else this meant, what else he couldn't control.

He'd known it when Hermione had taken his hand, and he hadn't wanted to let her go. He'd known it when he let Hermione use the shared bathroom in the cellar's magical tent first, so when it came time for his turn, he could brush his teeth surrounded by a flowery fog of her scented soap.

It was disgusting.

He was disgusting.

(But he kept doing it until the end of the holidays, and missed it—her smell, her touch, her presence—once term had started and there were only other boys in his shared bathroom.)

Tom's revulsion had nothing to do with the concepts of Sin and Temptation, the way Reverend Rivers had spoken of them when he came to Wool's and lectured the children. It had been a transparent attempt to warn the orphans that funny business wasn't tolerated under Mrs. Cole's roof... With the exception, of course, that if one was properly married in the eyes of God and the Church, any funny business being had wasn't his business at all.

Tom's revulsion had everything to do with the fact that somehow, overnight, his priorities had rearranged themselves.

He still wanted greatness, renown, knowledge, and power—everything the Sorting Hat had told him that he valued. But he also wanted her—Her—

—Was 'want' what this feeling was called?

Because it felt too much like the fiery abyss of Temptation for his comfort.

It was the fact that he couldn't push it away, cut it off, or spell it into non-existence like all the other changes that had been forced upon him. That part troubled him the most.

He hoped that as suddenly as these sensations had come upon him, they would go away, as long as he had the patience and forbearance to wait it out. It was a physical reaction, the same one which affected stray cats and street mongrels during certain times of the year. After a week or two of strange behaviour, they always returned to their original states.

Tom Riddle was not a cat or a dog; he was a human—no, he was a wizard. He was better than any of them. He was better than all of them.
These changes were fleeting; the inconvenient urges were ephemeral; those vivid dreams were forgotten by morning.

Magic, however, was permanent.

Tom had resolved to spare none of his valuable time on pondering the mysteries of Sin and Temptation. He had the mysteries of Magic to attend to.

So he'd come up with an altered shaving spell, based off the one meant for grooming crups and kneazles. And it was better—or perhaps he was just a better wizard—than the spell the other boys in his dorm used to rid themselves of their unsightly facial hair or neaten their sideburns. He'd seen them coming out of the bathroom holding a washcloth to their faces.

Apparently their fathers had showed them what to do, and it was a variant of the Severing Charm. It made sense: the Severing Charm was notable for its versatility. Its intent was centred on separating a piece from a whole, cleaving one thing from another. A Fourth Year had the power to perform it—but control was a whole other issue. And control became the issue: the Severing Charm, no matter how much or how little power one put into casting it, sliced a line straight across. An adult wizard with years of practice could control the angle and trim their moustaches with a single swipe of the wand. A student wizard wasn't quite as good.

It meant that there was a niche there, a place where his spell would be useful, a practical application whose value other people could appreciate.

A market.

It was just another word for an audience.

Exclusive to readers of Witch Weekly:

The Perfect Trimming Charm!
(Turn to next page for instructions.)

Are you tired of having half a dozen different pairs of shears, scissors, and knives for your daily household duties? Do you want a safe, fast, and convenient alternative to keep everything in your daily life looking neat and tidy? Here's what you can use the new Trimming Charm for!

1. Gardening with a wave of your wand. De-thorn roses for your floral arrangements. De-sting nettles for your potion brewing. Cut blackberries from your brambles—no prickles, no crushed fruit! A perfect accompaniment for meringue or trifle!

2. Cooking with none of the fuss. For crisp roasted poultry, use the Trimming Charm around joints and limbs to remove the skin on your pre-plucked chicken, goose, pheasant, or turkey. Rub butter on underside of the skin, replace, and roast. De-scale fish by applying an angled Trimming Charm from tail to head, following diagram on Page 3.
3. Wearing your most daring seasonal robes. The Gladrags' Wizardwear summer dress robes selection is on sale now! The hemlines may be bold, and the sleeves sheer, but the Trimming Charm will allow you to entertain in confidence, wearing the Audacia ribbon front day gown (Page 44) or the Genevieve satin ruffle evening robe (Page 45). Follow the simple instructions on how to apply the mess-free, worry-free Trimming Charm on Page 4.

All the disgust he felt earlier couldn't compare to the disgust he felt now, laying on the pandering so thick he thought he could feel the oil leak out of his pores and soak into the parchment.

He wondered if this was what Gellert Grindelwald felt, praising his audience for having been born with the gift of magic in their blood, even if most of them were sots in a dingy tavern looking for someone to give their life a greater meaning, not one of them thinking about the work required to get there. He wondered what Grindelwald felt about having the tavern regulars admire him, hanging onto his every word, and what the admiration meant to him when he knew it came from people for whom he held not an ounce of respect.

Some part of him wondered if Grindelwald had his own Foil.

Respect from lesser beings didn't matter if he had respect from the one person—or the few people—that really mattered. Respect from only lesser beings was... unfulfilling, Tom thought. Respect and admiration were easily had, naturally accrued when you were better than everyone else. Born greater. But it was like a Seventh Year student taking the First Year exams—of course he would rank first in every subject.

It was a victory—that was undeniable. But it was no accomplishment.

Some other part of him wondered what he'd be doing if he didn't have his own Foil.

He probably wouldn't be writing this half-baked article, where every word that came out of his mouth and out of the tip of his Dictation Quill was as painful as proofreading Avery's Transfiguration essays. (Which Tom still did because he and Avery were "friends", as the other boy had accepted his status as a lesser being. By now Avery had acknowledged that Tom was cleverer and more powerful than he, far better at everything important that Mr. and Madam Avery had ever hoped to see in their own precious son, and so there was no shame in Avery's asking for help to overcome his own regrettable deficiencies.)

If Tom hadn't had a Foil, he knew he certainly wouldn't be having clandestine meetings in the back of the library while the rest of his Housemates were out watching a Quidditch game.

("It's a 'match', not a game," he could already hear Rosier lecturing at him, on the only subject on which he was an authority. "And if you're talking about the game itself, it's not a game, it's a 'sport'! The greatest sport ever invented!")

Tom put the finishing touches to his wand movement diagrams. He considered them the most interesting thing about this vapid article, a legitimate intellectual challenge that his school assignments didn't offer. He appreciated the process of teaching and learning magic; Tom could disparage the Hogwarts professors all day, but he'd never say the same things about his magical education. He just didn't understand why other people needed the dull presentation of a fluff article to think learning new magic was worthwhile.
"Hermione," said Tom, "you're a girl—"

Hermione’s quill jerked over her parchment. Ink dribbled down the page. She looked up.
"Excellent observation, Tom."

I could hardly forget, could I? he thought. Antonella Everard is a girl. The Fifth Year prefect, Lucretia Black, is a girl. But whether people were witches or wizards never mattered to me, only that they were obstacles or tools. Hermione is a girl, but not just a girl; she doesn't fit into any of the neat little boxes that apply to everyone else.

Hermione is the first witch I ever knew. That makes her more important than everyone else.

Special.

(He chose to overlook the fact that Dumbledore was the first wizard he’d ever met.)

"If we're going to make sarcasm into a competition, you haven't a chance," Tom said. "My question was actually that, as a girl, do you believe witches would take lifestyle advice from a wizard?"

"Are you asking if the average witch would allow you of all people to decide their suitability for motherhood?" asked Hermione. "The answer is no."

"Not that kind of 'lifestyle advice'," Tom said, rolling his eyes. "No, home decorating tips, fashion and fripperies, that sort of thing. Things that the married housewitch would occupy her time with while the children are away at school."

"It depends on the wizard," said Hermione, tapping the end of her quill against her chin in thought. "Most girls wouldn't listen to someone like Professor Slughorn tell them how to decorate their dormitory or wear their uniforms. Or any man who signs all his correspondence as he does—'H.E.F. Slughorn' with a list of his titles and qualifications. Everything about it makes him look like someone so dusty that they'd consider mayonnaise strange foreign nonsense. Someone who is more appealing would be... modern. Approachable and modest. Informative without being condescending..."

She trailed off, then peered at him in clear curiosity. "Are you planning on publishing something?"

"Maybe," said Tom. "It depends on what you mean by 'you'."

"Oh," said Hermione, sitting up straighter in her chair. "You're using a pen name?"

"I was thinking about it. I want a name that I won't be embarrassed about if I ever get rid of it—something close enough to my real name that I could reveal it one day without anyone questioning it," said Tom. "But according to what you've said, 'T.M. Riddle' won't do."

"How about Tim Roddle?" Hermione suggested. She covered her mouth to hide her snickering.

Tom glared at her. "That's the most uncreative anagram I've ever heard. I need something better than that."

"It's simple and modest," she said, "and you shouldn't use a fancy or well-known surname if you want the average witch to be interested. In the Muggle world, I'd buy a cookery book written by a Mrs. Drummond over one written by a Lady Penshurst. Just by her name, I'd assume Mrs.
Drummond has recipes that my Mum and I could cook at home, while Lady Penshurst's book asks for two pints of 'almond cream enriched with aged liqueur of vanilla'. And," she added with a frown, "I would also assume that it'd be the servants doing the cooking rather than the Lady herself."

"If you had a pen name, what would you choose?" asked Tom.

"I'd pick one from a book," said Hermione instantly. "No one would recognise it; wizards don't read Muggle fiction. 'Scarlett Blakeney', maybe, if I was writing as an older witch—it's an obvious reference to The Scarlet Pimpernel. And if I had to write under a man's name, then... 'Hector'. Like Hector of The Iliad, or one of my dad's great uncles. My mum might have named me that had I been a boy, since it's a tradition in our family to have names starting with 'H'."

"You seem to have put a lot of thought into it," Tom remarked. Of the two of them, Hermione had a greater familiarity with fiction, whereas he personally didn't read fiction if he was offered the choice. Wizarding textbooks and spell guides were fantastical enough not to need any other types of reading material.

"Well," said Hermione, "I've thought about writing, too. There aren't as many forms of entertainment in the wizarding world as there are in the Muggle one—I've seen the plays and novels, but there's nowhere near as many authors. And wizards don't have cinema or the wireless at all. You could tell an existing story, and wizards would never have heard of it and believe it to be original. Though that would be plagiarism, of course, unless you do what Shakespeare did and changed all the character names."

"If you were to give me a pen name, what would it be?"

"Don't you want to choose your own?"

"I trust your judgment; shouldn't you be flattered?" Tom raised an eyebrow. "It's not like I'm asking you to name my firstborn son."

Hermione frowned. "But you'll never have a firstborn son. You always go on about how much you hate children."

"Correct," said Tom. "So that's why it should be an honour to you. It's the closest you'll ever get."

"Hmm." Hermione bent down and rifled through her book bag on the floor. After a minute of two of shuffling papers and furious muttering, her head popped up from under the table. "How about Thomas Bertram? He's one of the characters from Mansfield Park, the baronet's son. It's a proper English name, and nothing like the unusual Greek names that you only ever see on old men. Professor Slughorn is a good example of what not to do—one of his middle names is 'Flacchus'. No one names their children 'Flacchus' anymore; just by hearing it, you can tell that he was born last century. And 'Bertram' as a surname doesn't indicate any particular blood status either."

"It sounds... plain," said Tom. There was nothing grand about the name. It could be the name of a vicar or an accountant, but not an emperor.

(Tom Riddle isn't an emperor's name, said the voice of common sense in the back of his head. He was used to ignoring it; those who only ever relied on common sense became vicars and accountants, and never emperors.)

"You let me name your pet rat, which you've kept for the last three years," Hermione said. "And
anyway, if you're set on an anagram, there's nothing interesting you can make out of your name. 'Mild Doormat Lover'? Well, I suppose it'd fit an expert on home furnishings."

Tom scowled. "Mockery doesn't suit you, Hermione."

"It's sarcasm, Tom," said Hermione reprovingly. "I thought we were having a competition."

Her nose wrinkled up the way it always did when she was trying to control her facial expressions. He could tell she was trying to keep from smiling; she lacked the kind of subtlety that would allow her to impersonate a Good Girl to match Tom's Good Boy—not that she needed to, when she genuinely strove to be Good. In honesty, Tom quite liked the way it brought out the soft dusting of freckles over the bridge of her nose.

There were very few things in the world that Tom considered endearing, but this was one of them.

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Dear Mr. Bertram,

It is our pleasure to inform you that your submission, 'The Perfect Trimming Charm', will appear as the feature article in the October 25 (1941/#43) issue of Witch Weekly Magazine. Payment for a 5 page feature article with integrated sponsor promotion equates to 37 galleons, 15 sickles, and is included in the message pouch. See included receipt for full statement of remittance. Please mail back the Payment Arrangements form should you wish future payments to be deposited directly into a Gringotts vault.

We would like to offer you the opportunity to be a regular contributor to Witch Weekly Magazine, which allows the benefits of further royalties in future re-printing, or cross-publication in our sister journal, Housewitch and Home. Regular contributors (17 submissions or more within a period of 365 days) will be eligible to receive a Press Identification Certificate, which grants holders access to:

— Wizengamot sessions, including hearings and trials.
— Reserved interview slots with Ministry of Magic department heads.
— Press box at league Quidditch matches in the British Isles. (First come, first served, seats are limited. International championship matches not included.)
— Wizarding Britain Society of Journalists' annual dinner and awards ceremony.
— Discounted subscription rate for all major publications, including The Daily Prophet and Quidditch Quarterly.
— Nomination panel in our annual Most Charming Smile award.

Looking forward to seeing your work in future editions of WWM,

Clementine Wimborne,
Editor-in-Chief

The pouch of galleons was the first thing that Tom opened when he received his reply during breakfast. It was heavy—far heavier than the pouch that came with the Hogwarts student fund every year. It was the most money he'd ever held at once, though not the most he'd ever beheld: last year, when one of the Chasers on the Slytherin Quidditch team had quit mid-season to study for his
N.E.W.T.s, they'd held an emergency tryout and Lestrange had ordered a new broomstick by owl mail just to have the extra edge against his competition. There had been a huge pile of gold on his bed the evening he'd made the order, which he had to split between three owls to carry.

This was around half as much, but it was sizeable. Converted to British pounds sterling, this was a fortune.

*And all I had to do was write a stupid article,* thought Tom, closing the flap on the money pouch and slipping it into his book bag.

The best part was that he'd gotten away with it with his reputation intact, just like all the instances where he'd arranged convenient accidents for his own benefit. No one suspected quiet, scholarly Tom Riddle of teaching his classmates' mothers how to shave their legs.

(It was somewhat disturbing when he thought deeper on it. He wasn't sure it would make for the most effective bragging material. He likened it to someone in the Slytherin Common Room insulting someone else's mother: it just wasn't done, because with how interconnected wizarding family trees were, it was tantamount to slinging mud at one's own cousin.)

The second best part was beating Albus Dumbledore's record. Dumbledore's first essay on magical theory been published when he was sixteen, a month or two from seventeen. Though Tom's authorship credit had been attributed to a Mr. Bertram, there was still satisfaction to be had in knowing that the real writer wasn't even fifteen. Perhaps one day he would show it to Dumbledore, and rub it in his long, crooked nose.

He was wary of showing Slughorn. It would just be an excuse for the professor to start inviting him to Slug Club evenings *now,* instead of waiting until next year, when Tom was in Fifth Year and old enough to be permitted an extension to the curfew. Tom was looking forward to new privileges—and being Prefect—but not to being the centre of Slughorn's interest in filling a gap on his photograph shelf.

Tom knew that some wizards would say that *Transfiguration Today* was a more respected, more sophisticated publication than some low-brow gossip rag for witches.

But the gossip rag had ten times the circulation. It had a legion of loyal readers who would buy things just because the man in the paper told them to. And this was of a more tangible use than the non-existent loyalty of a handful of bickering academics who were busy competing with each other to add another point to Gamp's list of magical limitations, when they could be looking for new things that magic could do.

If Grindelwald could content himself in starting his journey with the ale-soused dregs of society, then surely Tom Riddle—Thomas Bertram—whoever—had much greater a potential in canvassing the comfortable middle class. One characteristic of the middle class was that, no matter the nation to which they belonged, they were aspirational.
The weeks flew by, but Tom scarcely noticed. He was too busy spending his time writing or reading or cosying up to the professors for information on specialty spellwork and other magical shortcuts that were never published in generalist handbooks.

He filled his diary with lists of obscure household spells and all the variations he could make of them. The Steaming Spell, used to freshen up dirty drapes and press the wrinkles out of delicate dress robes, could be cast at full power as an alternative to the Smokescreen Spell. In Duelling Club, Tom found the overpowered Steaming Spell more useful, because while smoke made a decent visual distraction, it was just magical smoke, not much better than an illusion.

Steam, however, could be used offensively. It could conceal Tom from his opponents, and it could burn and scald when cast in a certain way, and that was useful after Professor Merrythought had told him off for his overenthusiastic Incendios, which he was informed were not appropriate for student-level duelling. The good thing was that wizards, being useless and unobservant, only saw his charmed steam as a fog of white indistinguishable from a Fumos.

When he included it into his next article, he wrote of using a milder version of the superheated Steaming Spell to blanch beans, broccoli, and asparagus to retain the bright colours and natural flavours that were lost in boiling or roasting. He included instructions on how to poach fish in thyme and lemon with mixed vegetables with one pot and a single spell. And he didn't forget the obligatory nod to Potage's on Diagon Alley, purveyor of quality cauldrons and kitchenware.

The amusing thing was how no one noticed or cared that he "borrowed" recipes from Muggle cookbooks, only changing a few ingredients or instructions here and there to make use of the new spell. The recipes padded out his articles, which served to his advantage when his payment was based on the number of pages he submitted.

After many years of deprivation, Tom had developed an appreciation for good food. He held the firm belief that ensuring the general public knew how to prepare dishes more complex than porridge, buttered toast, or breakfast fry up counted as a social good, on par with ensuring universal literacy. The more people who knew how to cook, the less need he had of learning to do it himself. It was the same with military enlistment—all the other orphan boys did it, so he wouldn't have to.

And there was something even more amusing:

Tom got his first fan mail.

Dear Mr. Bertram,

Last week, I used the Super Steamer Spell for suet pudding, and I turned out the most perfect spotted dick for my daughter's engagement supper. I have always had some trouble cooking my puddings to a pleasing consistency right through to the centre, but this was tip-top. Your instructions were excellent, sir, and though I admit I never took the N.E.W.T. in Charms, I managed well, quite well indeed, with the spell diagrams.

Our Geraldine and her new fiancé promised that they'd let me host the family Christmas party this year if I would serve spotted dick once again. I plan to try your steamed custard recipe next time! Mr. Bertram, please pardon me for the presumption, but if you have not a mother-in-law already, I should like to make an introduction with my niece, a Miss Nanette Cahill née Maunders, 31 years old, a widow in good
Alright, that second part wasn't so amusing, but it was proof that his spells worked, and that his instructions were good enough that even someone who hadn't opened a textbook since they left Hogwarts could follow them correctly.

Tom wasn't too keen on the idea of making magic so democratic that people who hadn't put in the time to study and understand magical theory could have access to spells they would not have had in any other situation. He'd always felt that people who didn't practice magic, live for magic like he did, didn't deserve to be good at it, a view which Hermione would contest, because she believed everyone deserved help and guidance if they needed it—that was the reason for the existence of magical schools. Hadn't the great Salazar Slytherin, a master of magic, one of the most powerful wizards in British magical history, been a teacher himself?

Tom, for all the indignity there was in being a teacher to common housewives, was nevertheless a teacher. One who was being reimbursed for his efforts. And he wasn't going to publish the spell variations he'd used in Defense and Duelling Club, so there were still some secrets left.

Some part of the magic remained Special.

Oh, look. The woman, Mrs. Maunders of Barnton, had even included a photograph of her spotted dick.

The animated photograph depicted a spotted dick being vivisected by a sharp knife and drenched in brandy cream.

Tom stared at the photograph, wondering if there was supposed to be a subliminal message hidden in the picture, a secret code in the framing or presentation.

Or maybe it was just spotted dick.

"Riddle?"

Tom tore his gaze away. "What is it?"

Rosier dropped into the bench on his left side, pulling a plate towards himself and pouring a cup of tea. "Orion Black and Matthias Mulciber approached me after Duelling Club yesterday," he said, reaching for the milk and sugar. "Oh, did someone make pudding? It looks good. Shame it's not the real thing—Pater always lets me and Dru have it for breakfast during the winter holidays. Mother doesn't get up before eleven, so she'll never know."

Tom stuffed the photograph into its envelope and turned back to his breakfast. "What did Black and Mulciber want?"

"They want to sit at our side of the table."

A slight frown appeared on Tom's face. "They can sit where they like; there aren't any rules about assigned seating."

From what he'd observed, members of Hufflepuff House sat wherever they liked, and sometimes...
with members of other Houses. Gryffindors clustered in the centre of their table, where their House's Quidditch team chose to sit, and everyone piled up around. In Ravenclaw, seating came down to whoever got there first.

At the Slytherin House table, there was no official seating chart, but there was tradition. The First Years sat on the benches closest to the High Table, the seats nearest the Sorting Hat and the teachers. The Seventh Years sat farthest away, in the seats nearest the door. Prefects were given more leeway, but past the first two weeks of term, they sat with their own year. At the beginning of each school year, current members of Slytherin House were entitled to move one section further up.

As Fourth Years, Tom sat somewhere in the middle of the long House table. Black and Mulciber he didn't know well, but they were younger than him, and he'd seen them in Duelling Club. From where they were seated today, he assumed they were both Third Years.

Rosier slurped his tea, then set his cup down. "There's the rub. They want to sit next to you."

"Is there any reason in particular?" Tom asked.

Rosier sat with the First Years now and then, but it was only because his younger sister Druella had just started Hogwarts and their parents sent them gift parcels with the same owl. That was considered an acceptable reason to flout tradition. Having no reason other than 'Just Because' was not acceptable. This was annoying after he had gotten used to sitting with Hermione and reading her Muggle newspapers when the House tables were combined into one big table for the holidays.

"They want to know where you get your spells from, Riddle. You made a smokescreen that caused boils during the last Club meeting. How did you do it? I had to go down to the Hospital Wing after to get the blisters cured," Rosier said. He rubbed his chest where Tom had scalded him with a jet of steam in a recent duel. "That wasn't a normal boil jinx; Black and Mulciber said they looked through all the books on curses they brought from home, and they didn't find anything. I looked through mine, and there was nothing in them that looked like what you did. Nothing that counts as tournament legal, at any rate. And we all saw how Merrythought never stopped or called you off early."

Tom surveyed the breakfast offerings, picking up the serving tongs while subtly scanning the Third Year section of the House table. "So they want to sit here and ask me to give up my advantages? That doesn't seem quite fair to me."

"They're from good families," Rosier said. "They've got advantages to offer of their own. Orion Black's father was awarded an Order of Merlin a few years back—the official reason was for services rendered to the Ministry. The semi-official one is that he's got fingers in the nomination committee and bribes in the right pockets. They're not exactly a family you can just turn down."

"Well, if they're offering something of value, then I suppose we can come to an agreement," Tom conceded, who thought it somewhat gauche to drop the 'But my family!' line in every other conversation.

He strongly disliked Slytherins who used their parents' names and accomplishments—if one counted successful bribery as an accomplishment—to strong-arm their way around the school. It seemed like the opposite of the cunning that Salazar Slytherin valued so much. In that, he commiserated with Hermione on her complaints about students who sent their homework assignments to their parents for advice and sometimes wholesale answers. It was the kind of thing to make Rowena Ravenclaw roll in her grave.
It was times like this that Tom almost believed that the magic of the Hogwarts castle came from the non-stop grave rolling of the Founders, from where their bodies were hidden away in a secret crypt beneath the school.

"If they want help with their 'Defense homework', I want to borrow the books they brought from home," said Tom. "I assume there won't be copies of them in the library?"

"No," said Rosier, lowering his voice and ducking his head so that he was concealed from the High Table. "They're counted as family heirlooms. Not strictly legal, but Old Sluggy keeps his own, and doesn't make much ado about hiding them. He doesn't care as long as he doesn't see anyone turn up in the Hospital Wing with something that can't be explained away as 'Defense homework'. He'd have to report that sort of thing to the Headmaster."

"Good," said Tom, making a note of that detail about Slughorn for later. "Invite them to dinner tonight."

He had already known that Slughorn kept questionable ingredients in his personal potions cupboard. No unicorn blood as far as he could tell, but he thought he'd recognised Sphinx claws, and weren't Sphinxes rated by the Ministry as beings capable of speech and reason? 'A souvenir from a colleague in Egypt' was as valid an excuse as 'beloved family heirlooms' when it came to his Potions professor.

"I want help with my 'Defense homework' too," Rosier said reluctantly, scratching his nose. His eyes darted toward the Fifth Year area of the table. "I saw the way you took Malfoy apart the other week. Won't stop him from trying to challenge you again, though—he keeps claiming that you're getting in lucky hits, but I don't think so. No one can be that lucky."

"Five in a row isn't luck," said Tom in a flat voice. He laid the napkin on his lap and began tucking into his breakfast. "And I'm not in the business of helping anyone for nothing."

He hoped that new people wanting to sit next to him at meals would be a unique circumstance, and that they would go back to their own seats the next day. He didn't enjoy being interrupted while eating, especially with the type of conversation Slytherins liked to engage in, which involved casual mentions of everyone's parents and what they did or didn't do for a living.

Tom couldn't relate; he had no parents and they, being dead, did no living.

For once, Avery and Lestrange were useful for something—on most days they sat on either side of him and spent that time stuffing their faces. People found themselves reluctant to interrupt when those two were demolishing mounds of scalloped potatoes and whole roast chickens between them.

"I can offer you the same," Rosier suggested. "We have a family library too. Not as much variety as what the Blacks have, but there's hardly any families who do."

Tom considered the offer for a moment. "Do you have anything on mental magic? The Confundus, Memory Charms, Calming Draughts and other emotion and mind-affecting potions? I've read the books about them in the library, but the descriptions seem too simple, and I suspect the good books are all in the Restricted Section."

Rosier looked blank for a second or two. "You're looking for textbooks on Healing, Riddle?"
"Not necessarily," Tom replied. He raised an eyebrow and elaborated no further.

"Ah..." said Rosier, comprehension beginning to dawn. "I think we have some in our collection, but I'd have to wait 'til the holidays before I can get them. What you want isn't anything I can just write home for."

"But you can get them, can't you?" Tom asked, his gaze searching Rosier's face for any trace of deception. For any chance that the value of Rosier's offer had been embellished or overstated. Tom wouldn't show his own hand if it turned out that Rosier was testing him on behalf of his family or another's. Perhaps he was setting up an elaborate trick, a frame job like Tom had done to the Slytherin girls months ago: put an expensive heirloom book in the hands of a student on the Hogwarts charity list, then pin him for thievery, the same thing as had been done to maids and footmen from the very invention of domestic service.

Tom had no doubts that if the opportunity presented itself, the majority of Slytherin House wouldn't hesitate to teach an upstart half-blood to mind his manners and heed his betters. In the Common Room, he didn't hear them speak of him in that way, as a half-blood who ought to be taught about the way things were. But in the days leading up to a Quidditch game, they used certain words for the members of opposing teams who were deficient in blood, if not in skill and talent; on the pitch, those players were often the victims of dirty plays and name-calling.

It had led to Tom's private belief that most current members of Slytherin were useless, a canker on the original values of their House's founder—but what most of them lacked in true ambition, they made up for in cold-blooded opportunism. They didn't care about achieving greatness with the strength of their own magic, not when they could replicate the effect of being 'greater' by cutting everyone else down and making them lesser.

"Can you, Rosier?" said Tom softly. The sound of his voice was dark and resonant and laced with magic, the echo of his words lingering above the clatter of cutlery and the hum of other people's conversation, as if he'd shouted the incantation to a spell in an empty ballroom. But there was no perceptible effect, no doves or flowers or floating teacups, just Tom Riddle asking an innocent question at the dining table, his expression open and sincere.

Rosier looked slightly uneasy, as if he was debating if it was just his imagination or if he'd been caught in the radius of an experimental spell that a student from another House had cast on another. His breathing had become a notch more ragged, but he didn't look away; Tom wouldn't let him look away until he had got the measure of the other boy.

"Yes," said Rosier, lowering his eyes, "but only after Christmas."

"I'll teach you one of my spells for each book I want to borrow," said Tom, leaning back. The mysterious pressure faded. Rosier sagged against the wooden table. Tom patted the corner of the napkin against his lips. "The same goes for Black and Mulciber. I can teach them—but if you can't learn, then that's your own look out."

"I understand." Rosier swallowed. "I'll tell them."

"You'll make sure this stays between us, won't you?" said Tom. "This little 'Defense homework' study group arrangement. We can't have everyone learning how to top the age brackets in the Duelling Club, can we? There's no sense in giving everyone an advantage."

"Of course not," said Rosier. He dropped his napkin over his barely touched breakfast plate,
pushing himself to his feet. His knuckles were white on the edge of the table. "I'll see you at dinner, Riddle."

"I'm looking forward to it," Tom replied amiably.

Tom finished his breakfast and went to class with a spring in his step.

The tides were changing. He could feel it. He was earning his own money, studying magic beyond the level of his Hogwarts classes, and gaining a following on two different fronts. He could see the path of his not-so-distant future unfolding before him, dazzling him with its as yet untapped potential.

He wouldn't need to take the conventional path to respectability after leaving Hogwarts. No low-level starting position as a secretarial assistant in the Ministry of Magic could ever appeal to him now. As of now, he knew he was not completely unaccountable to someone else higher up the ladder, but in this line of work, the things he wrote and made were credited under his name—not his name exactly, but that wasn't the point—and it was that name which gained recognition. It was quite unlike the Ministry where the head of the department took credit for his underlings' innovations, or a professional Quidditch team where the Seeker did most of the work, but the winners' purse was split with the entire team.

(Tom had a lot of things to say about the ridiculous nature of Quidditch rules and the points awarding system, but he had long ago learned to keep his opinions to himself. He shared a dormitory with boys who either played for the school team and reserve squad, or followed the professional leagues. There was only so much logic could do to in the face of an impassioned mob.)

In the publishing business, Tom was paid piecemeal. And once he had made his name and reputation, he could easily take his pieces to another publication if he was offered a better situation with more benefits elsewhere. It was humouring the readership that mattered; the editors and printers had little power over the individual writer if he made himself both popular and indispensable.

He was a true Slytherin—he could be ambitious and an opportunist.

One day, he supposed, he'd get around to thanking Hermione for coming up with the idea. It was more profitable and less risky than doing other students' homework.

He'd do it once he got over the strange urges that came over him when he saw her in the corridor, or bent over a book at her House table, or with an ink smudge on her cheek while she wrote her History of Magic essays in the library. Tom prided himself on his self-control and willpower. Whilst he hadn't reached over and wiped the ink off, he had still been tempted to; the memory of her parting embrace on the Hogwarts Express railway platform two—no, two and a half years ago—had not faded from his mind.

Some days he wanted to forget it had ever happened, or that afterwards, he had wanted it to happen again. Some nights it lingered, vivid and persistent, in his memories. It was a good job that he could cast a Silencing Charm to last until morning.

The danger of Temptation, the knowledge of it as had been imparted by the Reverend Rivers, had revealed itself then and there to be a tangible risk. That was the one thing that Tom would not allow himself to forget.

It wasn't his immortal soul that was in peril; instead, it was his dignity and self-respect.
But this would soon pass. It was a momentary hindrance.

Adolescence was merely a phase.

Greatness could last a millennium.
Saturnine

Chapter Notes

I've changed the rating from T to M because we're starting to tread into more mature themes in this part of the story. Not necessarily romance, but references to/depictions of violence, etc.

1942

For the first time since First Year, Hermione returned home for the Christmas holidays.

She missed her parents, and though she worried less about their safety now, some part of her had never quite gotten used to spending almost ten months away from them. Hermione's family had never been the kind to have passed the children off to an au pair at the age of five or six, as had not been uncommon with the other families in their neighbourhood, where having hired help was considered a badge of status.

Mum and Dad were familiar lifelines to her, reminding Hermione where she'd come from and why it was worth it to work as hard she did, and how important a gift it was to have been born with magic. A gift and a responsibility rolled into one.

She could admit that she was lonely too.

There was, of course, Tom. But Hermione had observed that Tom was busy doing his own things in recent months. He'd told her in confidence that he was sharpening his writing chops, and that he planned to use the pen name she'd come up with that Saturday in the library. Since she was the one who'd encouraged him to re-direct his efforts into productive pursuits like writing original works, she could hardly justify an excuse to pull him away from it because she had nothing better to do.

Hogwarts during the holidays just wasn't the same. She enjoyed attending lessons, and the daily bustle of school life, and without them, the Hogwarts experience felt less magical; to her, a school without students was like a bookshelf without books. She always finished her assignments within the first few days of the holiday. Without classes to go to, and an empty dormitory, more than a few mornings had passed where she'd been at a loss for what to do.

Hermione knew she would have been restless if she'd stayed at Hogwarts. There were only so many walks she could have taken around the draughty castle in mid-winter, so many conversations to be had with the moving portraits who soon grew bored of answering her questions and tried to talk her into delivering messages to portraits in other parts of the castle on their behalf. There was the school library, a place where she'd spent many a free hour, but she had begun to realise that it was limited in what it could offer a student of her age, with no signed teacher's pass or outstanding O.W.L. credentials to her name.

In recent months, her extracurricular reading had been occupied with books that weren't exactly school approved.
It had begun when she'd learned of the existence of the Unforgivable Curses.

The books in the library gave her examples of historical uses when she knew what words to search for. They were more helpful than the legal codices, but her scholarly side objected to the way that the authors didn't touch on the magical theory; most instances of the Curses' mention was to demonstrate that this or that historical figure was a dark wizard who had done evil deeds. It left a bad taste in her mouth, the same feeling she got when she read military histories recounting incidents where a commander had ordered a mass execution or the capture of women of the opposing nation.

(She knew that a thousand or more years ago, both sides of any conflict would be committing atrocities left and right, but the official narrative often maneuvered the victors into the position of moral superiority.)

In her search for more information, she'd written to Mr. Pacek, and he had recommended specific authors and stockists. They were not books that made it to the window display of Flourish and Blott's. She'd had to turn to Glimwitt's Biblio-Antiquities in Knockturn Alley, a shop that offered customers a 'gift-wrapping service' for their purchases, which turned out to be a euphemism for disguising their books with false covers and layering on the repelling charms.

There were three Unforgivable Curses, and it was illegal to use them on other people. The first caused instant death, the second caused immense pain, and the last was the mind control spell that she was absolutely certain Tom Riddle had wanted to master at the age of eleven.

If she'd been younger, Hermione knew she would have been horrified by the idea of wizards turning their wands on each other with the intent to harm and kill. The Hermione of the present knew that death and pain were not the sole dominion of wizards. There was a Muggle war going on right now, with millions of young men conscripted to fight the conscripts of other nations, armed with rifles and tanks and rocket artillery. There were men dying in foxholes and forests; in the occupied cities of the Continent, partisan forces were struggling to survive on smuggled resources, each day of resistance bought at the cost of their own blood.

When she'd read in more detail in the books she'd ordered by owl mail, she found that the Killing Curse caused instant, painless death. The Torture Curse targeted the minds of the victims, but left their physical bodies untouched. For both of those, she could find worse alternatives in the Muggle world. What were these spells in comparison to dying of sepsis in a triage tent, or an amputation without morphine by a surgeon spattered with the viscera of a dozen dead men?

It was the mind control curse that she was the most apprehensive about. There was no direct Muggle equivalent.

No spell or potion replicated its effect, unlike the other Curses. It was not hard to think up a way to kill someone with the right spell—Tom's Incendio, the one he'd used on the boggart, could have done it with less mercy than the Killing Curse, and the incantation was taught to First Years. Or, with the right potion, one could cause pain without incurring bodily harm. Vanishing someone's bones, then feeding them Skele-Gro would not affect their physical health, but it would be immensely painful, especially if done multiple times in a row. On top of that, it could be carried out by anyone who'd studied a basic Healing manual and had access to a potion that was available in every apothecary and household medicine cabinet.

None of this was anything Hermione would have done to another living being. However, she took a logical approach to understanding magic, and from her years of knowing Tom, she had had plenty of
practice in finding legal loopholes, reasonable alternatives that would have been overlooked by the average wizard or witch.

This didn't apply to mind control. There was no ersatz for it, no other spell that was as fast, direct, clean, or undetectable as the Imperius Curse.

Which explained Tom's inordinate interest in it.

So Hermione went home that Christmas, looking forward to seeing her family, at the same time conscious of the fact that Tom had chosen to remain at Hogwarts. She had questions to ask without Tom's constant loitering about as he had done during their summer holiday, his ears perked for any discussion of magics that appeared to be obscure or powerful.

Rare magic was Tom's catnip. He was the kind of person who'd put in the effort to learn a complex spell that grew furniture out of the floorboards, when it was simpler to use a textbook Conjuration if one wanted a place to sit or prop up their feet.

("Everyone treats magic like it's something mundane," Tom had said. "As if it were nothing more than a time-saving convenience, no different from electric toasters or laundry mangles. I don't. I want magic to be as magical as possible.")

London in the winter was... bleak.

The aerial bombings had ceased for the last few months. Evacuees had slowly been trickling back into the city from their extended holiday in isolated villages across the country. Things felt like they were returning to normal, whatever level of normality could be found in a country at war.

The city's destroyed buildings, however, had been left untouched, because property owners didn't want to re-build when there was a possibility that the German planes would one day return. Not to mention that acquiring the materials, equipment, and labour to repair private buildings that were deemed unnecessary for the war effort was an impossible task, even for the wealthy.

The money was there—for a loose definition of there: she'd read that several banks had transferred their bullion to Canada—but nothing else was. It was in this instance that money couldn't buy everything.

Hermione was grateful that her money had guaranteed the safety of the things that mattered to her. Her family's house was intact. Shortages, recruiters, and looters had not touched Mum and Dad.

Her parents met her on the Muggle side of the station.

Dad looked tired. He had looked tired when she'd come home for the summer holidays in late June—in his letters, he'd written of working long hours in the spate of bombings and subsequent fires—but now it seemed that the fatigue had made itself at home for good, settling into the grey wings of
hair along his temples, and the heavier wrinkles above his brows and in the corners of his eyes. And Mum, she noticed, looked pale, her skin blue-tinged as she stood in the shadow of a luggage cart, the brightest colour on her face from a coral-red sweep of lipstick; Mum's brown eyes were still sharp and animated, but they had lost much of the merriness and warmth that normally lit up her features during the season of Christmas festivities.

In any other year, her family would have spent their summer holiday in hired cottages at the seaside, or exploring sites of historic castles and ancient Roman forts in the British countryside. This year, and the last few years, they hadn't. Instead, the family had spent most of their time, when they weren't needed at work or shopping for essentials, inside the house and within reach of the cellar, because no one knew if or when the sirens would go off again. And thus, not one of them had gotten much of a summer tan.

Now in the shortest days of winter, all three of the Grangers looked rather pale and wan, like potted plants kept inside a cupboard. It seemed to Hermione that something in her Mum and Dad had been worn down by the stress of the times, despite official efforts to boost morale and the implicit pressure of people of their social set to maintain minimum standards of appearance.

But it didn't mean they couldn't try to bring back the Christmas cheer reminiscent of the carefree days of Hermione's childhood. Hermione was fifteen now, and whatever was left of her childhood—if it was possible for a child to be a child in the middle of a war—had not long left before it was gone for good. The circumstances might be strained at the present, but the Grangers had alternatives. They didn't have to condemn themselves and each other to misery out of solidarity with the war effort.

So Mum and Dad made that year's holiday a nostalgic Christmas, with a roast goose dinner on Christmas day, presents under a tree, and a whole new set of clothes for each member of the family, including new robes and charmed no-run stockings for Hermione. Some part of her was acutely aware that the rest of London was getting by on canned pork sent by the Americans, and that clothing rationing had gone into effect in June. As such, most other households would be saving their tickets to replace an outgrown coat or afford a pair of winter gloves.

Another part of her, one she didn't like acknowledging, was glad that Tom had stayed at Hogwarts. This was her family, and she liked spending time with them without him nearby; when he lived with them, she practised restraint to the extent that she felt guilty for any gestures of open affection with Mum and Dad. Her parents had made an attempt to be inclusive to Tom, but it had still felt like she was flaunting her family in front of him when he had none of his own.

She was glad that she didn't have to share a family—her family's—Christmas with him.

He'd spoken of his disinterest in family connections, past and future, and she remembered the few references he'd made about his own mother, the woman who'd saddled him with his plebeian name, and her death in childbirth...

He had never outgrown his resentment about families in general—it was one of the first things she'd observed about him when she'd first met him at Wool's all those years ago—that, and his apathy toward observing the tenets of common decency. This resentment flared up whenever she'd mentioned the possibility of adoption; it hadn't been more than a handful of times, and only approached as a hypothetical, but he'd been incredibly vehement about it.

For someone who presented himself as so disinterested, he took it so personally. 

(For someone who presented herself as sympathetic to those of lesser circumstance, why on Earth
Mr. Pacek visited on New Year's Eve, bringing a hamper of imported champagne—the real stuff, not the sparkling white wine that the London hotels had begun watering their stock with, as France had been taken by Germany last year, and the Channel had been under blockade for longer than that. Blockades were of no inconvenience to wizards, and apparently there were consortia on the fringes of the Statute of Secrecy who had made a fortune in acquiring luxury Muggle goods, duplicating them, and supplying the wizarding market. It explained how the Diagon Alley grocer's cheese and smallgoods counter had dozens of imported varieties on offer, while the local Muggle delicatessens were putting out horse meat.

The wardmaster had also brought her the books she hadn't dared to order while at Hogwarts. She didn't know what kind of protections the castle had against students bringing in dangerous magical artifacts, but this subject was uniformly labelled as 'Dark Arts', even though the books she wanted only addressed it from an academic perspective. She knew the school had a list of banned objects, which was comprised of prank items such as Dungbombs and cursed trinkets that many old families collected in their drawing rooms.

But she hadn't wanted to risk it; she had a perfect, unblemished disciplinary record and wanted it to remain that way, or at least until she'd earned her very own Prefect badge. (Hermione had found out back in First Year that Prefects got five extra books added to their library borrowing limit.) Nor did she want to chance spending her birthday money on a rare and expensive book, only to have it confiscated before she'd even opened the cover.

The book she was most interested in was a translated dissertation published in 1712 by the Academy of Magical Scholarship in Padua, a first-hand investigation on the Imperius Curse written as the third of a three-part study on the Unforgivables. It had been commissioned by the ICW after the ratification of the Statute of Secrecy to discover the full effects of the Curses, and determine whether or not unregulated usage would reinforce fears of devilry and witchcraft among Muggles.

In that time period, Muggles died all the time from childhood illnesses and contagious plagues. Those deaths left signs in the form of pustules on the skin or nodules in the lungs; important Muggles killed by wizards left no signs to be registered by the coroner's court, which fanned the flames of paranoia among the churchgoing public. And that endangered magical communities, many of which were closely integrated with the nearest Muggle villages, and until the Statute came along, were under the technical jurisdiction of Muggle authorities.

"Upon casting the curse, the subject immediately exhibited the following attributes: a vacant expression, glazed eyes, slurred articulation, and impaired faculties; he could not produce answers from a pre-supplied list of questions until compelled under intensified magical pressure, in conjunction with additional clauses to further explicate the parameters of the original commands. Veritaserum is strongly recommended as an alternative for purposes of efficient and humane interrogation..."

Hermione devoured the book in an afternoon, and when she'd finished it, she had questions.

"Sir," Hermione asked, setting down the book and pulling out a roll of parchment and a pencil. "The study says that the Imperius Curse is better at making people act, rather than making them talk." In the book, she'd read that a long-term subject kept in an underground laboratory would not be able to
tell the day of the week when asked by the interrogator. That made sense; Gamp's Law of Principal Exceptions said it was impossible for a wizard to create information by magic; if one did not have an answer, no amount of magic could make them give it. "So the Curse isn't useful for all circumstances—it has obvious limitations."

"Most spells have limitations," said Mr. Pacek, summoning a chair and transfiguring cushions and upholstery over the seat. "Unlike with certain potions or enchanted objects, you must be within casting distance of the, ah, shall we say—volunteer—to use the spell. And casting it leaves traces, most noticeably the flare produced by a concentrated burst of magical power. The book calls it 'yellow-green', but it has always been 'chartreuse' to me. The precise shade and colour of a spell cast with proper intent is recognisable to those who have seen it before, and to my knowledge, the majority of those convicted of illegal use were caught because they were witnessed."

"That must mean that anyone who uses Unforgivable Curses can get away with it so long as there aren't any witnesses," Hermione mused. "And there are plenty of ways people in the Muggle world discredit witnesses that I can't see wizards being incapable of doing it too. Cases of divorce are still nothing but the leverage of a husband's reputation against his wife's."

Until 1923, a divorce was only made possible if initiated by the husband, and only on the grounds of adultery. Today, it was possible for either the man or the woman to file for divorce, and not only for adultery. Now it was for grounds of adultery, cruelty, or insanity. From this perspective, she could understand Tom's disinclination to have anything to do with families and marriage; even if divorce was possible, applying for it would mean making the reasons public. And to most people, revealing details of this nature was considered scandalous and simply Not Done.

"Very true, Miss Granger," said Mr. Pacek, who was in the process of decorating a conjured footstool. "I have heard rumours that Minister Grindelwald has put political opponents of his under the Imperius—those, of course, who are more useful where they are than under what he calls 'house arrest'. But they shall remain only rumours because he is very good indeed at hiding what needs to be hidden."

"I wonder how he's doing it," said Hermione. She frowned. "Exploiting a limitation somewhere, I'd assume. What happens if you Imperius someone into Imperiusing someone else? Is that possible? How far can you keep doing it?"

"Legal precedent rules that the person under the Imperius is not responsible for his actions. Although he might cast an Unforgivable Curse on someone else while under orders, he cannot be convicted of it," he answered. "From that, I do believe it is possible to create a chain. As for how many people can be linked in a 'curse chain', I suspect that once you get past three deep, the command boundaries become unstable. If you tell a volunteer to order the next one down the line to fetch food for your supper, and so on, the last one may come to your doorstep bearing a live cockerel."

"That precedent means someone could get around the law if they had an accomplice under Imperius," said Hermione, scribbling notes down on her parchment. "Even if the accomplice was witnessed casting an Unforgivable, or even committing murder in a public area, there would be no consequences if he shows symptoms of being under the Imperius, or even if claimed he was under magical coercion. That's if wizarding court follows the same guideline of 'beyond all reasonable doubt' as British common law does."

"Exactly." Mr. Pacek nodded. "For someone like Gellert Grindelwald, underlings do much of his visible dirty work. And for the things he does in person... well, it would be a troublesome task to find someone willing to speak against him at trial. Political writers and opponents, if they dare to
denounce him, criticise his policy instead of his person."

"And what happens if multiple people cast the Imperius on the same person?" Hermione asked, pencil hovering over the page.

"The commands are obeyed until they contradict, and the volunteer should defer to the more powerful wizard with the strongest will," answered Mr. Pacek, stroking his goatee in thought. "Dark magic leaves traces, so if that is being done, it would be safe to assume that someone is attempting to cover theirs up. It confuses certain magical instruments, Dark Detectors and Foe-Glasses, you see," he said, and noticing Hermione's look of confusion, he added, "They are enchanted mirrors that show the shadows of one's enemies, but too many at once will cause the instrument to malfunction."

"That's interesting," said Hermione, making a note to look up Foe-Glasses. She remembered seeing them mentioned in upper year Defense textbooks, but she couldn't recall what one actually looked like. "Based on what you said, does that mean you could negate one Imperius Curse by casting a stronger one in its place? In ordering the victim of an Imperius to disregard all previous orders, you'd create a blanket contradiction without having to know the exact details of the original instructions. Then you could cure victims who've been controlled, without having to track down the original caster... and kill them, I suppose. It would be best if nobody had to kill anyone."

"You might," said Mr. Pacek. "But only if you trusted someone to cast the Imperius Curse and then immediately rescind it without seeing it as an opportunity to take advantage. And that is if you choose to overlook the ethical implications around casting an Unforgivable Curse on another witch or wizard, who, being under spell, cannot give true consent."

"Is there any ethical question about it?" Hermione said, pursing her lips. "You'd be curing someone who's being mind controlled, because while they're under, they could be a danger to themselves and other people. It might be illegal by technicality, but it'll fix them, make them better. Surely that makes such an act forgivable. It wouldn't be much different than an inoculation—giving someone weakened cowpox so they'll be immune to smallpox."

Mr. Pacek chuckled. "It is times like this that I begin to understand why someone like Mr. Riddle is so fond of you."

Hermione's pencil skidded over the paper. "Excuse me? What does that mean?"

"You are conscientious; you strive to defend others," he said, "but in doing so, you can find reasons to justify the usage of Dark Arts."

"I'm not using them, or planning to!" said Hermione adamantly. "Studying them isn't the same as using them. You studied them yourself when you were in school."

"I did," he conceded, "but I do not look for ways to rationalise their use, or detect inadequacies in the law that would allow me to do so."

"I think it's best to be as well-informed as possible," Hermione said primly. "Why shouldn't I want to know everything about the magical world? The good parts are as important as the bad parts. Even if our society or social systems have shortcomings, it only means that there are places where improvements might be made."

"And in knowing the legal loopholes, and wanting to study such magic, I do not think I am wrong to guess that the next thing you will ask me is to demonstrate the spell, in the name of academic
curiosity," Mr. Pacek spoke in a very amused tone of voice, his eyes glittering. "As we both know, the law only protects humans, and Conjured animals, being magical constructs that do not have the internal structures to eat and breed, are not properly alive by the biological definition."

"But are they alive enough for the spell to work?" Hermione asked, pausing as an avalanche of questions began to gather. "Can you even use it on inanimate objects? What about the in-between things like ghosts and plants? And what about real living animals Transfigured into inanimate objects?"

"I may as well indulge my curiosity too," Mr. Pacek said, sighing. "The wards are well-maintained here, but I do not recommend doing this anywhere else—and never at school, for I should not like to see you following the path of Herr Grindelwald. Even if you might have the most well-intentioned reasons, and a true scholar's appreciation of the magical essentia, you cannot expect other people to see it that way." A grim smile crossed his face. "Other than young Mr. Riddle, of course."

He drew his wand and Conjured a small dove with soft grey feathers and pink legs. It flapped around on Mr. Pacek's vacated footstool, its head bobbing up and down. It cooed and scratched, and would have been indistinguishable from a real bird.

**Real birds,** she reminded herself, *can't be disappeared with a simple Finite Incantatem. And this bird Conjuration is better than using a real bird. I wouldn't do it to a real animal, and never to a sentient being.*

Hermione pulled out a fresh roll of parchment and a sharp pencil for some intensive note taking.

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When Hermione returned to Hogwarts for the new term, she'd begun to see more differences in scholarship between herself and other people.

Hermione loved school and enjoyed studying and learning new things, especially if they had to do with magic or wizarding culture. But in the end, it wasn't for the sake of learning that she studied—she wanted top marks, but she also wanted to *do* something with her knowledge. She wanted to make things better; she wanted to improve the world that was meant to be her birthright, whose existence she'd only been informed about when she was months from starting Muggle preparatory school.

Mr. Pacek was studied in magical theory, but he only pursued in depth the subjects that personally interested him. He was a specialist in warding buildings and fixtures, although his true passion was in the craftsmanship of magical windows and glassware. In other subjects such as Defense or Potions or Magical Botany he was no better or worse than the average wizard.

And just as she did, Tom enjoyed learning—he was obsessive about collecting knowledge—but he preferred magical disciplines for which he could see a practical use. The ones he didn't were disregarded: History of Magic, Divination, Muggle Studies, and Flying Class. (Hermione could see what made that last one somewhat useless: Why would wizards need to learn to ride broomsticks
when the other methods of magical travel were faster and didn't involve breaking the Statute of Secrecy when going further than the outer limits of Hogsmeade? Not everyone wanted to play Quidditch. And even if they did, there were only seven player positions per House team.)

Top marks were secondary to Tom's stance on magical scholarship. His entire reason for studying was the pursuit of self-improvement.

In some ways it bothered her, because Tom excelled as a student and a wizard. He had an intuitive grasp of practical magic where Hermione's neat and logical mind struggled with the fine details —when it came down to it, magic made no sense. (Why did the official rules state that it was impossible to Conjure or Transfigure wizarding money, which was made of gold, but entirely possible to create gold through Alchemy? They'd made metal snuffboxes in Second Year Transfiguration, so why was one metal an exception, and the others not?)

For all that she had the capability of becoming a great researcher, she could see where Tom could become a great innovator. But she couldn't imagine a Tom Riddle whose priorities weren't firmly concentrated on making himself better or more powerful. The idea of a humanitarian Tom Riddle boggled the mind; she just couldn't imagine any version of him behaving that way, helping a world that had never given him a genuine crumb of concern. If Tom was altruistic, then there must be some ulterior motive behind it.

(If Tom could be cynical about the world, then she could be cynical about Tom. It wasn't cynicism so much as being... realistic.)

Speaking of Tom, she scarcely spoke to him; by the time spring had arrived, she was seeing him less and less. It seemed that after Christmas, he'd started making "friends" with more of his Slytherin Housemates, and his side of the House dining table was looking more crowded than ever.

At breakfast she observed Tom and his dining companions. They were all of them boys and she didn't recognise some of their faces from shared classes, so they mustn't have been Fourth Years. Wherever Tom sat, they gathered around him. Without conscious intention, he was at the centre, the heart of the group around which the other boys circled. They ate their meals, played card games at the table, conversed among themselves, but when Tom looked up from his books and gave any single one of them his full attention, the rest quietened.

It was... curious.

She wasn't sure what to make of it. She knew him well enough to know that he didn't enjoy it—he enjoyed shows of respect and deference, obviously, but it was hard to believe that he'd enjoy having people near him all the time, having their shallow conversations within earshot, annoying him with the pointlessness of their existence. (When Hermione tried to put herself in the mindset of Tom Riddle, she couldn't help picturing him as a mean and snappy old tortoise.) Now and then she could see a flash of irritation in his eyes; although he must have noticed that she was watching, he never turned his gaze in her direction.

The morning owl delivery arrived, and her line of sight was broken by a mass of feathers and hooting birds and the slap of rolled newspapers hitting the table from six feet up, and the occasional metallic clatter when a paper hit the hot chafing dishes containing oat porridge and cream of wheat, sending the serving ladles flying over the breakfasting students.

There were few reactions and even fewer screams; most Ravenclaw students continued with their reading and eating. Some of the older Ravenclaws waved their wands to Vanish the mess on their
laps and on the faces of the youngest students around them without comment.

This was considered a regular morning at Hogwarts.

"Oh, look," said Twyla Ellerby on Hermione's other side, flipping through an owl order catalogue full of bright, animated fashion plates of witches twirling in place and blowing kisses. "Gladrag's has got their spring collection out this week. I think I'll pop in and have a look the next time I'm in Hogsmeade."

"Have they?" asked Siobhan Kilmuir, Hermione's dorm mate, who'd dropped down to the seat next to Twyla and began looking over her shoulder. "It looks alright, I suppose. But they hardly look much different from last year's—a little less darting on the hip and a bit more tailoring on the shoulder. Couldn't you just re-use last year's, and change the colours for the season? Witch Weekly ran a good article the other week on colouring charms by Mr. Bertram, and it'd be a good chance to try them out."

"Was that the one on the forty-eight hour weekend makeover? Philippa Boyne—you know her, she was your Herbology partner back in Second Year—asked to borrow my copy and hasn't given it back. Do you know, I think she borrowed my Defense notes before the final exams last year and never gave them back either; is it too late to ask for them back too—"

Hermione had been half-listening to the conversation as she paged through her own mail delivery, a Muggle newspaper from London. It had a front page article on the recent spate of German bombings in York, Exeter, and Bath, with a casualty count of well over a thousand souls. The second page had information on National Service, and the mandatory registration of all British men and women over the age of eighteen.

National Service is nothing but another name for conscription, thought Hermione, skimming through the details. Minimum age of eighteen, maximum age of fifty-one years old—Dad wouldn't be exempt from this. Mum has a child under the age of majority in her care, so she could apply for an exemption for the next few years, and Dad is an experienced doctor; they'd never be moved to the front, surely—

—Wait a moment.

Her thoughts stuttered as she heard a name she recognised.

Bertram?

Could it be...?

"Sorry," Hermione interrupted, not the least bit apologetic, "did you say 'Mr. Bertram'?"

Twyla and Siobhan shared an amused glance. Twyla nodded, saying, "I didn't know you read Witch Weekly, Hermione."

"I don't," said Hermione, "I read the Prophet when I see it in the Common Room, but I haven't seen anyone leaving Witch Weekly lying out."

Hermione tried to keep up with wizarding news, but it was hard to call it 'news'.

The Minister for Magic, Leonard Spencer-Moon, celebrated his birthday yesterday with a surprise
gala thrown by his supporters. A Quidditch supplies shop in Diagon Alley was running a draw for a ticket package to the Quidditch World Cup that was to take place that summer, open to anyone who made a purchase at their store before August and registered their owling address. There was a notice to wizarding gardeners to keep their magical plants in charmed beds or secured hothouses, due to a recent incident with a wandering Muggle and a flesh-eating shrub.

It was interesting to see how wizards lived their daily lives, but overall she found what they did to be so... incredibly inconsequential. Where was the news on Grand Minister Grindelwald? What about the uneasy pact of non-aggression made between Grindelwald and the Headmaster of Durmstrang? The reports of infiltrators in various European magical governments, including Italy and France? Mr. Pacek had given her smuggled Dutch newspapers from his contact in Leiden, and had translated the cover articles when she'd asked about them.

Did the British Ministry have some hold on the Daily Prophet, enough to censor the final product delivered to subscribers? Hermione could see the Ministry of Magic not wanting to panic its citizens; they could not be unaware that its fellow European Ministries' vulnerabilities being exploited by hostile forces meant that there must be vulnerabilities at home. She knew that in the Muggle world, the British government sanitised its official statements, and the wartime Emergency Powers Act granted it the ability to censure criticism whenever a publication was found to be "damaging to morale".

But there is no excuse for total ignorance, Hermione concluded.

For that reason, she couldn't bring herself to give money to the Daily Prophet or any other wizarding periodical, so she only read them when she could get them for free.

"No one's throwing out their Witch Weeklies, that's why," said Twyla. "There's always something in it these days that I want to save for later. All the tailoring tips don't work when we're only allowed our school uniforms."

"What about Mr. Bertram?" Hermione asked. "Who is he?"

"He's an advice columnist," Siobhan put in, "and an expert in Charms. Mum saves his recipes in her kitchen scrapbook."

"Is his given name 'Thomas', by any chance?"

Twyla sent Hermione a sidelong glance. "Are you sure you don't read Witch Weekly, Hermione? We wouldn't judge if you did."

"I know you prefer harder subjects like Arithmancy, but Mr. Bertram's Charms articles aren't so bad," said Siobhan rather reasonably. "It's nothing revolutionary, but he did write a section on spellcasting patterns to help improve the charmwork of left-handed witches. People forget about us lefties, even the school textbooks."

"He's so thoughtful," said Twyla breathily, holding her Gladrag's catalogue to her chest.

Siobhan sighed. "You haven't even met him, how would you know?"

"He sounds nice," Twyla said. "Anyone who sounds as nice as he does would never be a bad person. Believe me, I know these things—I'm top three in our year in Divination. From his signs, he sounds like he's in the house of Saturn, and do you know what that means?"
"What does it mean?" asked Hermione, who had chosen Muggle Studies in favour of Divination as her third elective subject.

What little she knew about celestial forecasting she'd learned in Astronomy, a core subject that was much more scientific than the guesswork and fanciful interpretations of Astrology. Astronomy was useful for tracking the life cycles of magical animals and plants, and could be combined with Arithmancy to calculate the most powerful days to brew certain potions and enchant certain objects; Astrology in her experience, however, was "useful" for determining the romantic compatibilities of every other boy in their year.

"He's 'saturnine', which makes him deep and brooding, associated with maturity," said Twyla. "Saturn relates to intellect and authority, in the context of leadership and fatherhood—Saturn was the father of the main Greek pantheon. See? The signs point to him being a good father, if he's not married yet." Her brows furrowed in a look of consternation. "I hope he's not married."

"Saturn in the tenth house could mean maturity with a solitary nature," Siobhan pointed out doubtfully. "Which also twists the 'fatherhood' interpretation. You forget that in the Greek myth, Saturn fought and deposed his own father, Uranus."

"Alright, 'fatherhood' is a stretch, but it still indicates a personal affinity toward responsibility and tradition. He's also powerful and a thinker. I wonder if he was a Ravenclaw?"

"He still wouldn't want you—Saturns in cadent are independent thinkers."

"How could he be solitary by nature if he's strong in leadership?"

"Well, you can be independent and a leader—"

"Oh, Siobhan, don't be such a Cancer!"

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"Aggression and confusion, according to Cholmain's Astrologia."

"At least I'm not a Gemini; air signs are never compatible with cadent Saturns..."

Hermione rolled her newspaper up and stuffed it in her bag, deciding that it was better to go to class twenty minutes early than sit and listen to her dorm mates throw horoscope interpretations at one another. She could always revise her notes in the back of the classroom before the teacher arrived.

As she was waiting for a bunch of Hufflepuff First Years to move out of the way of the door—for some reason Hufflepuffs always travelled in herds—she noticed Tom and his friends finishing up their breakfasts and heading for the door as well.

She left the Great Hall, deliberately slowing her pace so Tom could catch up, and when he was behind her, she took a step to the left and hissed at him under her breath.

"Tom!"

"What do you want?"
"Can we talk?"

He jerked his head toward an approaching intersection. The was a lesser used corridor that held rooms used for club meetings on the weekends; the doors would be locked because everyone would be going to class, but the corridor itself was deserted.

There was a small alcove between a carved stone column and a suit of armour. It was a close fit for the two of them, since it appeared Tom had grown an inch or two over the Christmas holidays. The toes of his shoes brushed her own, even as the cold stone pressed up against her back. Tom applied a few non-verbal Silencing Charms before he slipped his wand back in his robes; she felt the hem of his robe brushing against her knees, it was such a tight fit.

"What's so urgent that you had to stop me?" said Tom, looking down at her. "You normally save your complaints for the weekend."

"I found out about your articles," said Hermione. "One of my dorm mates told me."

"Oh?" Tom lifted an eyebrow. "What did she have to say about me?"

"She had plenty of things to say about Thomas Bertram," Hermione huffed, still irritated about the ridiculous horoscope reading. Really, even in a world where the Sight was considered a legitimate magical gift, the art of Astrology still had a strong association with quackery. And a well-deserved one at that, she thought.

"You're not jealous, are you?" said Tom, his eyes fixed on hers, and his expression darkening. His nostrils flared, and he continued in a low voice, "You know, Hermione, I wouldn't be averse to offering a collaborative writing credit—if I didn't think the idea of magical cheesemaking would be too superficial for your tastes."

"Of course I'm not jealous!" said Hermione heatedly. There was a tiny part of her, the tiniest, most microscopic speck, that was envious, because she'd liked to have seen her words printed and delivered to a thousand households, or have a prominent segment of the population following along with her personal opinions. It wasn't envy directed at Tom so much as it was a driving urge to see herself there, successful, one day in the future. Yes, she decided, it was more like a jealousy of a person's accomplishments than jealousy of the person's innate talent. And accomplishments could be earned by anyone, whether they were born gifted or not. It just took work.

Thus heartened, Hermione asked, "Why should I be? You're doing something productive to fight wizarding complacency. Maybe I'll never use your spells myself, the same way I'll never need a snuffbox like the ones we make all the time in Transfiguration, but it doesn't mean I don't see the value in teaching or learning new things. I just wish you'd told me about it instead of thinking you had to hide it."

"Good," said Tom in clipped tones. "Is that all you wanted to say to me? I do have to ask that the next time you want to discuss this topic in particular, you'd wait until we're not somewhere so public. I hope you understand that it's meant to be a secret."

Hermione ignored the fact that this tiny alcove was hardly a public place. It was rather too private, when she spent a moment or two to take in her surroundings—the alcove was so small she could touch the three side walls without straightening her arms, and the overhead column's carved cornice could brush the top of Tom's head if he stood straight. He had to stoop a little and lean forward to
keep from knocking himself out.

He was so close she could feel him breathe; from where she stood, she could count the silver stripes on his green Slytherin necktie, or the knitted purls on the neckline of his woollen uniform jumper.

"Have you heard the news about the bombings?" said Hermione, tearing her eyes away from his chest. She dug into her book bag and drew out the morning's paper from London, setting her bag on the floor between their feet.

\[ \text{Union Jack Flies at Half-Mast, RAF to Fly for Retaliation.} \]

Tom scanned the front page. "It's not London," he remarked with an indifferent shrug.

"I know," said Hermione. "London isn't as soft a target as the smaller cities. But they could still come back. I wanted to tell you that you can come and stay with my family again. The official word is that it's 'safe' for everyone evacuated to go back to London, but they still haven't closed the shelters or ended the blackout curfew."

"I'll consider the offer," said Tom, "but if things go to plan, I won't need to."

Hermione blinked. "What does that mean? You're going back to Wool's?"

"No," Tom said. "I'm planning to hire out a room in the magical world for the summer."

"But that's expensive! And you don't—" Hermione cut herself off. "You're going to spend your writing money on lodgings? You shouldn't, Tom—you have to save up; Parliament pushed the National Service Act through, and cut out most of the prior exemptions. Even I will have to worry about it when I leave Hogwarts, since they've put girls on the list too."

She opened the newspaper and showed him the interior, her finger jabbing at the relevant section and smearing black printers' ink over her skin.

"Look here: 'Female British residents under thirty required for vital industries at home'. Who knows when they'll extend the age limit, since they've already raised the men's from forty-one to fifty-one. My father was aged-out with the old policy, but with the extension, he's eligible again." She turned the page and showed him another passage. "The only way I can get out of it is to never leave Wizarding London once I step off the Express for the last time. If I wanted an official exemption, I'd have to marry and fall pregnant as soon as I'm done with school."

Tom made an odd choking sound from somewhere above her, and Hermione looked up from the paper. He'd leaned over to read the small lines of black print under her pointing finger, so the top of her head smacked into the underside of his jaw, which made him stumble on the book bag she'd set on the floor when she'd dug out the newspaper. As the alcove was so cramped, his toe whacked into her ankle and caused her to stagger into the wall.

Somehow, she ended up pressed flat against the wall, with Tom pressed against her.

He was much taller than her—it wasn't hard to recall that when she'd first met him, they had been
around the same height—so her face ended up mashed into his collar, and their legs were tangled together by the straps of her bag. She could feel the rise and fall of Tom's chest; he was breathing heavily, and it was unexpected because Tom had always made himself appear so aloof and unflappable.

In this instance, however, it seemed like he'd been flapped.

"I remember you saying that your childbearing restrictions wouldn't apply to me," said Hermione, one hand reaching down to untangle her bag.

Her knuckles brushed his trousered knees, which weren't as knobbly and sharp as she'd expected from a boy of Tom's age whose rapid gain in height made them gawky and coltish until they'd filled out somewhat—but wouldn't it just be fitting for Tom Riddle to have perfect rounded knees along with his perfect wavy hair that had never touched a roller, and his perfect smooth skin that had never seen a spot?

(Some part of her recognised the absurdity of their situation, and how indecent it would have been had they been born a hundred years ago. If admiring a woman's bare ankles was considered the height of lechery back then, then touching a man's clothed knees wouldn't be quite so far up, but it had to be in the domain of the irredeemably saucy.)

"That's not funny," Tom muttered. He pushed himself off her, a strange expression on his face. He lifted his fingers to his mouth and pulled out a few strands of curly brown hair, connected to his lips by a fine string of saliva, like the silk thread of a spider's web.

Hermione could feel her ears growing warm. "Um," she said. "Sorry about that?"

Tom cleared his throat and glared at her. "I think it's best if we both agree that this never happened."

"Fine," said Hermione. "Now, what's this about you going somewhere else in the summer?"

"If I keep writing articles during the summer—which I can't do at Wool's—then I can afford to stay in a wizarding area," he said. "It'll be like a summer job."

"You're still underage," said Hermione, frowning. Tom had turned fifteen a few months ago, and despite his looks and self-assured manner, she didn't think he could pass as an adult. Not to anyone who gave him a second glance. "Most landlords wouldn't rent to you because of that, not without seeing an adult witch or wizard with you. And you'd have to pay for food on top of the rent." She shook her head. "If you can't find anything, you can always stay with us. I know you hate feeling indebted to other people, but the most important thing is keeping yourself safe."

"I can look out for myself, Hermione," said Tom. "But if it makes you feel better, I'll write to you as often as I can."

"It does," Hermione said, chewing on her lip. She tried to direct her thoughts away from Tom's lips, and that sticky trail of spit he'd wiped off his cheek with the back of his hand. "I worry about you. About the future."

"You shouldn't have to." Tom picked up her bag and shoved it into her arms. "For now, just worry about studying and getting to class on time."

Hermione gasped, almost dropping her bag. "We're going to be late for class! What if they give us
detention?"

"Then you spend an hour or two before curfew sitting in a professor's office, asking them advanced questions that they couldn't answer in class because they had to teach the lesson," said Tom. "Simple."

"Oh, I'd have never thought of that," Hermione said, stepping out of the alcove and straightening her robes.

"And once you've done it, they'll never want to give you detention again," said Tom. "Things will all work out, trust me."
On Tom's return to London that summer, he saw Wool's for the first time in two years.

He was immediately assaulted by a wave of nostalgia.

It wasn't a pleasant reminiscence of the good old days—Wool's had done nothing to produce good memories—but he held a certain sentimentality for the place, for as humble as it was, he'd been born there. It had given him reason to better himself, the motivation to push as far as he could against the limitations under which everyone else lived their humdrum little lives, because every step he took was one more step away from where he'd come. He told himself that it wasn't shameful to have such humble origins—after all, one could not forget how many millions of people dedicated their lives (and afterlives) to a man who'd been born in a stable.

From first glance, Wool's Orphanage looked the same as it always had: dreary and worn, with only regular scrubbing and a bare minimum of maintenance keeping it from falling into a state of total disrepair. (Guess who did the scrubbing and repairs? Not Tom, that's who.)

But as he looked closer, he noticed where changes had been made, so small that he caught himself wondering if it had always been that way. The crumbling asphalt on the road leading up, that dangling second 'A' in ORPHANAGE swinging in the wind was just as he remembered, but the dirty windows had been boarded up with rough planks layered over oilcloth, and that pervading grimness he felt upon walking through the gates...

He used to think nothing of it, passing through the gates twice a day on his way to primary school, but now it really did feel like Hell on Earth, a place where hopes and dreams were put out of their misery by a parental substitute assigned by the government, they who moulded the leftover bits and pieces of children's souls into the much more acceptable values of duty and conformity.

Due to the evacuations, there were fewer children than there had been when he'd left, and many of them were faces he didn't recognise. It wasn't as if he put the effort into memorising the names of every orphan who, by chance or misadventure, found themselves sentenced to life in Mrs. Cole's loving care, but he did assess each new inhabitant for their usefulness upon arrival. These children were new, thin and grubby and shabbily clothed, and made him realise that out of all the people he'd seen walking through the familiar tiled halls, he himself had been one of the oldest.

Mrs. Cole was in her office counting out little slips of paper into small piles.

Like the rest of the orphanage, she looked just as she always had: clean, well-kept uniform, sensible shoes and lumpy, flesh-coloured stockings. But the uniform hung loose on her frame, just as her skin hung loose on her face, the edges sagging where she'd lost weight, folds and wrinkles gathering in the corners. He hadn't seen her in years; the aging came as no surprise. Some part of Tom was quietly delighted to see her in such a state, when he himself was the very picture of youthful health and vigour; he had grown broader and put on flesh since he'd last stood in front of her office door at the end of his second year at Hogwarts. He took it as visible proof that he was better than the other
orphans—that he came of superior stock compared to the common Muggle.

In other circumstances, Tom wouldn't have been surprised to see Mrs. Cole dealing out a hand of cards accompanied by a half-glass of white spirits—there were only so many diversions to be had when one's company was limited to the residents of Wool's. But, as he applied his subtle upside-down reading skills, which he had kept in practice during all those teatime conversations with Dumbledore over the years, he saw that they were ration tickets.

Men were given more tickets than women, who were in turn given more than children, the category which comprised the majority of the local population. However, children were afforded extra milk rations, as well as extra clothing tickets for how quickly they grew. Not that it did much, as a customer had to hand over the tickets on top of cash for new clothes, and wartime prices had made everything in the shops much dearer.

(He had once accompanied Hermione to Hogsmeade, where she'd spent an hour at the clothiers' browsing the selection of stockings and socks. Wizarding shops were cheaper than the Muggle equivalent now, and no one there even knew what ration booklets were. Hermione had marvelled at how wizards could knit so well with magic instead of machines, and how the fabrics were so thin and light without a stitch of nylon, which was expensive and rationed in the Muggle world. Tom could have lectured her on the technical aspects of reiterative charmwork, as used in household spells such as cleaning charms for multiple windows or dirty dishes... but he was self-aware enough to know that normal boys were ignorant of such things, even the good ones who liked helping around the house out of devotion to their beloved mothers.)

She looked up from her desk, lips pinched. "Tom Riddle?"

"Good day, Mrs. Cole," said Tom, slipping one hand into his pocket and feeling the embroidered edge of a cloth napkin he'd borrowed from his last breakfast at Hogwarts that morning.

"You're back then, Tom? Staying with us for good?" Her eyes flicked down to the stack of ration tickets. "Not going away with that family in Crawley again?"

"No," said Tom, "I'm not staying with them. But I shan't be staying here either."

Mrs. Cole's lips pinched even further. "You're entitled to your month's tickets to take with you, but we've already used the ones from when you were away at school."

"I don't want them," Tom answered, quite truthfully. He didn't want rubbery cheese or milk powder flavoured with ground vitamins; he didn't think he could stomach it after months of proper food at Hogwarts. "I'm happy for you to keep collecting them in my name—each small contribution helps in these hard times, doesn't it?"

"You're leaving, then," Mrs. Cole said. "For good, or just the summer? Where are you going?"

"I've found myself a job for the summer. I'll go straight to school afterwards, and you won't see me back until next year."

Tom drew the napkin out of his pocket. *If all goes well, you won't see me back at all.*

"Here." Tom slipped an envelope out of the napkin and slid it onto Mrs. Cole's desk.

Mrs. Cole inspected the envelope, which was of wizarding make: thick parchment, mottled yellow-
cream instead of the chemically treated white paper used in Muggle offices. There was a heavy red blob of wax on the flap, un-stamped with a crest or personal insignia. It would have looked suspicious to any wizard, but to the average working Muggle who was served with practical alternatives in lieu of any opportunities for luxury—their stationery came with factory applied self-adhesive! *They put their mouths on it!*—this would appear elegant and expensive.

Tom kept his hands behind his back and his posture relaxed. He watched as the matron picked up the envelope, turning it around to see her name written on the front; she then flipped it to the side with the wax seal.

She stuck her thumb under the wax, and it crumbled into sharp little shards of red. They dug into the tender flesh of her nailbed.

"Ouch!" she hissed, and popped her thumb into her mouth. With her other hand, she flicked open the envelope and scanned the contents of the letter within.

Tom heaved a mental sigh. He was counting on the Muggle lack of familiarity with sealing wax—the proper stuff flexed and bent but remained solid in order to endure hours of transit flapping about on an owl's leg. It didn't crumble into bits at a touch, but peeled off into a single piece with the design intact, which encouraged wealthy wizards to keep buying custom seals.

This wax crumbled, because it wasn't just wax. It contained concentrated Confusion Concoction, his own altered recipe for it, brewed in a solvent base of dandelion sap mixed with flobberworm mucus, which cooled down to a thick paste at room temperature. He'd introduced finely diced goosegrass stems in the cooling stage to both dye the potion red and allow it to be absorbed through the skin, a tip that he'd picked up from a borrowed Healing textbook; it was used as a treatment when a patient was incapable of swallowing a conventional potion, but being stored in jars and pots meant for multiple uses halved its shelf life in comparison to single-use potions in Stasis Charm stoppered bottles.

"*Tom Riddle...*" read Mrs. Cole in a slow, slurring voice. "*Has... secured a job for the summer.*"

"That's correct, Mrs. Cole," said Tom, nodding along. "It was an opportunity I couldn't pass up."

"*The job... provides food and board. Tom will not need his room. His room will remain... untouched... until Tom's next return.*"

"Thank you, Mrs. Cole," said Tom, smiling graciously. "I know things might be crowded with new occupants, but you know how much I like to keep my things in order."

"*A sum of five pounds is given in Tom's name... in thanks for Mrs. Cole's cooperation.*"

"An advance of my pay," said Tom. "It'd please me if you wrote a receipt and made a copy for your records. Something to remember me by, when I'm gone."

With all the Muggleborns staying at Hogwarts for the Christmas holidays due to the war, most of them had received care packages from their parents, which included Muggle pounds sterling for some reason. It wasn't hard to trade them galleons for their pounds at a favourable rate. Their parents, being Muggles, and themselves, being underage, couldn't open accounts at Gringotts. With no account, they couldn't write to the goblins to conduct banking transactions by owl mail. And whilst at school, they couldn't go and exchange currencies with a teller.
Tom had amassed over two hundred galleons from a whole year's writing, which would have made his trunk quite heavy if the money pouches hadn't been enchanted with a Feather-Light Charm. Collectively, they'd taken up a good deal of space in his trunk and jingled about unless he renewed the Silencing Charms on a regular basis. He'd been somewhat relieved to have changed much of his gold for Muggle banknotes, and was planning to open a Muggle bank account. He'd decided to keep his extra money in a Muggle bank until he was seventeen, and collect the interest on it. The goblins didn't offer interest, or very much in the way of investment options at all.

Mrs. Cole smeared drool over her chin as she wrote out a receipt in duplicate. She placed Tom's copy of the receipt back in the envelope and handed it back to Tom, who took it with a hand covered by the napkin.

"It seems... everything is in order, Tom," said Mrs. Cole.

"I'm much obliged, Mrs. Cole," Tom beamed. "I'll see you next year, I suppose. I might send a postcard while I'm away and have the time, but don't look for it."

"Goodbye... Tom..."

Tom shut the door behind him and allowed Mrs. Cole to return to her ration ticket counting.

*It had worked.*

Of course it had.

He had known it would work when he'd convinced Rosier to rub some of his Confusion Concoction paste on the door handles of the Gryffindor Quidditch team's changing room the evening before the last game of the year, on the final weekend of May. Ravenclaw had beaten Gryffindor, though neither team had scored enough points to top Slytherin House's cumulative point total.

Slytherin had taken the Inter-House Quidditch Cup, and Tom had secured Rosier's esteem, which the other boy had been dawdling about ever since joining Tom's unofficial *Homework Club* after Christmas. It had been convenient to Tom, who had until that point rated Sebastian Rosier as interesting and as useful as furniture.

Rosier's sly mentions of the Gryffindors' humiliating defeat at dinner that night had convinced Abraxas Malfoy to be less aggressive in Duelling Club, because as a member of the Slytherin Quidditch team, he cared more about winning than about good sportsmanship. And if Malfoy couldn't win at Duelling, he satisfied himself with winning Quidditch matches for the House, because it would bring him one step closer to the Captainship in the following school year.

(No one but Rosier had known exactly how Tom had done it, and even Rosier didn't know what he'd put on the door handle—only that he should wear his Herbology gloves while performing his assigned task.)

That left Tom to drag his trunk two miles to Charing Cross. And he couldn't even charm it lighter, the same as he couldn't have Confunded and Obliviated Mrs. Cole, and saved himself two hours dicing ingredients to a powder on top of the three hours brewing and cooling, because whole potions ingredients didn't dissolve in a paste base as they did in a liquid. At least potions had the benefit of not being traceable by the same wand test that Professor Merrythought had used on him after the Wardrobe Incident, which he'd found out later was standard procedure for Aurors and hit wizards when interviewing potential lawbreakers. It would take a Potions Master to figure out what
Tom had done, and he'd taken with him the only evidence.

For all the preparations he'd put into escaping the Muggle world for the summer, his plans for what to do after that remained... tenuous.

His main goal was to stay out of the orphanage and ensure himself a situation that provided clean sheets and proper meals, without ending up on the Grangers’ doorstep like a stray puppy, cap in one hand and suitcase in the other. It wasn't that the Grangers had been cruel or abusive, as other people were when they took in a parent-less child with no intention of making it a member of their family—maiden aunts looking for a carer in their old age, or large families wanting a maid-of-all-work came to mind—but living with them would have been a constant distraction.

They had certain expectations.

They wanted him sociable, agreeable, and convivial.

He could do that; he could meet their expectations if he wanted to; Tom Riddle could do anything if he put his will to it.

But he knew that it would be an illusion, to shine away the rough edges of his character so that everyone who saw him would be blinded by his light and see nothing else. Like the glaze of a china cup, the outer layer of himself would grow brittle over time; constant contact would chip away at him, and reveal hints of the true colour beneath.

And the true colour was nothing to be proud of, nothing he wanted other people to see—Tom himself was personally reluctant to address it—because he, in a manner of speaking, was more like a tamed stray than he ever wanted to admit, at least when it came to how he felt about Hermione Granger.

It was a combination of the way she smelled and the way she felt—strange and soft and fleshy, which in theory should have been as appealing as sticking his hand into the barrel of pickled toads in the potions supply cupboard, but wasn't. He wanted her friendly pats on the shoulder and upper arm to last for longer than they did; when he saw her absent-mindedly running her fingers over her owl's feathers at the breakfast table, he imagined himself as the object of her attention; his memory lingered on the hug she had given him at the platform that very morning, before they'd gone their separate ways—

Of course he knew what this was.

It had gotten to the point where he couldn't ignore its existence, but he was not so far gone that he couldn't attempt to govern his thoughts and his impulses. During the school year he had Duelling Club and the members of his unofficial homework study group on which to bleed off his frustrations; there was nothing that satisfied an itch within him like knocking people off a duelling platform like skittles. During the summer, he hadn't the luxury of volunteers willing to face him at wandpoint, so he'd decided to remove himself from the Distraction in order to get on with his life. He had better things to do than lose himself to idle thoughts while real, profitable opportunities passed within his grasp.

That was his reasoning for avoiding the Grangers this summer, as contemptible as it was.

With these thoughts in mind, he found himself beneath the dim, smoke-stained rafters of the Leaky Cauldron, lugging his trunk up to the counter.
In the late afternoon, somewhere between lunch and dinner, the pub was relatively empty. Most of the tables and booths were unoccupied. There was the bartender behind the counter, the one who Dumbledore had told him, to Tom's great disgust, shared his given name. There was a barmaid with an apron tied around her waist wiping down the scarred wooden trestle table in the centre of the room, cleaning away the wax drips fallen from the chandelier attached to the ceiling beams by black iron chains.

In a corner booth, a handful of be-hatted witches dawdled over a late tea, and not dissimilar to the pubs of the Muggle world, there were also a few grizzled old men nursing single pints for hours on end at the local watering spot because they had nowhere else to be.

"Excuse me," Tom said, approaching the barmaid, who was levitating fresh candles into the iron sconces of the chandelier, "how much does a room cost?"

"We're booked up," said the barmaid, not even looking at Tom. "Only room left is a double with facilities."

"How much is it?"

"Fifteen sickles a night, comes with a breakfast tray. Five galleons and five if you pay for the week. Cheaper if you split the hire and find someone to take the other bed."

Tom did the calculations. Ten weeks away from Hogwarts would cost him over fifty-two galleons, an absolute fortune, unless he sacrificed his privacy to share with a stranger, which was worse than enduring the awkward politeness of the Granger family. For that kind of money he could stay in a four star hotel in London, or a five star in Leeds or Liverpool. For that money, he could buy himself a tiny flat of his own in London—a wreck of a place with no electricity, working plumbing, or a roof, in a bombed-out borough, but it could be his.

(But all of these places would be in the Muggle world, and that would defeat the purpose of avoiding Wool's this summer.)

"Do you charge for your Floo?" asked Tom.

"Two knuts for Floo powder. Free with any order."

Tom hadn't eaten anything since the last Hogwarts breakfast before getting on the train. He went through his options as he dug into his pie in gravy with a side of minted peas and buttered parsnips.

The Leaky Cauldron, as the gateway to the magical world, was the most popular pub in Wizarding London. There were other inns and taverns in London, but they catered to niche customers. He knew there was that one pub in Knockturn Alley that served a suspicious "veal" schnitzel with "brown sauce". But he'd never been there before, and the idea of spending a night there by himself wasn't the least bit enticing, for all that the proprietors would turn a blind eye to his practising "obscure magics" in his room, from pages copied from his classmates' heirloom books.

He couldn't imagine spending a whole summer in Knockturn Alley, unless he covered every door and window with strings of garlic bulbs, and kept his shoes on in bed and his wand under his pillow.

But what about outside of London?
Tom knew there were wizarding settlements all over Britain, small magical villages in Lancashire and Devon and Wales. Just as in the Muggle world, prices outside the big city had to be more reasonable, and with magical transportation, distances meant nothing to wizards. But he couldn't just travel there; to use the Floo would require knowing the exact name of his destination, and he couldn't see anything good coming out of jumping into the Leaky Cauldron's fireplace shouting "Devon Wizard Village!" With that, he was liable to end up in a random family's sitting room, setting off the burglar jinxes and having Ministry hit wizards summoned for a case of attempted robbery.

Tom wasn't well-travelled outside of the streets of central London. In London, he always knew where he was by looking at the height of the buildings, the shape of their roofs and windows, the design of the street lamps, and the colour and markings of the pillar-shaped Royal Mail post boxes: the ones in his borough bore the names and arms of Victoria Regina, but the ones in Hermione's newer suburban neighbourhood were marked with George Rex.

The only other town he was familiar with was Hogsmeade, in Scotland. Not that there was much to memorise. The town was tiny, with one central village green and road; most of the businesses and houses were placed around it, so visitors could shop from door to door in the snowiest winter without leaving the shelter of the overhanging eaves.

The largest building off the main road had been The Hog's Head, the dingy tavern whose appurtenances must have been installed before the Statute and hadn't been updated since, had rooms to let for the partaking of "private business transactions". Tom, who had seen the benefit of living in Knockturn Alley despite the character of the clientèle, couldn't help but recognise the opportunity in this.

This was guaranteed privacy. No questions asked. And no need to stock up on garlic bulbs, or sprinkle powdered garlic over his bedsheets.

Tom personally didn't mind the taste of garlic in small amounts—mixed with crumbs of day-old bread and pressed into the egg-washed surface of a side of chicken, it elevated a meal and pleased the pickiest children of his readers—but he couldn't imagine being surrounded by the sharp aroma of garlic for weeks on end. That kind of thing would drive the most composed man into a homicidal fit.

He'd made up his mind by the time he'd finished his meal.

Hogsmeade it was.

Salazar Slytherin himself had lived in Hogsmeade during the construction of the Hogwarts castle, along with the three other Founders. According to a book Tom had found in the Ravenclaw Common Room two Christmases ago, Rowena Ravenclaw, a native Scot, had recommended the area around the lake as the perfect, private location to build a magical school. The Founders' families had lived in the village year-round; the book said that Rowena had taken a local man as her own, and had given him a daughter who'd been raised in the village.

To Tom, there was no place that was as magical as Hogwarts. But when the school was closed and the gates barred for the summer, Hogsmeade was the closest he could get.

Too bad that it's still so rustic, thought Tom, having paid for his food at the Leaky, taken a scoop of Floo powder from the jar, and entered Hogsmeade via the Floo at The Three Broomsticks.

The fireplaces at The Broomsticks were built wide, with a high mantel, so wizards and witches could pass through without having their hats knocked off. It was well-maintained, with enchanted magical
fires, so there weren't any logs and cast iron grates to trip over. It looked like it could hold a spitted hog and a brace of ducks and still have room for commuters.

The fireplaces at The Hog's Head, when he pushed open the creaking door, dragging his school trunk after him, weren't even lit. It prompted Tom to ponder on what would have happened had he tried to come directly from The Leaky Cauldron. What was that blurry green space he saw when travelling between Floo connections?

The Hog's Head was empty apart from one customer hunched in a corner. It was daytime on a weekday, so Tom wasn't surprised—he had only ever been inside the pub once, and it had been on a weekend. Even then, it hadn't been the most popular place. Wizards didn't look down on drinking during the day, as it wasn't unusual to have a glass of ale or cider with lunch, but this wasn't an "ale and cider with a ploughman's lunch" type of establishment.

The barman was behind the bar, spreading dirt on the counter with a stained tea towel.

"How much is a room for the week?" Tom asked. It was better to be direct, wasn't it? In his experience, he'd always thought that salt-of-the-earth folk felt threatened by what they considered intellectual types, which included anyone who spoke in words over five syllables without dropping a single one due to the influence of a regional dialect.

The barman regarded him with a flat stare. "Ten galleons."

"The Three Broomsticks charges four and eight per week."

"This isn't the Broomsticks, lad."

"No, it's not," Tom agreed. "The Broomsticks has a day maid and breakfast options."

"You won't find any such fancies here," the barman grunted. His hands stilled, and he set aside his dirty rag of a towel.

"I wasn't expecting to," said Tom, reaching into his pocket for his wand. "I can manage on my own. In fact—" he pointed his wand at a stack of smudged and dusty glasses behind the counter, "—I happen to be an expert in household charms."

Tom cast a non-verbal Levitation Charm. Three glasses—short and squat, and based on what he'd seen in the Common Room after hours, were what people used for serving whiskey—rose in the air and bobbed over to him, hovering a foot above the counter. A slight adjustment to the charm and a swirl of his wrist caused the glasses to rotate in mid-air.

Tom followed it with a wordless jet of steam, pouring out of his wand like the chimney stack of a factory, billowing white clouds that split into three masses that he directed around and inside the glasses. He chewed the inside of his cheek in concentration; he had gotten used to generating mass amounts of fog in Duelling Club which felt not much different than what he could get from a dorm room shower. Heated steam with enough water content to give the glasses a perfunctory rinse was another thing, which he'd practised for an article on the seven uses of the Super Steamer Spell.

(One of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, according to Albus Dumbledore's celebrated essay on it, had been in wart removal potions. If anyone should be judged, it was the Transfiguration professor.
Dumbledore was the father of inane inventions, as the shelf in his office full of magical doodads proved, and proud of it.)

The glasses rotated in a white cloud, the surfaces dripping with beads of water which evaporated before a single drop hit the top of the bar.

It didn't look that impressive, but Tom was wordlessly performing two altered spells at once (two!) on three distinct subjects (three!). To the more discerning eye, this was N.E.W.T. extra credit level charm work, the same way casting a Patronus Charm earned extra points in the Defense practical examination, or successfully brewing a full-efficacy Mandrake Restorative Draught under the eyes of the instructor won one a recommendation to an apprenticeship program.

Anyone who knew anything about magical theory had to recognise Tom's brilliance—or at the very least, his efficiency.

The rotation slowed. Tom flicked his wand one final time, and the stream of fog broke off the tip, dissolving into the air.

When the clouds wisped away, three shiny crystal tumblers were left, not a trace of dirt or a smudged fingerprint in sight. There were a few scratches on the bottom of the glasses that Tom couldn't have done anything about—he assumed they'd come as a result of the barman not providing coasters for his tables.

The glasses, unlike every other vessel and container in The Hog's Head, sparkled.

Tom floated them back to the stack behind the bar, gracing the barman with a pleasant smile. "I'm also quite decent at Transfiguration, too."

The dirty tea towel rippled, thickening from the centre outwards, fresh fibres growing out like hair, the colour changing from a dull grey to a clean, crisp white. Another application of the steam spell followed by an anchored Scouring Charm turned the old rag into a temporary self-cleaning towel, which began buffing away at the layers of dirt crusted into the bar.

(One could always cast the Scouring Charm on the bar itself, but the spell worked best on smaller discrete objects. It wouldn't work if you cast it on a house you wanted to clean, but would if you cast it on a sinkful of dishes. Tom thought it was more efficient to anchor the spell on a single cleaning implement, instead of having to cast it several times on the bar, and on each table and glass.)

"As you see," spoke Tom, returning his wand to his pocket, "I'm capable of keeping a place tidy if I want. In fact, I'd leave the place looking better than it was when I got it. I'll pay a galleon a week for a room."

The barman glared at him, his beard twitching. The transfigured towel scrubbed energetically at a crusty black stain. "Three galleons and five."

"I'm not paying any more than two galleons a week," said Tom firmly. "You don't have running water and plumbing installed in this place, do you?"

"Got water in the kitchen up the back. No plumbing upstairs," the barman said. "Want a bath, use the tub in the room. But you'll conjure and heat your own water."

"And what about meals?"
"What about them?"

"I'll give you one galleon, two sickles for a week," said Tom, who was hoping that he wouldn't regret choosing this backwater establishment for the sake of the privacy. A pocketful of garlic and pale-faced European men with a flair for silk-lined capes couldn't be so bad in comparison, could it?

"How long are you staying?"

"Ten weeks." Tom reached into his trouser pocket, feeling for the string of his coin bag. "I can pay a month up front."

The barman eyed him, his eyes glinting in the light of a few lonely guttering candles set at intervals on the back wall.

"Ten weeks?" he growled. "How old are you, lad?"

"Seventeen," Tom replied, not batting an eye. He clinked the coins in his pocket for emphasis and kept his expression neutral. He hadn't been to The Hog's Head since that visit last year, when he'd been wearing his Slytherin robes and his school uniform, which he'd removed and stowed in his trunk back on the Hogwarts Express. Surely the bartender wouldn't remember him? He'd grown taller and filled out a bit since then—and his voice had deepened. He also wasn't making inquiries about goat milk.

(He sincerely hoped that the barman didn't remember him as "The Goat Milk Boy").

The books he'd read on mental magic had said that obedience by dint of magical force took more power and was more noticeable than convincing people to lean towards their own beliefs. The Obliviation spell, for example, was easier to cast on someone who had suffered a traumatic event, who wanted to forget a certain aspect of their past. To cast it on someone unwilling led to having to subdue them and work as quickly as possible, which often produced unreliable results in the form of impaired short-term memory and loss of personality traits. If he was attempting to remove the memories of the unwilling, of course they weren't people he cared about, so the prospect of permanent amnesia didn't make him feel guilty in any way. But he didn't want others to judge him guilty either, not in the context of a criminal conviction, so it was better to hide the evidence—or anything that could be recognised by someone who'd read a textbook on Healing.

"What's your name?" the barman asked.

"Bertram." Tom's response was automatic. He was a bit put-out at first for having so generic a pseudonym, but when he needed to be unmemorable, it had its uses.

"If the Aurors come here looking for you, you'll go with them and won't make a scene."

"I wouldn't give the Aurors any reason to," said Tom, sounding offended.

"You best keep your word," the barman grunted. He fumbled around under the counter and slapped
a rusty iron key onto the bar. "Room Four, second floor. The stairs creak, so I'll know if you try to sneak up any 'guests' at night. I won't have 'em in my rooms unless you'll be paying me for two."

*What an imbecile,* thought Tom. *We're wizards. Don't you know how to use a Silencing Charm?*

Suppressing his eye-roll, Tom counted out his coins and stacked them onto the counter. A month's rent, for less than the cost of a week at the Leaky Cauldron. The bathing situation with having to fill his own tub didn't bother him, as he'd had to clean himself with a washcloth and a bucket back in the old days at Wool's when a frozen pipe had burst in the winter and the matron hadn't gotten around to putting in for repairs.

However, he knew he had to do something about the toilet situation.

But he was a wizard, and if he couldn't transfigure a working plumbed toilet, he *could* experiment with anchored self-scouring spells and automatic water-filling charms, which could be useful for home and garden purposes. Refilling watering cans, pet drinking bowls, tea kettles, bird baths, and so on.

It looked like he could squeeze an article or two out of this.

It would begin to make up for the deplorable state of his current accommodations.

If worst came to worst, he could always blow his savings on a magical tent and camp out on the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

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_Dear Hermione,_

_You should be glad to know that I've found a room in Hogsmeade for the summer. The landlord is thoroughly unlikeable, but he has the good manners to leave me alone most days—though I won't hesitate to declare him the second most irksome wizard I've ever met. I know that he keeps track of my mail, so from now on, please address your letters to 'Bertram'. If you plan on sending parcels or sweets, I've opened a post box at the Hogsmeade owl mail office. The landlord is an uninspired cook and eats anything I've made or stored away in the pantry, which he calls a "business surcharge" for letting me use his kitchen._

_Yes, I am making my own food, because the sole alternative is eating at The Three Broomsticks every day, and the barmaids there have become very intrusive as of late. I should think that any man would dislike being interrupted six times during his meal by waitresses wondering if he needs a refill on his drink; in that vein, my next published piece shall be on the technical aspects of the Refilling Charm._

_If you've managed to locate some more Muggle cookery books, I ask you to send them my way._
A month into his summer holiday, Tom had learned a few things about the landlord.

His name was "Old Ab", according to a drunken wizard who'd yelled for a fresh round of pints late one Saturday evening.

Ab hadn't renovated his rooms for a reason. The rooms were kept uninviting so visitors would conduct their business transactions as quickly as possible, then leave. If they wanted to stay longer to conduct "funny business", there were places in Knockturn Alley for that sort of thing.

The goats were Ab's pride and joy. Each one had a name and a personality and a custom bell collar. Some of the milk was sold to a local witch who made herbal soap. Ab himself made a sharp white cheese out of the rest, logs of which filled the cellar next to the barrels of ale. Selling the cheese to the local grocery, and the bezoars to the local apothecary, made around half of the man's cash income.

Ab also had political leanings. Tom had been reading his copied Grindelwald pamphlets while waiting on his altered Refilling Charm to finish cleaning the pub's dirty glassware—he'd been working on a variant that produced piping hot water instead of the standard lukewarm water conjuration used in conjunction with multiple heating charms. The barman had stomped into the kitchen looking for where the glasses had gone, and spotted Tom thumbing through the well-worn pages of *On the Preservation of the Magical Race*.

> I preface this treatise with the disclosure that there is no precise definition of what magic is—perhaps a force, a phenomenon of nature, or a gift of a greater entity—but it is known that magic is not only the stuff of the spirit, but a matter of the flesh. Magic is a trait borne in the blood, carried from one generation to the next. We, as magical beings, have the privilege of bearing this sacred blood; beyond that, we each of us bear a solemn duty to safeguard its very existence against all prospective threats...'

Without a single word, he'd ripped the booklet out of Tom's hands, torn it in half, then chucked it out of the window where it was eaten by a wandering goat.

"Excuse me," Tom said, who recognised this as the perfect moment to call for a wizard's duel—he would have done it if it hadn't meant he'd be tossed out of his room with nothing but his wand and the clothes on his back. Pragmatism was truly the nemesis of satisfaction. "That was *my* book."

The old man glowered at him. "Don't bring any of that rubbish in here again. I won't tolerate it."

"It's just a book," said Tom, blinking innocently at the man. "I find the Ministry of Magic to be as clumsy and incompetent as any wizard does who has a working brain in his skull, but it doesn't mean I was going to roll them over and pledge myself to a foreign cause."

Ab's mouth was twisted into a scowl of disapproval. "Then why were you reading it, boy?"
He always called Tom 'boy' when he was in a mood, never mind that Tom had told him he was a legal adult. To be fair about it, Tom called him 'old man' in his head.

"Why shouldn't I be able to read what I want?" asked Tom. "I get Witch Weekly and you've never said anything about it. And believe me, there's nothing more rubbish than Twelve Ways to Envigorate Your Marriage—"as if lighting up a candle centrepiece at dinner is going to cure a man's wandering eye."

"Read whatever you like," snarled Ab. "So long as it's not that German trash."

He grabbed an armful of clean glasses and stomped out of the kitchen, slamming the door behind him. The dirty glasses on the shelves rattled.

Tom sighed and turned back to the sink, full of soap bubbles and hot water and clinking glassware.

Some people just couldn't help being so dramatic.

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Tom and his landlord didn't exactly get along. Their compromise was to not get in one another's way.

Over the next few weeks, Tom fixed up his room, from repairing and waterproofing the cracked windows, to blasting off the mouldy wallpaper, and Transfiguring the bed from a lumpy sack full of dried rushes and dead cockroaches into something he could actually bear to sleep in.

During the nights, he practised magic from his borrowed textbooks and brushed up on his O.W.L. level spells: he'd be starting his Fifth Year in September, an exam year, and he wanted to be able to cast a full Stunner and long-range Summoning Charms in the first Duelling Club session.

He practised the Disillusionment Charm too—it was N.E.W.T. level, but it was useful for sneaking around The Hog's Head and avoiding conversations with its owner. He also used it to avoid other people; the regular patrons had seen Tom going in and out of the kitchen so often that they thought he worked there, and assumed that the sandwiches he made for himself were dishes from the pub's regular dinner menu.

They were misinformed: The Hog's Head didn't have a dinner menu. Actual service was the domain of The Three Broomsticks. The Hog's Head was the place where hard liquor was sold in a pint glass, so one could go home and tell their wife they only had one drink; it was the place where drunkards could get drunk without anyone judging them for having a "problem".

During the day, Tom wrote articles with borrowed Muggle recipes and his own charm variations. When he was tired of making and eating sandwiches, he tried his hand at cooking; he didn't like the thought of all those random housewives being able to do things that he couldn't. It was partly a test to see if he could, as much as it was a way to tempt his pet rat Peanut into eating more.
Peanut was over five years old now, grey-whiskered with balding patches behind the ears and a wrinkly tail that resembled a shrivelled up worm. A regular rat had a lifespan of two to three years, and as magic tended to double an organism's lifespan—wizards living past one hundred and fifty years wasn't uncommon—Tom had estimated that Peanut's six years were almost up. It wasn't as if Tom would mourn for Peanut when its time came to move on to the next great "adventure", for a rat was a rat, but he could regret the loss of such a well-trained minion. (Tom had no one else who would dig through the girls' laundry hampers to find things to dump into the upper year boys' dorm and cause dissent in Slytherin, when the House had heretofore valued unity. It was so easy to create hilarious misunderstandings, since it was tradition for the children of wealthy families to have their initials embroidered on their smallclothes. There was no Friday night entertainment quite like seeing well-born purebloods slap one another, causing other purebloods to jump into the defense; the performance was in a way very Shakespearean with how it involved a bunch of family members squabbling over affairs of love and honour. And as the master orchestrator, Tom supposed, it made him the villain.)

It was Tom's belief that skills in cooking and cleaning couldn't be considered "womanly" when everything was done by magic. The requisite precision and control meant that anyone who could produce a three course meal in under half an hour was an expert in charmwork—as Tom saw it, such proficiency was not a sign of a superior homemaker, but a superior witch or wizard.

And he didn't have to touch a single potato when his altered Trimming Charm did the peeling for him. The eggs whisked themselves, the flour was self-sifting; magical cookery, like everything about magic, distinguished itself from its common Muggle equivalent in that Tom was never obliged to get his hands dirty, just the way he liked it.

Around the middle of his second month at The Hog's Head, Old Ab allowed him to prepare the morning mash for the goats. Tom didn't particularly like the goats—no one did, apart from the idiosyncratic landlord—but he found them useful for his magical experiments.

The goats were known around the village to be vicious beasts, so no one went around the back of The Hog's Head unless they wanted a bite taken out of the back of their robes. They were animals who made loud bleating noises all the time, which everyone ignored when they heard it, and Silenced their walls if it was louder than usual. But the most useful thing was that goats couldn't call the Aurors, so no one knew or cared that Tom was trying to control their minds and alter their memories afterwards.

"Hello, Laurel," said Tom, levitating a fresh trough of grain mash to the shed in the inn's stable yard. "Good morning, Curly. How do you do, Moe? Did you sleep well last night?"

The goats bleated and gathered around, but not too close—he'd put them under intensive "training" the last time they butted too hard at his legs and almost knocked him over.

Tom tossed a few apples into the trough and swished his wand back and forth to slice them up with a Severing Charm, then stepped back to allow the goats to eat.

"Filthy beasts," he muttered under his breath. He watched the goats' square, yellow teeth crunch at the apples. "There is no better place to find 'disposable animals' than a farm, is there? I bet I could test potions on you lot all day; the bezoars will keep you going even if I'm feeding you Essence of Nightshade."
He'd thought about experimenting more with potions since his Confusion Concoction had gone over so well with Mrs. Cole, but he didn't want to risk Ab finding out about it. Potions, even if they wouldn't kill the old man's goats, would change the flavour of the milk and make it unsellable. And if Ab had to choose between his goats and "Bertram" the temporary tenant, it would always be those stupid goats.

Oh well. He was sure that the pub regulars would serve as a decent substitute; most of them didn't care about what they were drinking if it came in a pint glass.

And when he got back to school, there were his Housemates' cats, and the members of other Houses. Tom thought that any student who was willing to eat what appeared to be a buttered scone sitting on the banister of a staircase deserved what they got.

Perhaps Tom's attitude toward animal welfare was rather blasé, but it wasn't any better than how Napoleon's armies treated their horses. And even now, as was written in the London papers Hermione sent him, Russian armies trained their dogs to carry mines under the treads of German tanks. The Soviets put time and effort into moulding their animals into suicide bombers, and to Tom, that seemed so wasteful as to be offensive.

Disposable test subjects were one thing; putting in the effort to create a loyal servant and then destroying it was like setting fire to a stack of banknotes. Although Tom's interpretation of personal ethics was aberrant in comparison to that of the average fifteen year old boy, even he had his limits to what constituted acceptable behaviour. It took a great level of concentration to impose his will on a single goat; he'd found it easier with eye contact, but goats, like most herbivorous species, had one eye on either side of their heads. Wasn't it better to have and keep a beast trained to do what you wanted, without having to get into an undignified squat in order to stare it down and forcibly coerce it?

Tom mulled over the possibilities of animal armies as he Vanished the manure and refilled the water trough. He'd read the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, and whether or not the man had been a wizard, he'd proven that the combination of animals and mind control could be successfully used as a means of extortion.

He returned to the inn, washed up in the kitchen, and made himself a Welsh rarebit with the ends of yesterday's bread loaf and a wedge of goat cheese.

When he pushed open the kitchen door, he saw Ab sitting at one of the tables, pouring a dish of water for a delivery owl. There was an envelope on the table before him, the directions face-up. From where he stood, Tom could see the address written out in emerald green ink.

"Your name's not 'Bertram'," said Old Ab, stroking the owl and regarding him with narrowed eyes. "And you're not seventeen."

"I could be," said Tom, setting his plate on the nearest table. His hand slipped into his robe pocket.

"You're lying to me, boy. My brother wrote me over a year ago that there was a Mr. Tom Riddle, a talented student of his, who might come to me asking for help. You can't be more than sixteen."

"Your brother?"
"His friends call him 'Albus'. His family, if there were any around to speak to him, call him 'High-Handed Bastard'."

Tom's mind made the connections. Old Ab, tall and thin and blue-eyed and irritating, was a Dumbledore. A scruffy vagrant in homespun in contrast to the colourful hats and spangled robes worn by the Professor Dumbledore of Hogwarts, but both of them had that air of eccentricity, and a certain disregard for authority whenever it suited them, which was a very Gryffindor-ish trait.

"You two don't sound very close," Tom remarked.

"Don't try to change the sub—"

Under the table, Tom flicked his wand. A rack of pint glasses behind the bar slid down and smashed onto the flagstone floor.

The owl squawked; Ab jerked and turned to look over his shoulder.

Tom cast a second silent spell with a twitch of his wand.

*Stupefy!*

Ab's forehead thudded onto the table, overturning the dish of water. The delivery owl flapped its wings, gave a reproachful hoot, and flew out of the open window.

Tom got to work.

The first thing he did was pull Ab off the chair and dump him on the floor. The second was to fill the water dish with beer from the pump behind the counter; Tom slopped that on the floor too, then sent the empty dish floating into the kitchen. He pocketed the letter from Hogwarts, which in coming from the school a mile away, had been delivered early in the morning. When he'd lived with the Grangers, their supply lists had arrived in the mid-afternoon. He noticed that the envelope was thicker than usual and contained something solid within that didn't feel like paper, but he put that thought away for later.

Tom knelt down and placed the tip of his wand to Ab's temple.

*Should I try to unearth his secrets? I have more of the Confusion Concoction in my room upstairs,* thought Tom, who had never heard anyone speak an unkind word about Professor Dumbledore, and was curious as to what had passed between Old Ab and his brother. *Dumbledore is a powerful wizard; the Stunner won't keep him down for long. Best take care of him as quickly as I can.*

He Obliviated the last ten minutes of Ab's memory, and cast a Memory Charm to create a false replacement to fill the gap. He'd never done it on a person, only the goats—they'd begun to avoid him after the first few "training sessions", so he'd made them forget their fear and confusion. A person was different, but human memory relied on sight and sound, something that Tom understood and could replicate with a verisimilitude he couldn't recreate in the scent signal and instinct-driven mind of a beast.

He concentrated on the scene he wanted Ab to remember:

*Entering the tavern commons, checking the till, the first thing he did in the morning. Making sure*
there weren’t any patrons sleeping in the corner, kicking them out if there were, but not before charging them for the overnight stay. Straightening the tables, picking up empty glasses. Walking back to the counter, then—

—A slip on a puddle of spilled drink, a fall, a blow to the head from the edge of a table, then—

—Darkness.

Tom repaired the broken glasses behind the bar and set them back on the rack. Then he returned to Ab, fixing a concerned expression on his face.

"Hello? Ab? Ab! Merlin's whiskers, are you alright?"

Ab's eyes fluttered, and he gave a low groan. "Argh... My head... What happened?"

"I heard something crash and ran downstairs—you were on the floor," Tom spoke in worried tones, his brows furrowed in distress. "Do you need to go to St. Mungo's? Should I start a fire and connect the Floo?"

Ab pushed himself upright, scrubbing a hand over his face and wincing in pain. "I think I'll be alright. Knock to the head won't kill me."

"As long as you're sure," said Tom. "If you need it, I can send out to the apothecary for a pot of bruise paste. It looks like half your head will be blue by tomorrow."

"Got some in my room; don't bother," Ab grunted, who had settled back into his natural personality without a hitch. No signs of permanent personality alteration here, alas. "If I can remember where I put it..."

Ab stumbled out of the room, and Tom quietened the pounding of his heart. What he'd done wasn't strictly illegal, as the Ministry's Obliviators did this to Muggles all the time, but it was the kind of thing that went against Hogwarts' code of student discipline, even though Tom hadn't done it on school grounds.

I won't be caught, he reminded himself. And no one will catch me for performing underage magic inside a registered wizarding residence.

He was further reassured when he opened the envelope from Hogwarts. Underneath the standard book list for the new school year, he saw another sheet of parchment emblazoned with the serpent emblem of his House.

Tom, my boy, I have the greatest joy in presenting you with the badge of Slytherin's newest Fifth Year Prefect. I expect to see you join me in my compartment for lunch on the Express—I do hope you like venison, went stalking with a dear friend at his estate in Norfolk this summer, though I'll tell you more later—after your Prefect meeting in the Heads' compartment, of course!

Congratulations on a fine achievement, Tom. You'll do the House proud, I am entirely sure of it.
Horace Eugene Flacchus Slughorn,
Potions Master, cert. 1924.
Slytherin Head of House.

Tom couldn't keep himself from smiling.

Being a Prefect meant that he was in charge of enforcing student discipline. And if ever there was a case of setting a fox to guard the henhouse, it was giving Tom Riddle a Prefect badge.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was necessary to put Tom on his slippery slope to Climb to Greatness. From the next chapter onwards, we'll start picking up the pace heading into the endgame. This is a slowburn fic, so things take a while to heat up.
Hermione wasn't the least bit surprised to see Tom wearing a Prefect badge in the Heads' compartment on September 1.

Her parents had dropped her off at the station half an hour before departure, her mother wanting to ensure she ate a proper breakfast because there was no lunch served on the train, her father helping her unpack and re-pack her trunk for the sixth time to check that she'd remembered every book she wanted to bring, and that there was no room for a last minute addition.

Tom, for all the years she'd known him, went to the effort of arriving hours early, because after the weeks of abstention in the Muggle world, the train was the first place he was freely allowed to practise magic. She was somewhat surprised at the giggling and flushed faces of her classmates when she'd popped her head into occupied compartments—which she could do now, without being told to butt out, due to her status as a Prefect—to ask if anyone had seen Tom.

"Hello?" said Hermione, who'd changed into her uniform robes as soon as she'd entered the train. "Have you seen Tom Riddle?"

The group of Hufflepuff girls looked at Hermione and then at each other. "Have you seen him?" asked one girl, fanning herself with a magazine. "No," Hermione gritted out, "I haven't. That's why I'm asking."

Another girl sighed. "I wouldn't mind having detention with him."

"The Hufflepuff Prefects would be the ones organising the detention, even if it was assigned by a Slytherin," Hermione pointed out, rather peevishly. She had no idea how anyone could speak of detention as if it was something to look forward to. "So have you seen him, then?"

"I haven't seen enough of him," said the first girl. "I think every girl in our year is going to be soooo jealous of Sidonie Hipworth—you know, the other Slytherin Prefect."

"D'you think he prefers Slytherins? He helped me re-pot those Wiggentree clippings in Herbology last year, was perfectly polite the whole time, too..."

"Ugh!" Hermione groaned. "None of you are any help!"

She slammed the compartment door closed and headed for the front of the train, where the new Head Boy and Head Girl would induct the eight new Prefects and assign duties. The train hadn't begun to move, but the Prefects would end up gathering there, so she'd see him sooner or later.

She found him in the Heads' compartment reading a textbook titled *Arithmantic Theory of*...
Spellcrafting, scrawling annotations in the margins with his enchanted purple quill. Unlike the textbooks she'd seen him use for the last four years at school, this book didn't have a scuffed cover with dinged corners and crumpled pages. His school uniform looked new as well, the wool of his jumper an even dark grey with no signs of the blotchiness that came from over-washed dye; when he bent his elbows, she couldn't see the white of his shirt underneath.

And instead of the princess-like fair skin, Tom looked as if he'd actually gone outside during the summer. He'd grown another inch or two; with the healthy colour on his cheeks and a bronze-y sheen to his dark hair brought out by the sun, he looked like the poster boy for a Muggle druggist's wellness tonic. In that moment, Hermione realised why the Hufflepuff girls had reacted as they had: Tom Riddle was handsome.

She'd known years ago that Tom was fortunate in the appearance department. She'd observed, on an objective level, that his features were symmetrical, his proportions well-formed and seemly; if the old masters of the Renaissance had taken Tom's measurements, they wouldn't find him far off the golden ratios of the ideal, in the distance from brow to hairline, or eye to eye, or the breadth of his shoulders and the span of his arms. But not until now would she ever have thought to describe his hair as 'luxuriant' or the shape of his lips as 'sensual'—

_Nor would I ever_, she told herself.

Tom was more than his appearance, which was only a conglomeration of traits that current day society saw as fashionable, just as powdered white wigs were fashionable two hundred years ago, and conspicuous bulging codpieces had been four centuries past. Tom wasn't just his looks; he was more than his social background, his name, or his blood.

Tom was her best friend, the first friend she'd ever made, and the years had never changed that fact.

"Congratulations," said Hermione, dropping into the seat next to him. "I think everyone was expecting you to make Prefect, but that doesn't diminish the accomplishment."

"Thank you," was Tom's polite reply. He leaned forward, flicking his wand to cast a spell that muted the conversations of the few other Prefects who'd arrived to the Heads' compartment. "I personally believe that Slughorn would have dropped dead before he gave the badge to anyone else."

"Slughorn," Hermione echoed. Her nose wrinkled. "I forgot about him. Does this mean he's going to start inviting us to his dinner parties?"

"I've already been invited to his lunch do at half-past noon," said Tom, putting his book aside. He reached into his robes and drew out a sheet of parchment printed with a Slytherin crest letterhead at the top, and Slughorn's signature at the bottom.

"Are you going?"

"Do you think he'd let me refuse?" Tom grimaced. "I can already tell that he's going to try and hound me into an apprenticeship with his old friend Mr. Jigger, or an internship at the Ministry with his old classmate Mr. Travers. We're taking our O.W.L.s this year—which means we get the career advisory meeting with our Heads of House. And he's my Head."

"Mine's hardly any better," said Hermione, who respected her teachers and trusted their expertise within their individual fields, but outside of that, knew that some of them were... _questionable._
"Professor Beery encourages us to follow our dreams and slake our creative spirits, but that doesn't exactly count as actual career advice. I think I'd rather Professor Slughorn, now that I think about it."

"You're certain you don't want a career in the performing arts?" said Tom, lifting an eyebrow. Professor Beery, their Herbology teacher, was an avid supporter of theatre, and recruited students every Christmas to put on a performance of a classic wizarding play—it was one of the many reasons why Tom made himself scarce during the holidays, dedicating his time to his private studies. "You'd get to choose an interesting stage name and bring Shakespeare to the ignorant masses—that's two things I know you'd enjoy."

"Monologuing from The Winter's Tale in my bedroom is different from getting on a stage and doing it in front of a hundred people," Hermione said, nudging his shoulder with her own. "I don't have the stage presence for it. Anyway, that kind of career is all about the popular appeal, and there are plenty of other things I care more about."

"Hmm," mused Tom. "I understand. I can't see you ever being happy in a situation where you're left reciting lines from someone else's script. I couldn't stand for it either, unless the 'someone else' writing the script was me under a different name." He paused, and when he continued, his voice was low and thoughtful. "That's what makes us so alike, isn't it?"

"Oh, Tom," said Hermione, rolling her eyes, "please, please don't ruin the moment by saying something about how much better we are—"

"Hermione!"

The springs in the compartment bench squeaked as a boy enthusiastically threw himself into the spot next to Hermione, pushing her into Tom, and pushing Tom into the window. For an instant, Hermione caught a dark flicker of anger in Tom's eyes, then it was gone, replaced by a friendly expression complete with a benign smile. Tom helped Hermione settle herself back upright and, with a silent twist of his wand, summoned his textbook from the floor and opened it up to the page he'd been reading, the quill marking his spot.

"Um," said Hermione. "Hello, Clarence."

Clarence Fitzpatrick was apparently this year's male Fifth Year Prefect for Ravenclaw. She had spoken to him a few times a week over the past few years—he gave her his Sunday Prophet during breakfast, after he took out the puzzle page because he only bought it for the crosswords, or so he claimed.

In classes and at meals, most students separated themselves by House and gender, the girls sitting with girls and the boys with boys, for the sake of propriety; in those shared benches, it was too easy to give or send the wrong message with an accidental knee brush under the table. (Hermione vividly remembered the feel of Tom's knees in that alcove the previous term, and the thought of being so close to him had brought a flush to her cheeks even weeks later.)

In the context of academics, Hermione didn't put much stock in what other people thought was wrong or right. From her first year at Hogwarts, she'd sat with Tom in their shared classes, and in Potions, a class shared with the Hufflepuffs, she'd partnered with Clarence Fitzpatrick because he was excellent in Herbology and had an eye for choosing the freshest ingredients. She valued skill and competence over maintaining the appearance of being proper and modest, and she supposed that it had formed in Clarence the impression that she was fond of him...
...And that they were "friends".

Clarence was pleasant and conscientious and a good partner for group projects. He felt bad about peeling the skins off dried salamanders in Potions. Of all the people who could have been chosen for the position of Ravenclaw Prefect, Clarence wasn't the worst choice. It could have been Merton Bancroft, who had to be given remedial instruction on how to properly hold his wand after a few too many spell backfire incidents in Transfiguration.

"I knew you'd be picked for Prefect," Clarence said eagerly. "How often do you think we'll have paired patrols?"

Tom made a quiet coughing sound, which he covered up by turning a page in his book.

"Not every night," said Hermione in a firm tone. "I've got to study for my O.W.L.s this year. I picked three electives when everyone else took two."

"We could study together, maybe? Prefects get their own study nook in the Ravenclaw Common Room."

"I don't mind sharing my notes for Potions," Hermione conceded with a touch of reluctance, "since we're in the same class. But I've got a partner already for my other subjects."

"You've got an O.W.L.s study group?" asked Clarence. "Can I join?"

"Erm..." said Hermione, sneaking a glance at Tom, whose eyebrow gave the slightest twitch.

Tom shut his book with a loud snap. "The Heads are here."

The new Head Boy and Head Girl were Gerald Mandicott and Hortensia Selwyn, of Hufflepuff and Slytherin, respectively. They'd been chosen on the basis of their leadership qualities and academic merit, but Hermione had to wonder if prominent family connections played a part in the selection process. The Prefects were chosen by the Heads of House, and were usually the professors' personal favourites. But the Head Boy and Girl were selected by the Headmaster, who was subject to the whims of the Board of Governors more than any other staff member at Hogwarts.

The meeting passed without issue, detailing the list of responsibilities and privileges of the Prefects. A curfew extension, at the price of going on night-time patrols. The ability to deduct points and assign detentions, but the requirement to sit those detentions with misbehaving students if a professor wasn't available to take it. Taking charge of the youngest students at Hogwarts and introducing them to castle life, in exchange for extended library borrowing privileges—which Hermione liked—and the use of a special bathroom on the Fifth Floor—which didn't sound so appealing.

Hermione didn't know what to make of it. So there was some sort of a magical bathtub, but one she had to share with twenty-one other Prefects, the two Heads, and four Quidditch Captains? What was wrong with the tub in her dormitory's bathroom, which she shared with five other girls (though she used the shower on most days), all of whom knew how to keep a room clean and not leave their hairbrushes and used towels on the floor?

The whole idea came off as very... untidy to Hermione, especially as she learned there was no official rotation schedule for the use of the Prefects' Bathroom—people came and went as they pleased. She didn't care about the gender separation in lessons, but this sounded like an out-of-class thing, definitely nothing to do with schoolwork. Boys ought not to be in the same bathtub as girls,
not at the same time, and from the sly glances shared between the Seventh Year Prefects, they'd considered such a possibility occurring and were not altogether against it.

The end of the meeting came with a delivery of parchment scrolls, invitations to Professor Slughorn's lunch. Hermione got one, and so did the new Head Boy and Girl, but she noticed that not everyone did. Clarence Fitzpatrick didn't, which she was relieved about, even though she felt a bit guilty for it after seeing him cast hopeful looks in the direction of the messenger.

Clarence wasn't a bad person, and he wasn't greedy and mercenary like Tom—which sounded rude, but any other words she came up with to describe Tom's character were equally unflattering. Unlike Tom, Clarence listened to what she said and followed her instructions without debating her on the number of stirs or the heat of the burner. In fact, he did exactly as she told him to, which was convenient in their lessons, but made him a terrible conversationalist outside of them; it was as if he thought being perceived as friendly and likeable came from concurring with everyone else's opinions. In certain ways, Clarence Fitzpatrick was naïve... which was an unexpected conclusion, because for many years, Hermione had heard herself called that for never having missed a meal in her life; she'd been told that the concept of the 'class struggle' didn't apply to her.

Hermione couldn't see herself as being that naïve anymore. She wasn't hardened in the way Tom was—the things she regarded as brutal and barbaric (corporal punishment of children, animal cruelty, or crimes of war) served to produce little to no reaction from him; she couldn't tell whether this lack of concern was a product of his upbringing, or merely Tom's natural disposition. Hermione's disposition was different, or it had been different, at least before the war. But after a summer spent reading into the history of what in the modern age was known as the Dark Arts, she'd begun to understand the murky limits of human cruelty and innovation, which in both the Muggle world and in the Magical were so closely entwined as to be inseparable.

She was quiet during the lunch of venison sausage served with a salad of walnut and watercress, sitting in Professor Slughorn's expanded compartment with the new Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team on one side, and Tom on the other. The compartment was crowded with over a dozen people, each guest squashed shoulder to shoulder from door to window, with Slughorn sitting in the center like a king presiding over his court.

There was a tray table laid out in between the upholstered benches, hosting a spread of cured meats and cold poultry, sliced cheeses and pickles, and bread rolls. Their lunchtime entertainment came in the form of Professor Slughorn rambling on about his holiday in Norfolk, which had a magical forest reserve that made for good sporting and potions-related ingredient collection.

"...He said to me, 'Horace, old chap, if you can make it past the sixth remove at Flume's you can make it past that ridgeline over there'," recounted Professor Slughorn, topping up his glass of claret. "So I told him, 'The last time I had dinner with Flume, he served crystallised ginger with the pudding course'. Crystallised ginger, have you ever heard of such a thing? I hadn't heard of it, but I can tell you that I felt it, felt it intimately indeed, the very next day..."
Mr. Pacek had visited every weekend during the summer holidays to dine with the Grangers, and each visit came with an armload of new books.

Mum and Dad invited him to dinner even when Hermione was at school, because he was one of the few people they knew who had a good understanding of the national politics on both sides of the war, on top of his knowledge of the state of Wizarding Europe.

Dad had served in the Great War, and they'd discussed how that War had led directly to this one: *this* war hadn't begun just because Germany had attacked Poland, but because the Allied Powers had been *overzealous* in redressing their losses, for lack of any better way to call it. It wasn't something spoken about outside the Grangers' house, because it seemed like anyone who publicly criticised the British Government would be accused a dissident.

Mr. Pacek had taken it upon himself to make the Grangers' cellar as home-like as he could, because the three members of the family slept every night underground, and kept the wireless on at all times when they were upstairs. The bare floors had been carpeted, charmed chandeliers hung from the high ceilings, and magical windows were placed at intervals so they got to see the sun, even if it was shining off the coast of Gibraltar and not the lawns and fences of Argyll Street, Crawley. Mr. Pacek had even Transfigured a few broken milk crates into a handsome set of bookcases to hold Hermione's growing collection of magical tomes.

The bookcases were of a dark varnished wood with glass doors to keep off the dust. He'd enchanted the glasswork so it would appear opaque and frosted unless Hermione cast the appropriate countercharm, and tapping the carved poppies on the side of the shelf would cause an image of innocuous school textbooks to appear on the other side of the glass, instead of what really lay behind, which was a series of magical medical books on the physiological theory of Veritaserum.

"It is basic warding technique," explained Mr. Pacek, showing her the tiny rows of runes carved under the stems of the climbing poppies. "Illusion, redirection, and repulsion are the three principles of wardcasting, ranked by their power and complexity. When you want to protect a physical structure or location, you can hide it by making it look like something else or nothing at all. You can convince viewers to think of it as uninteresting or unimportant—that is the foundation of most Muggle-repelling charms and wards. Or you might cast a ward that creates an emotional compulsion, inciting fear or dread, to discourage enemies or invasions. Many a family castle in the Carpathian Mountains is protected by such a ward, which has earned reputations among the local villagers for being haunted sites."

"Compulsion wards," Hermione repeated, trying to remember what she'd read on them. "Wouldn't they count as a form of magical mind control? They're not as invasive as the Imperius Curse, but they plant a suggestion into a sentient mind, which is similar to the Confundus Charm, the effect of which makes a mind *suggestible* to outside influence."

"Compulsions are general where the Imperius is precise—it is the difference between barbed concertina wire and a scalpel. In fact, compulsion spells and wards were the precursors of the Imperius," said Mr. Pacek, who knew more about the Dark Arts than she had ever thought a wardmaster should know, but he'd always defended himself by saying that it was important to understand these things in the proper historical context. "But in most jurisdictions, they are not illegal, nor do I think they would ever be outlawed—there are too many old and valuable monuments warded with them. Wizarding burial sites are the places where they most commonly used; if you ever travel to Egypt, you could study the ancient warding techniques for yourself."

"I think I'd like to see them one day," said Hermione.
"You are considering becoming a wardmaster yourself?" asked Mr. Pacek, who appeared pleased with the idea. "Or a cursebreaker? The more glamorous version of the profession, as I have heard it called, but also more dangerous."

Hermione shook her head. "For now I want to be able to cast a basic ward. I can't forget the fact that wards kept my parents safe during the Blitz. It seems like common sense for the average witch and wizard to learn how to cast one, the way Apparition is treated as a social necessity—Muggles are the same way when it comes to operating a telephone receiver. For a society where most of us choose to live so close to Muggles instead of going into total seclusion, it should be an essential skill. Not just for convenience, but for safety."

"Are you not studying the fundamentals of enchantment in your school lessons?"

"For the last two years we've been learning to read and interpret runes. We translated various passages for our exams," said Hermione, sighing. "But we won't make anything ourselves until the final two years."

"You are making it a mission to study on your own?" asked Mr. Pacek.

"Should I? Would you mind helping me?"

"I have eschewed private tutoring for years, but I suppose one can make an exception," he said. "For what have I done this past year but been your tutor?"

"Thank you," said Hermione, giving him a heartfelt smile. "If the Ministry of Magic had mass-produced and distributed simple wards for homes in Muggle areas, it would've solved so many problems."

"Most governments are not known for being clear-headed or far-sighted," he remarked.

"Have you ever thought about making improvements to the government?"

"Have you been talking to Mr. Riddle?" Mr. Pacek asked. "I have often thought governments to be unnecessary to the trained wizard who can provide everything he needs with his own magic. What use have I for a committee whose sole purpose is to institute speed limits on broomsticks?"

"I've never met anyone who was genuinely self-reliant," said Hermione, who hadn't met that many people in the course of her not-quite-sixteen years of existence, but had considered her statement from a logical perspective. In the Muggle world, education, water, electricity, and sanitation were public concerns and a necessity for a civilised standard of living. In the Magical world, there were essential tasks that could not be done with a wizard alone—herding dragons into reserves where they could provide the raw materials for crafts and potions, whilst remaining out of sight to Muggles. Or law enforcement and civil justice.

"Tom thinks he's one of them, but he's not. We're humans, not automatons; even the people who rarely invite the company of others still seek some form of community."

"I do not believe that it is the magical community whose esteem Mr. Riddle truly seeks," Mr. Pacek observed, and his eyes fixed on hers, as if daring her to counter his statement with one of her own. "Tom doesn't..." Hermione began, struggling to find the appropriate response. "Tom isn't—"
"Well said, Tom!" chortled Professor Slughorn, toasting Tom with the dregs of his latest drink.

"Tom isn't—" mumbled Hermione, burrowing further into her pillow.

"Tom isn't what?" the pillow asked in Tom's voice.

Hermione woke up.

"What—?" she murmured blearily, rubbing her eyes.

"You said, 'Tom isn't', then you stopped. What were you saying about me?"

The pillow turned out to be Tom Riddle, specifically his shoulder; she'd fallen asleep in the middle of Slughorn's story and had woken up with a red imprint of Tom's jumper's knitted pattern high on her cheek, which matched the bright red flush on the rest of her face. That flush stubbornly refused to go away when Tom had to untangle her hair from where it had gotten stuck to his shiny new Prefect badge.

"Nothing, it was just a dream," Hermione whispered, glancing up at Professor Slughorn on the other side of the table, who'd turned to answer one of the older Slytherin Prefects' questions about magical fauna in hunting preserves and how easy it was to acquire a season license from the Department of Magical Creature Regulation at the Ministry. Slughorn winked at her. "Oh no, he just winked."

"Stay still," Tom hissed, unpinning his badge from his robe and teasing her hair out of the clasp. "And don't look at him."

"Won't he think we're...? Should we say anything or pretend it didn't happen, just like that last time —"

"It's too late for it," Tom sighed. "I'm going to hear about 'our dear Miss Granger' for the rest of the year. For the next three years, probably."

"You should have just woken me up."

"You looked tired. Were you up late studying?"

"Revision timetables don't write themselves, Tom."

"Pfft," Tom snorted. "As if you couldn't get Outstandings across the board if you sat your exams right now."

"On the written papers, yes," said Hermione. "But there's a practical component, too. Defense is the one I'm most worried about."
"Well, you have me," said Tom, pinning his badge back into place on his chest and using that movement to lean closer and whisper in her ear. "And I have a 'Defense homework study group'."

The way he said it sounded ominous to Hermione.

"It's your Slytherin study club, isn't it?" Hermione asked, remembering the way the Slytherin boys in their year gave Tom wide berth when Professor Merrythought told the class to pick partners for spell practice. The boys who surrounded Tom at every meal in the Great Hall, their seating arrangement not much different to the way the dozen or so favourites encircled Professor Slughorn in his private compartment.

"I'm not a Slytherin. None of them like me. That time in Hogsmeade, when we bumped into Lestrange and Avery outside the post office, they called me a——"

"I took care of it," Tom interrupted. "There won't be any repeat performances."

Or else, was unsaid but very clearly implied.

Hermione enjoyed being a Prefect.

When she was younger, other children had called her bossy because she told them they had dirt on their nose or their shoelaces were untied. Now that she had a Prefect badge, she could say the same things, but that word, bossy, never passed their lips.

They called her responsible, and she'd begun to understand why Tom so relished having authority over his peers, even if she didn't approve of the way he used his power. To Tom, Prefectship was a means to stack the deck in his interactions with his fellow Slytherins. His Housemates knew that Tom could put a star Quidditch player in detention, or he could grant them amnesty for an offense; he had the power to re-schedule a detention so no player ever had to miss a single training session.

In Ravenclaw, it was a different situation than the Slytherin network of bargains and favours. Hermione's Prefect status made things so easy when people did what they were told. She could tell other students to pick up their crumpled parchments and walk over to the bin, instead of balling it up and tossing it over their shoulders, or worse, trying to Banish them with a charm they'd only learned last week, which sent wads of parchment flying all over the Common Room. When they took a book off the shelf in the library, she could make them put it back where it belonged when they were done with it, and not on the shelf nearest to their study table—Manual of Dendrodivination didn't belong in the same section as The Almanac of Simple Home Potions Remedies.

Tom the Prefect wielded his authority like a tool, while Hermione the Prefect found a way to use hers more responsibly.

The badge made her look trustworthy, or her trustworthiness had earned her the badge. Either way,
one reinforced the other, and now Hermione could go up to her Ancient Runes teacher's desk after
class and ask for a signed note to borrow this or that book from the Restricted Section, and she would
get it.

The power of the badge was great, but she took advantage of it in moderation. She asked for a note
to borrow expensive out-of-print volumes that she couldn't find or afford from an owl order
catalogue. She didn't delve into the darkest of the Dark Arts. The librarian scrutinised every
professor's note and Restricted Section book that passed her desk, and made a note of who borrowed
what. Hermione wasn't as good at talking herself out of corners as Tom was, so prudence was a
sensible course of action.

Tom, on the other hand, could have explained why he was looking into illegal murder spells; when
Tom justified his curiosity as nothing more than academic interest, adults simply took him at his
word. As Hermione lacked his ability—and his propensity—to prevaricate, she contented herself
with obscure but relatively harmless books, *Intellectual Indemnity* and *Elements of Runic
Enchantment.*

The first book was an overview of common spells used by researchers and academics, those who
wanted to protect their research until they could get it published, or until they could pass it onto their
designated successors. Before formal schooling was established as the main vehicle of magical
education, young wizards and witches lived in the houses of their mentors, similar to the
apprenticeship programs of today. Wizards were protective of their trade secrets, and even these
days, invented spells couldn't be patented like magical inventions, so magical secrets and techniques
were kept close to the chest. Even in the modern era, textbooks and periodicals were protected by
anti-duplication jinxes so an enterprising wizard couldn't defraud the authors and publishers whose
livelihoods depended on sales numbers.

During the winter and summer holidays, she'd memorised sections of the textbooks that she couldn't
bring to Hogwarts—partly because she didn't want them confiscated, and partly because she didn't
want Tom to know that she had them. She wrote pages of notes and left them in her enchanted
bookcase at home, but she wanted to continue her research while she was at school and had access to
the Restricted Section. She'd also gotten to the point where there was only so much she could
memorise while continuing to add more. Her standard organising technique was to write colour-
coded notes divided by subject with an alphabeticised list of references at the end of each section,
and her fingers itched at keeping all her notes in her head—but there was a risk to having potentially
dangerous research notes at Hogwarts, because while she herself was sensible enough to avoid
temptation when it came within her reach, Tom wasn't.

The spells in that book guaranteed Hermione's privacy, because she didn't want Tom to stick his
nose where it didn't belong.

Tom didn't see anything wrong with reading over her shoulder when they studied together; he
thought he was being helpful when he commented on her essay structure or the strength of her
sources. He had a fuzzy definition of what counted as personal property, and whilst he knew that it
was too risky to go around "borrowing" things from his dorm mates, he considered information free
game. The textbooks in the library had anti-copying charms placed on them to prevent students from
cheating on their class essays, but Tom had gotten around it by reading the text aloud to his Dictation
Quill.

With this in mind, Hermione began her first foray into magical enchantment.

In class, she'd learned how to shrink textbooks just like how the shopkeepers in Diagon Alley did it.
The Shrinking Charm wasn’t permanent—the spell lasted a few days before it faded away, or as long as it took for the buyer to bring their purchases home and remove the wrapping papers. It was one of the most common and convenient charms, and often made into permanent enchantments for premium luggage and furniture, like the portable stands and viewing pavilions sold to Quidditch spectators.

She wanted to imbue a common charm with the permanence of an enchantment, and here she was inspired by the notes she’d seen being passed around at lunch and under the tables during lessons—students who took a test in the combined Gryffindor-Slytherin classes often shared around the answers to the Hufflepuff-Ravenclaw classes who had the same subject later that day. Hermione had confiscated a number of them, and it was always a simple Concealment Charm they’d used, which rendered a sheet of answers into a blank page of parchment, until one cast a simple *Finite* or *Revelio* over it.

She peeled back the endpapers and binding of a memo book she’d intended to use as a study planner, scraped the glue out with her potions knife, and began to inscribe the inner bindings with a series of runes: *secrecy, stealth, disguise, security, stability,* and *permanence.*

The interesting thing was that enchanting with runes, although time-intensive, was more flexible than casting the same spell with a wand. If she performed a wand Conjuration of a flower with the visualisation of a pink tulip, she’d get a pink tulip. If she enchanted a flower pot to produce a flower with pink petals and monocot leaves, she might get a pink orchid instead of a tulip, and if she wanted more variety, she could further extend the runes to specify dark pink petals that faded to white, at the rate of one flower Conjured per day, with two on Thursday.

It reminded Hermione of punch card tabulators, where a set of coded instructions was fed into a machine in increments—but in her case, it didn't produce a solved equation, it made *magic.*

She wrote out a long list of conditions in rows of fragmented Futhark; her instructions were roughly translated from English, complete with questionable grammatical cases, and none of the poetic elegance of an original Edda. But the intent was clear, and that was what mattered most with magic: she wanted to prevent the use of copying charms and hide the planner's true contents until a certain pattern was tapped on the binding with her wand. It was an idea she'd copied from the enchanted locks used in high security Gringotts vaults, which could only be unsealed by an authorised staff member touching specific points on the lock with their finger. Without the pattern, the interior of the planner resembled a standard secretarial daybook, the days of the week marked out within, printed and labelled in neat square sections.

When she glued everything back together, it looked a bit lumpy and the endpapers had dried crooked, but everything worked. And she could even use it as a date planner to write down her homework assignments and library due dates.

It was in her new planner that she marked down the first meeting of the year of Tom's homework club, on Sunday, September 27.

She didn’t know what to expect. Desks and books and studying? A group reading of the assigned chapters in their Potions textbook? Tom standing at the dusty lectern of an out-of-use classroom, going around and asking what answer everyone got for Question Eight of last week’s Transfiguration homework?

What she got was a half-dozen boys with their robes off, their ties loosened, and their shirtsleeves rolled up, which was the most relaxed of an appearance she’d ever seen for Slytherin students; their House had a reputation for being the most uptight about adherence to the school’s uniform code.
She recognised some of the boys from shared classes: Theodore Nott, ash-brown hair, scrawny and paler than Tom in winter, but whereas Tom's fairness passed as aristocratic, Nott in contrast just looked wan and pasty; he was the boy whose father, Cantankerous Nott, had written *The Pure-Blood Directory*. Sebastian Rosier, wearing his hair with a severe centre part and slicked down with an oily, brilliantine shine; she remembered him as the one who, instead of paying attention to the Arithmancy lesson, calculated Quidditch odds in the back of the classroom. Iain Avery, the rude boy from Hogsmeade over a year ago, whose thin lips seemed perpetually pulled into a dismissive sneer; he'd paid Tom to do his homework from the beginning of First Year.

There were two other boys she didn't recognise. One was stockily built, with heavy brows and a dark shadow of stubble around his chin; his sleeves were pushed up to reveal the shiny pinkness of freshly re-grown skin in patches about his wrists and forearms. The other had grey eyes and black hair that fell past his ears, worn longer than any decent Muggle school would have allowed for male students.

He was currently facing down Tom, who unlike the rest of the boys was dressed in his full school uniform, even though it was a Sunday afternoon. A section in the middle of the classroom was cleared of desks, which had been pushed back against the far walls and used as seats by the rest of the boys. They watched in interest as Tom cast spell after silent spell in the other boy's direction. By the colour of the spell and the wand movements, it was the Knockback Jinx, but Hermione had never seen anyone cast it so quickly in succession—one blue flash of light was in the air when the tip of Tom's wand was already glowing in preparation for casting another.

Tom looked almost bored by the time he sent his opponent's wand flying out of his hand, where it rolled under a pile of chairs at the front of the classroom.

"Your defense is weak, Black," said Tom, summoning the lost wand and handing it back to its owner. "Next time, take the lateral stance and pick up your feet—present your side at all times, instead of your chest, and you'll make a smaller target. And your Shield was uneven. Show me how you cast it."

The other boy must have been a member of the wealthy and prolific Black family who had several of its number attending Hogwarts. Hermione recalled that Lucretia Black had been in the Heads' compartment as the Sixth Year Slytherin Prefect, and her brother (or was it her cousin? Pureblood families made it so difficult to tell) Alphard Black was a Chaser on the Slytherin Quidditch team. There were a few others, the baby who'd started this year, and to no one's surprise, was Sorted into Slytherin. Then there was the annoying one in Sixth Year who had the most irritating laugh, which sounded like the last breath of a dying donkey. Hermione had heard it more times than she would have liked whilst peacefully minding her own business in a bathroom stall.

Black gripped his wand with white-knuckled fingers and cast the Shield Charm. "*Protego.*"

Like a proper Shield Charm, it was invisible, only showing itself when it took the force of another spell.

Tom threw a trio of Knockback Jinxes—one to the upper right, one to the upper left, and one to the lower centre, at knee level. The shield flared blue-white, absorbing the jinxes at its outermost edges, and revealing that its shape was ovoid and irregular, stronger and brighter on Black's right side compared to his left.

An unbalanced shield.
"Expelliarmus!"

A red streak of light, then the shield glowed brighter than ever, before it popped like a soap bubble, and Black's wand was once again clattering to the floor.

"Still uneven," Tom stated, swishing his wand and effortlessly summoning Black's to his hand. "Your wand movement was correct, but what was your visualisation?"

Black frowned in consideration. "A uniform hemispherical construction, rigid of consistency and flawless of surface..."

"Hmm," said Tom, turning Black's wand between his fingers and inspecting the carvings on the handle, "that's Slinkhard's method, isn't it? Word for word."

"Yeah," Black said, with a shrug. "It's from the textbook."

"Well, I know it works, as long as you're doing it right. Which you're not—I can tell that you aren't concentrating hard enough. You're watching me and what I'm doing, and not paying enough attention to preparing your own spells. You also focus too much on your dominant hand, your wand hand, and you leave your left side wide open." Tom returned the wand and lifted his own. "Let's try it again."

They tried it.

Again. And again. And again.

The wand flew across the room and smacked into the blackboard, and soon Tom began to lose his patience, so then it was Black's turn to hit the desks.

Hermione found herself stepping in and casting a Shield Charm to block a Knockback Jinx that was so powerful that the colour was a deep indigo instead of the standard bright blue. It would have punched through Black's feeble shield.

Hermione was well aware that it wasn't easy for anyone to concentrate while a frustrated Tom Riddle was staring them down with a wand pointed at their chest.

"Enough!" Hermione cried, and her own Shield Charm flared blue and rippled as the jinx bounced back in Tom's direction. "It's not working for him, can't you see?"

"He's not focusing hard enough, that's why," Tom retorted, side-stepping the reflected jinx. He lowered his wand, nostrils flaring. "It's the standard textbook method; it should work for anyone if they're doing it right. As you obviously are."

"Let me try," said Hermione, gesturing at Black to come forward. "There's another way to cast a Shield Charm."

"Reciting the textbook at him one more time isn't going to work." Tom pocketed his wand and smoothed down his robes, which had barely gotten wrinkled in the duel. "I should know—I've tried."

"I'm not going to use the textbook," Hermione said firmly.
She knew Slinkhard's *Defensive Theory* back to front, and she'd struggled with the same textbook instructions for casting the Shield Charm. In that she'd been no different than Black, bleeding frustration and dissatisfaction, which made each subsequent casting more difficult as she slipped farther and farther away from the absolute confidence necessary to will magic into existence. The issue came from the approach: the book's recommended visualisation was a rigid, inflexible barrier to deflect incoming spells, with an emphasis on ensuring that every point in the shield's ambit was solid and consistent. It worked in theory, certainly, but it was more than demanding to set one's mind into that perfect, structured level of thinking in the middle of a duel.

She'd asked for advice during the summer, tired of the repetitive cycle of struggle and failure—although her own attempts hadn't involved bouncing off stacks of classroom furniture. She'd remembered the way Tom had improved his *Incendio* casting during the summer of their Second Year, beyond what *The Standard Book of Spells* had ever indicated was possible. She still trusted the school textbooks to work as they were supposed to—they did work, or else they wouldn't be published and sold to students. But by now she'd recognised that they weren't the only solution, just one of many.

Visualisation, she'd learned, was the key to conveying the correct magical intent. There was more than one way to reach that state of mental focus necessary to cast a spell; on top of that, the wand gestures and incantation, which her teachers drilled into the students every other lesson, were optional to the highly skilled. But if Hermione, who struggled with practical Defense—the offensive part of the curriculum, and anything involving physical stamina, floor dives, dodging, or all-around athleticism—could block Tom's attack with a Shield Charm, then Black could do it too.

"No textbook? Now I'm curious," said Tom, his brows rising toward his hairline. "Go on, then. Show me that someone else here knows what they're doing."

Hermione turned to Black, who looked askance at her, then at the boys lounging on the desks by the door. He shrugged helplessly.

"Um," Hermione began, shuffling over to where Black stood. She'd celebrated her sixteenth birthday a week and a half ago—she'd gotten a box of rose scones from the girls in her dormitory, bought from the tea house in Hogsmeade, and a subscription voucher to *Minutes of the Wizengamot Proceedings* from Tom, which according to him, was Wizarding Britain's most boring periodical. (Apparently it was also authored by a Dictation Quill, as the names of the speakers were all spelled phonetically, with a series of footnotes on the last page added by the printer to explain who was who.)

She knew she was the oldest student out of their entire year. But all the boys had already outstripped her in height; even Black, in the year below, was half a head taller. It was hard to project an air of authority, as Tom did, when she had to crane her head up to look them in the eye.

"Here." She tapped him lightly on the shoulder, then on the elbow. "Relax your shoulders. Lower your arm; bend your elbow. Don't squeeze your wand like that—you're not trying to choke it. Relax. Now close your eyes. Yes, I said close your eyes. Erm," she continued, clearing her throat nervously. "This is going to sound silly, but it's what works for me.

"Imagine a small tropical island, somewhere in the South Pacific, white sand and coconut palms and a round lagoon right in the centre." The words were hesitant and awkward and recited from memory, from how she recalled Mr. Pacek making a very similar speech in his accented English, full of rhotic trills and harsh consonants. It was scarcely any better than reading from the textbook, but as she spoke, her words slowly gained a measure of confidence.
"It's a perfect lagoon, with clear blue water, not a ripple on it, the surface as smooth as glass. During
a storm—a wild, roaring typhoon, the kind that tosses ships and crests forty feet high—the little
island is in danger of being swallowed up. But this round lagoon acts as a breakwater. The waves
crash, the wind howls, and the water rises and rises and rises, but the lagoon absorbs everything that
comes its way. And when the storm blows itself out, the lagoon and the island are still there, safe
and sound, and the water is as blue and clear as it was before. It wasn't a rigid barrier; it was never
rigid—its strength was always in its resilience."

"Now," said Hermione, nudging Black's elbow. "Cast your shield."

Black took a breath and adjusted his feet. "Protego!"

Tom, Hermione mouthed silently, sliding to the side and out of the way of what she knew was
coming next.

Flash—flash—flash—flash.

Blue, blue, red, white, red.

Hermione's eyes followed the wand movements, as Tom had cast non-verbally. It looked like he
was proficient enough with the Knockback Jinx to abbreviate the movement somewhat, from the
full-arm dip, flick, and flourish that they'd learned back in First Year to a shallow twitch of his wrist
that conserved energy and let him proceed straight into the next spell. Another Knockback, a
Disarmer, that white one she didn't recognise, and the last one was a deep, rich red with a precise
slashing wand movement that she had seen in a diagram printed in this year's Defense textbook, but
had never performed herself. A fully-fledged Stunner, which they hadn't yet been taught in class.

The first four spells dissipated on Black's shield, the boy gritting his teeth at the fizzling sound they
made upon impact, but the final Stunner shattered it, red cracks crawling over the shield's half-dome
shape. The power of the spell was being absorbed, the cracks yawning open, limned in fading red
light that flickered and dwindled to a dusky pink. Black's wand arm shook with the effort of holding
his shield for so long, and then the onslaught was over, and Hermione sucked in a lungful of air;
she'd realised that she'd been holding her breath for the extent of the demonstration.

Black sank to his knees to the dusty flagstones, his right arm flopping down, his left hand rising to
swipe the sweat off his brow and push his fringe out of his eyes.

"Finally," said Tom, not the least bit out of breath from the magical exertion. "Now that you've got
an O.W.L. level spell down, all you have to do ensure you haven't forgotten it by the time you
actually get to the exam."

"There's no need to be so uncharitable, Tom," Hermione sighed. She inclined her head at Black.
"You've successfully cast a Fifth Year charm, and you only started Fourth Year a few weeks ago.
I'm proud of you. Tom is too, only he doesn't know how to say it, so I'll speak for the both of us—"

She pointedly ignored Tom's muttered, "Whatever."

"—And say that it's a wonderful accomplishment, and very practical too, since you're basically
immune to Peeves now, and anyone from Gryffindor who stocks up on firecrackers on Quidditch
match days."
Hermione beamed and helped Black back to his feet.

"Where did you learn that?" Black asked her, brushing dirt from the knees of his trousers.

"From my summer tutor," she said. "He studied at Durmstrang. Class of Thirty-Four."

"Oh?" Black cocked his head, his grey eyes bright with curiosity. "Is that why Riddle invited you to the group? I'm Orion Black, of the House of Black. Alphard is the oldest of us at school, but he's in the cadet line, of course."

He offered his hand to her, and assuming he wanted to shake, Hermione took it. To her surprise, he raised her hand to his lips and kissed the air above her knuckles.

Hermione felt her cheeks growing warm. She'd known that purebloods and most traditionalist wizards had little contact with the Muggle world, and had thus fallen behind with regards to modern social conventions. It was a quirk of magical life she'd observed with interest, but only from a distance—she was a Muggleborn, and didn't socialise with other students outside of schoolwork or Prefect-related business. But she'd noticed that boys raised in those families sent notes via owl or left visiting cards on a girl's desk if they wanted to walk her to Hogsmeade, and the girls complained about how tawdry the knee-length woollen uniform skirts were, and fondly remembered their mothers' days in the Twenties, when the skirts had been calf-length. She definitely hadn't made an attempt to break into the circles of those wealthy wizarding traditionalists, who were known to be as snobbish as any group of London society ladies who only lived in the city for the length of the "Season".

"I—I'm Hermione Granger. Fifth Year Ravenclaw Prefect. I'm here because this is a homework study group," Hermione said, still flushing, "and I'm the only one in our year who can match Tom's marks."

"Riddle lets you call him by his given name?" Black inquired, a thoughtful frown crossing his face.

"He hasn't said not to," said Hermione, wondering what Tom and his 'friends' got up to when she wasn't around. She understood men being more formal than usual when present in mixed company, which this was, due to her having been invited, but she didn't know how far that formality went amongst the stodgy, conservative Slytherin contingent. If it was anything close to what got on in elite Muggle old boys' institutions where institutionalised bullying was a rite of passage, she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

"—And he also says it's time to get back to work," Tom interrupted. "Who's next? Rosier? I recall last year that you tried to make up for your weak defensive spellwork with clever footwork. I hope you've been practising during the summer, because now it's time to prove you can out-run a Tripping Jinx."

Rosier groaned; Black found a seat between the other boys, who pounded him on the back and ruffled his sweaty hair.

Tom brandished his wand, paused for a moment, and his eyes fell on Hermione. He gave her a pleasant smile. "Would you like to give it a go? In class, you've never quite caught up to my casting speed. How about we give Rosier a fighting chance?"

"Just Tripping Jinxes?"
"For now."

"For now?"

"You'll still need to be able to cast a Stunner for the O.W.L.s," said Tom, his Reasonable Face on full-force, which was only a few self-effacing smiles and an eyelash flutter away from being his Wheedling Face. "Isn't that why you're here? It's the best way to build experience for the exam practical, performing in the midst of a demanding situation. We'll just have to work our way up."

"Fine," Hermione conceded. "I want you standing by to cast a Cushioning Charm if he needs it."

"He doesn't need it," Tom said, and before Hermione's mouth could open to argue, he added, "But fine, I'll do as you wish."

By the end of the meeting, Hermione felt like she'd made a significant improvement in her spellcasting. For all that Tom as an instructor was unforgiving and unsympathetic, he was also very effective at teaching other people. He had an eye for picking out weaknesses and pointing them out, showing where they could be corrected or counterbalanced by one's individual strengths.

She didn't go so far as to call him fair-minded, an attribute of a good teacher that he apparently lacked. Hermione noticed that Tom gave her better treatment than the other members of the group; he settled the others into pairs and took her as his personal duelling partner, spending more time talking to her and only making training-related conversation with the others. He advised her on a series of traditional duelling stances that had him standing quite close to her and adjusting the angles of her shoulders and hips—something she didn't see him doing for anyone else.

Afterwards, the boys left to wash up and change for dinner. She and Tom stayed behind, clearing up the mess. Tom dusted and scoured, washing sweat and scorchmarks off the floor, his household charmwork graceful and effortless. Hermione repaired the broken chairs and desks, her wand movements not nearly as fluid as his, but she'd put in a good amount of practice in recent weeks helping the First Years—many of them hadn't known how to pack their trunks, and she'd had more than a few students bring her broken picture frames and self-winding alarm clocks.

"How was that?" Tom asked, when they stopped to inspect their handiwork.

"It was... interesting," Hermione replied honestly. She had never been exposed to this many Slytherins in close quarters. In classes, she sat with other Ravenclaws, and even the shared classes, the only Slytherin she really spoke to—the only Slytherin most people of other Houses spoke to—was Tom, whose reputation for helpfulness had only grown since becoming a Prefect. "But I thought your club would have more people."

"Travers is hosing down Greenhouse Four for Beery—couldn't get him out of that one," said Tom. "And Lestrange went to Quidditch practice. Still a good showing, and if you plan on staying, we'll be going over textbook theory at the start of next term."

"I think I might." Hermione sat down on one of the cleaned desks and fiddled with the hem of her skirt. "They respect you, Tom. I wasn't expecting that."

"Why shouldn't they? Don't you?"

"Well..." Hermione began. "I do, but I like you too. I don't think they have that, not with you; I see that they're closer with one another than they are with you. It feels like the difference between an
army officer and the enlisted—the more you prove you can teach them, the more that distance grows. Tom, if you started this group to try and make some real friends at Hogwarts before you graduate, instead of having a bunch of 'friends'," Hermione put particular emphasis on that word, "$I... I'm afraid that it isn't going to happen."

"You've seriously been worried about how many friends I have?" Tom laughed, and settled next to her, desk creaking under their combined weight. "Oh, Hermione. You shouldn't be worried about that. I don't need them, and I wasn't trying to collect 'friends'. You're more than enough for me."

"I thought we weren't friends," said Hermione, remembering the Tom of First Year who had derided his Housemates as a bunch of gullible inbreds. That Tom had told her friendship as a concept was foolish and shallow.

"Of course we're not," Tom stated, standing up and offering her his arm. "We're more than that. Now may I escort you to dinner?"

"This isn't because Orion Black kissed my hand earlier, is it?" Hermione asked. "You don't have to put on the gentleman dandy act to fit in with them."

"It's because Sidonie Hipworth keeps following me around if I don't look like I'm in the middle of a conversation with someone else," said Tom, holding the door open for her and locking it behind them, placing a jinx on the doorknob so a casual Alohomora wouldn't pop the lock.

"And because I want to," he added, his smile as benign as ever. "You must have noticed that I'm a Prefect now... which means I can do whatever I want."
Just another day for Prefect Tom and Prefect Hermione...

**Hermione:** I don't know, Tom, that sounds like a bad idea.  
**Tom:** Oh, Hermione, when have I ever led you wrong?
Hermione: Yesterday, the day before, last Saturday...

The picture turned out how I imagined it, showing Baby Tom and Baby Hermione grown up but not all the way there yet, and still sort of looking like the original cover image set on the front page. Tom just wants to rub his cheek on Hermione's soft, floofy hair. They're so cute!

If you want to re-blog the illustration on tumblr, here's the credit link.
Pride and Accomplishment

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1942

Tom enjoyed being a Prefect.

But his enjoyment was overshadowed by two things:

The first was his awareness that the job of Prefect only existed so that teachers could off-load their duties onto someone else, permitting them to put up their feet after class and drink in the staffroom, instead of patrolling the castle and doing actual work. Prefectship meant nothing in the long run—though they did get to keep their badges after they left—and even the Head Boys and Girls only got their names engraved on a plaque that was shared with all the other Heads of the last decade. Tom had visited the Hogwarts Trophy Room, looking for any other Toms and Marvolos and Riddles and finding nothing, and there he had seen that most of the trophies were dusty relics, monuments of no importance. Especially that Medal of Magical Merit awarded to A.P.W.B. Dumbledore in 1899.

(As for House Points and Quidditch awards: the House Cup was a joke—for God's sake, the prize was eating one meal at the end of the year under the winning House's banners. This, in exchange for a whole year's worth of academic merit?! But it was like religion or fiat currency, the way the points system was indoctrinated into the minds of impressionable children. It had value because other people gave it value, and Tom, who saw himself above consuming the opium of the masses, could nevertheless recognise its usefulness.)

People who were famous were remembered for real deeds and accomplishments. The lists of deeds on the back of the chocolate frog cards never said, 'He was also a Hogwarts Prefect for the years of 1752—1755'. No one became famous by virtue of being awarded a Prefect badge; ergo, being a Prefect was not a real accomplishment.

Thus came the physical proof of real accomplishment: in the last week of October, a nondescript owl arrived to the Slytherin House table during breakfast, bearing a thick envelope with an official-looking seal in sparkly carnelian pink wax.

Dear Mr. Bertram,

We are pleased to offer you an invitation to the Wizarding Britain Society of Journalists (WBSJ), the premier society of contributors and creators in the business of printed media.

Enclosed within is your Press Identification Certificate and Press Badge, engraved with your credentials and personal identification number. We urge you not to misplace it. WBSJ members attending hearings or official appointments at the Ministry of Magic must present their badge at the reception desk after wand weighing; the Badge is registered with the Ministry and charmed to allow entry to court sessions closed to the
public. Lost or misplaced badges must be filed with the MOM Department of Administrative Registration, which charges a fifteen galleon service fee for replacements.

The WBSJ Annual Dinner is set for Friday, 18 December. The invitation and RSVP ticket is enclosed with your nomination slip to our Most Charming Smile annual award. We request that all seating reservations and paperwork be owled at your earliest convenience.

Our sincere congratulations,

Clementine Wimbourne,
Editor-in-Chief
Witch Weekly Magazine

It came from a year's worth of writing and studying and practising magic within the closed drapes of his dormitory four-poster, spending the free hours he had between meals and curfew in the library, combing through the shelves for simple spells he could re-purpose and promote as a groundbreaking solution to a common problem.

It came from the late summer nights spent in his room in The Hog's Head. The sweltering heat in the small room, so hot and humid that the windows dripped with condensation, but he didn't risk opening the window because anything was better than the fragrance of sweaty goats. In his room, he'd devoted himself to magical experimentation, wet socks squishing between his toes, broken porcelain scattered across the splintered floorboards from yet another Transfigured chamber pot whose structure couldn't handle a high-pressure water conjuration charm.

It was a year of self-education outside of the Hogwarts curriculum, combining what he'd learned from his classes into a sum greater than its parts. It made him question why they separated Charms from Transfiguration from Defense when they could be so much more powerful combined. Magic was magic; the divisions between disciplines were arbitrary and placed out of convenience than any fundamental distinction. Alchemy was the blurred line between Transfiguration and Potions. Defense was just Charms cast with martial intent. Many of them, such as the Severing Charm or the Banishing Charm, were useful for both housework or self-protection.

He found his Press Badge to be a more meaningful achievement than his Prefect Badge, which came from buttering up the professors for the last four years, on top of earning all those House Points for turning in his homework on time and for knowing the answers in class, which was like being rewarded for cleaning one's plate at dinner, or flushing the loo after doing one's business. It was such a non-achievement that he had imagined everyone's expressions of shock and horror if he'd launched the badge into the Lake and renounced his Prefectship in the middle of the Great Hall.

But those images never manifested themselves in reality; Tom kept them locked away within his imagination, and when the time came, he accepted the Prefect badge with gracious smiles and counterfeited modesty.

The duties of being Prefect aside, it still had plenty of privileges to make it worth the bother. For example, he could now loiter in the corridors after hours without anyone daring to tell him off.
That was where his new Prefect status was overshadowed for the second time.

When Tom had been in First Year, and the walls of Hogwarts had been the extent of the magical world as far as he had been aware, he had looked forward to being a Prefect. He wanted the power, the authority, and the ability to eject people from the many hidden alcoves and out-of-the-way classrooms, because there were better purposes they could be put to than serving as rendezvous spots for various upper year students' amorous ambitions.

Perhaps that was petty, but he'd been a child, and his horizons back then were narrow and simplistic, with a limited view on what tools were available to him. In First Year, there had only been himself, Hermione, and Peanut.

But Peanut's ill health had dampened his high spirits. He'd eagerly anticipated roaming the corridors with his loyal minion in his pocket, sniffing out the curfew breakers, the contraband smugglers, and the lovesick fools. Searching for the parts of the castle that had been off-limits to him in the past, like the kitchens, the laundry room, the caretaker's office—*where did all the coins that rolled under the sofas end up?*—and the Common Rooms of Hogwarts' other Houses.

(If it hadn't been for the Common Room library and the freedom to visit Hermione outside of class, Ravenclaw would have been disappointing; he'd been back after that Christmas just to see if the word puzzles improved, but they hadn't.)

Instead of his obedient and dependable Peanut, Tom had gotten Miss Sidonie Hipworth as his patrol partner.

Hipworth wore her hair in stiff, curling blonde ringlets, courtesy of hair charms rather than nature, quite unlike Hermione's naturally fluffy curls. Hipworth wasn't as pompous and overbearing as Everard, or as vacuous as Chuffley, Summers, and Preston; he'd heard that Hipworth's family had earned rather inherited their way into modest fortune, and as such, she understood the value of dedication. To Tom's annoyance, however, its manifestation in Sidonie Hipworth came in the form of shameless attempts at social climbing. She was in the top quarter of their year by marks, and he remembered that she'd asked to be his Potions partner a few times before Tom had begun leaving his bag on the seat next to him. His regular Potions partners were Lestrange or Avery, who made up for their near-illiteracy by being good at taking orders; beyond that, they could mash slugs and de-bone bat wings without being squeamish about the blood.

The girl had apparently wedged herself into that much-prized intersection between *Acceptable Academic Records* and *Notable Family Connections*, which had been enough to convince Professor Slughorn to acknowledge her existence, to the extent of handing her a badge and remembering her name. Tom was consoled by the fact that Hipworth's existence hadn't made so strong of an impression on Old Sluggy to merit invitations to his Slug Club dinner evenings. There was only so much of her that Tom could tolerate; she didn't even qualify for being one of his "friends".

(If it hadn't been for Peanut's poor state of health, Tom would have considered pranking the girls' dorm again on the off-chance that a public humiliation would force Miss Hipworth to hand her Prefect badge to someone else less annoying.)

Tom had set Peanut up in a shoebox under his bed, lined with the feathers pulled out of someone's pillow, and a hand towel taken from the dormitory bathroom.

Nott caught him coming out of the bathroom, and had asked him about it. "The Prefect with the
non-approved pet? Aren't you going to assign yourself detention now?"

"I have a permission slip from the Deputy Headmaster," said Tom, brushing past Nott, shoebox in hand. "I can have whatever pet I want."

"And you got a rat?" Nott's eyes widened in disbelief. "You could have gotten a snake! Why didn't you get a snake?"

*Because snakes are temperamental and boring,* thought Tom. He didn't understand why the members of his House worshiped them so much. They were fine as symbolic or heraldic animals—and if he had to choose, a serpent was miles better than a badger—but in reality, most breeds of snakes were rather dull and pre-occupied with their base urges.

Tom had talked to snakes when he and the other orphans had gone on trips outside the city. All a snake wanted was food and a warm place to sleep; Tom could imagine himself spending a week to build and charm the perfect heated terrarium for a pet snake, and then being woken up in the middle of the night because the snake wanted the temperature adjusted. Snakes could be as callous as cats, but at least the average house-cat maintained some semblance of domesticity.

"Because I didn't want a snake," said Tom. He tried to push past Nott to get to the door, but the boy didn't budge.

"Are you sure you were meant to be in Slytherin, Riddle?" Nott asked, folding his arms across his chest. "The others mightn't have noticed, but I have. You're making questionable choices, and it's showing: you invite that Granger girl to our club, then you fawn over her like a moonstruck puppy. It makes me wonder if you're really a Slytherin at all. Maybe you should've been in Ravenclaw. Or Hufflepuff."

Tom stopped dead. His fingers tightened on the shoebox; he could hear rustling from inside as Peanut woke up and shifted about. Nott was trying to provoke him. Nott had always been more perceptive than the other boys who saw new spells and novel magical tricks and didn't question the person providing them. Nott was quiet; he watched and observed, and despite not being as vocal about his opinions as the other boys back in their First Year, he had kept his distance from Tom. Things had warmed up since the Wardrobe Incident in Third Year, but Nott, though outwardly respectful, still chose to remain withdrawn and reserved, even as the rest of the boys grew closer as a group.

If Tom were to count the Slytherins who actually possessed traits that Salazar so valued, Nott would be one of the rare few.

"This isn't about what kind of pet I picked, is it? It's about Granger."

"That speech you made about special privileges and exceptions," said Nott, his eyes narrowed, his lip curling into a derisive sneer. "That was about her, wasn't it?"

"I'm not sure what you're getting at."

"Come off it, Riddle. You know what I'm talking about," Nott said contemptuously. "Don't you know how it looks? How you act around her? You've talent and ambition, and we both know it—Slughorn's already picked you for a winner. You're going to be someone important when you leave this place. But what I can't comprehend is why a man like you is wasting his time and potential on chasing a bit of skirt, let alone one like her. There's no knowing what kind of muck flows through
that blo—"

Tom felt his anger rising, the air growing heavy and stifling, a warm tingle running across his limbs and down to his fingers. His fingers itched; a hot pressure built up behind his eye sockets, and he could hear the thump of his own pulse roaring in his ears.

The cups and toothbrushes on the shelf by the sink rattled. A tube of hair lotion rolled off the edge of the sink and plopped onto the floor. Tom settled the shoebox in the crook of his left elbow, while his right arm rose up as if performing an act of divine benediction.

Tom flicked his wrist.

The bathroom door slammed shut with a bang, and Nott followed, his body propelled backwards until his back struck the wooden door, the handle driving into his kidneys from behind and expelling all the air from his lungs with a loud whoosh.

Nott wheezed for breath.

Tom drew his wand from the interior pocket of his robes, stalking forward over the green tiled floor.

When Tom was within arm's reach of Nott, the tip of his yew wand brushed against the other boy's throat, tracing a complex, looping pattern down his clavicle and the line of his sternum, over the pristine uniform jumper.

This was a spell he'd learned from a Healing textbook from Rosier's family library. One that was meant for field surgeries and medical emergencies, it constricted blood vessels and slowed the beating of the heart, in order to reduce blood loss while a Mediwizard sealed open wounds and waited for a Blood Replenishing Potion to take effect. It wasn't Dark Magic, which left traces on the body and in the caster's wand, nor was it something useful for fast-paced duelling, but it looked to be useful here and now. Tom had tested it on Old Ab's goats during the summer, while he'd held their eyes open and made them stay still.

He'd felt what they felt, and while it wasn't dangerous unless, according to the book, one had pre-existing heart conditions, it was still incredibly unpleasant. He could describe the sensation as something akin to holding his breath, but that would be an understatement; for a healthy human who had no restorative potions in his system, the arterial constriction was closer to being held upside down in a tepid pool of water and slowly starved of air.

"They called me 'Mudblood' back in First Year, as you may recall," Tom spoke in a quiet voice, looking down into Nott's eyes. The pupils were dilated, the white of his sclera visible around the iris, and his breath rasped in his throat. "You never said it, but I know you heard them, and you thought it. You and everyone else. Back then, my name meant nothing, my magic was an accident, my blood was tainted. But I wonder..."

Tom leaned closer and dug his wand into Nott's chest. "If we were to have a look at your blood, what colour would it be? Would it be the same shade, have the same consistency as mine, or even Granger's? Do you know what I think?

"I think there would be no difference. But we could always check, if you wanted to make sure of it."
Tom pulled back a few inches and twisted his wand in an intricate counter-pattern, reversing the spell. Nott sucked in a slow, croaking breath between his clenched teeth.

"There's a reason why I 'waste my time', as you call it, with Granger," said Tom in a conversational tone, pinning Nott down with his eyes. Tom felt the spine-prickling itch of an unease that wasn't his own, mutating into a sharp flicker of alarm that crawled up his throat like bile—

And then he was assaulted by a succession of images: a looming shadow in the corner of his eye; a vast, polished table in a room lit by candles; a little boy and a regal, grey-whiskered wolfhound hiding beneath a desk; a veiny, be-ringed hand turning the brittle and yellowing pages of an old book—

He blinked and the images were gone.

"It's because she understands the meaning of loyalty," continued Tom, deciding to pursue that strange episode at a later date. "In fact, that's what makes her exceptional and worthy of my time—it was never about name or blood or gender. You see, Nott, I haven't the time to spare for anyone who is anything less than loyal to me. And those who are loyal, who do prove themselves deserving? I'll give them whatever privileges I want. That's what I understand to be the mark of sensible leadership. If you learn anything from our little discussion, I hope it's that."

A few taps of his wand and Nott's collar straightened itself out; the wrinkles fell out of his robes with a soft puff of steam. Nott himself was paler than usual, his skin clammy with sweat, and he'd sagged onto the floor, but Tom couldn't do anything about that. He levitated the other boy out of the way of the bathroom door.

He spent a moment adjusting the shoebox, which had been tucked under his arm the whole time, and ensured its contents were secure before he opened the door.

Lestrange and Rosier, who had returned to the dormitory in the time Tom was having his talk with Nott, turned to look as the bathroom door opened.

Rosier was sitting on his bed, unwrapping his green-and-silver Slytherin scarf, quilted leather mittens and woollen cloak laying on his bedcovers; his shoes were half-laced, leather tongues pulled open to reveal a flash of green socks adorned with fluttering golden snitches. Lestrange was in the midst of changing, his numbered team jumper halfway over his head, wearing mud-flecked white Quidditch breeches with heavy pads buckled over the knees and shins. It was obvious that they'd come back from the Quidditch pitch, Lestrange to play, and Rosier to spectate.

Tom stood in the doorway, blank-faced. Behind him, Nott was getting unsteadily to his feet.

Rosier's eyes darted to Lestrange, then back to Tom. "Did something happen while we were out?"

"Nott ate something that disagreed with him," said Tom.

Nott said nothing.

"It might be best to leave him alone for a bit, actually." Tom glanced over his shoulder at Nott, who really did look ill. "If you need to use the loo, you could go across the hall and ask the Fourth Years. Black or Mulciber would let you in if you knocked on their door."

"Aww," Lestrange groaned; he had by now pulled his jumper over his head. "Can't you just take
points off like a normal person, Riddle? I wanted to use the shower."

After that incident in the bathroom, Nott put as much space between them as possible, removing himself from his usual spot at the House table and moving down to the point where the Fifth Year section met the Fourth Years. Mulciber, who had been joining the Fifth Years for dinner from the previous year, took Nott's vacated spot. Orion Black came and went as he liked; as the heir to a prominent family and closely related to a number of upper year students, he was invited to a different spot at the Slytherin table every other day.

Nott's enforced distance didn't stop him from attending Tom's homework club, which was held once per fortnight and included every other resident of the Fifth Year boys' dorm. The awkwardness also didn't stop Nott from observing Tom's interactions with Hermione, in the casual setting of the club and in the more structured setting of their mixed classes.

It prompted Tom to begin evaluating his own actions.

Did he really give Hermione special treatment?

Yes, in fact, he did.

Hermione was Hermione. He was accustomed to the small physical displays of affection they shared. He didn't mind the nudges and pats and the way she leaned against him at the end of the last lesson on a Friday afternoon. Those student desks were the same ones they'd picked in First Year, but they'd both grown since then, especially Tom, whose knees now pressed against the bottom of the desk. Contact was unavoidable, and there was nothing inappropriate about it.

Did he fawn over Hermione?

No. No, he didn't.

He counted fawning to be what the younger girls in his House did, pouting their lips and speaking in stupid childish voices, as if they hadn't had governesses from the age of six to teach them how to sign each other's dance cards in formal French. Tom had stopped studying in the Common Room because there was always several groups of girls who did nothing but giggle, whisper, and sneak glances at him from behind their textbooks, daring one of their number to go up and ask him a question about Third Year elective subjects.

His dorm mates found it amusing to watch thirteen and fourteen year old girls grow red and flustered when Tom looked in their direction, and downright comical when one of them tripped over her own feet and fell on her face. It wasn't so hilarious to Tom, who as the Prefect in attendance was expected to escort her to the Hospital Wing to the sighs and envy of her classmates. Perhaps they would have thought differently had Tom been anything other than indifferent to their advances, as more than a few of the girls had been nominal purebloods with all four grandparents being magical. (They weren't Sacred Twenty-Eight; those girls might look, but they'd never be so bold as to
countenance a match to a man with a Muggle name, who happened to be a half-blood at best.)

_Did he like Hermione?_

There were many ways to answer that question, because Tom's feelings about her were complicated at best.

He enjoyed her company, which came without the expectation of payment or obligation; spending time in Hermione's presence was the opposite of the dull evenings frittered away in Slughorn's office pretending to be grateful and pleasant, while he had one eye watching the sand in the hourglass, counting the minutes before he could make a polite departure.

He also found her appealing in a deeply visceral way, something that he hadn't noticed until the last year or so. There was no fawning involved, but when Hermione plaited up her hair and wore it tucked over her shoulder, Tom's eyes were immediately drawn to the small bumps at the back of her neck, once hidden but now revealed. One, two, three, four—he'd counted them, the evenly spaced bones of her vertebral column, before they disappeared under the white starched collar of her uniform blouse. It was an alluring sight on a level far beyond the vulgarity of simple titillation; he was at once entranced and dissatisfied by the implication presented by such a display.

In the end, he concluded that he did like her, though to what extent he was still unsure. He did feel that if Hermione had formed a friendship with anyone else other than him, it would never have had the depth of connection of what she had with Tom; she would have been wasted on anyone else, and Tom would have gone his entire life without knowing his Foil, which was so appalling a notion that he could scarcely bring himself to contemplate it.

It brought him to his last question:

(Which was perhaps Nott's last question, too.)

_Did Hermione like him?_

Of course she did—she'd said it before, and more than once.

But how far did that go? Was it the same amount that he liked her? Was it more, was it less?

Objectively, it didn't matter, but he couldn't help but be curious about it. It was silly to worry overmuch about it, as the Muggle girls at Wool's did when they plucked the petals one by one off daisies and played a game of _He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not._

Although he couldn't stop himself from wondering if Hermione found him appealing in return. He knew that other girls liked looking at him, admiring his silky hair or his soulful eyes or what have you.

(Honestly, didn't they have better things to do? Like, for instance, learn magic?)

Hermione was different in every way possible to those random giggling Third Years, most of them too afraid to say a word to him. If he unbuttoned his collar and showed her the vertebrae on the back of his neck, would she appreciate it? Or maybe she liked knees instead? She'd been awkward about touching his knees since that morning last year, in the alcove near the club rooms.

Someone coughed.
Tom blinked.

He looked down. He'd written **KNEES** over a page of notes listing the concessions agreed upon between the Ministry of Magic and the Goblin Nation in the Treaty of 1755.

Around him, students were drooling on their desks, playing Hangman, doing homework for another class, or in the case of one Gryffindor, sleeping while wearing glasses charmed to look like open eyes.

Was it possible to get an Outstanding N.E.W.T. for History of Magic without showing up to any of the classes? Why was History of Magic a mandatory class for O.W.L.s when few people even bothered continuing on to the N.E.W.T. level class, and unlike Charms or Arithmancy, no employer looked for good marks in History on a student's school record? In the Muggle world, such an arrangement was likely due to the interference of an interest group or political lobby who wanted to over-inflate student fees or flog textbooks.

Those questions were more interesting to contemplate than the rest of the class lecture, which detailed the Ministry's progressive tax rate on goblin-manufactured artefacts.

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Peanut died on the second day of the Christmas holidays.

Tom checked on Peanut each morning before he went to class, so it wasn't unexpected for him to open the shoebox one day and see a dead rat instead of a live one.

He took the velvet wrapping cloth that his Christmas present from Lestrange had come in—the gift had been a silver cloak brooch in the shape of a snake, with matching cuff buttons, which could be used to pin back one's robe sleeves to leave the hands free for duelling—and folded it around the stiff, curled body of the rat. The rat went back into the shoebox, which was then covered with the lid.

Tom put on his winter cloak, gloves, and scarf, striding through the empty hallways without passing a single student; even the portraits were still asleep at this hour of the morning. Up and out of the dungeons he went, and into the freezing air of a Highland dawn.

The grounds were white with snow, the Forest silently ominous, the footing on the carved stone steps down to the edge of the Lake slick and treacherous. Drifts had gathered on the frozen surface of the water. Other than the whistle of the wind and the clatter of an unsecured shutter in the nearby boathouse, there were no other sounds to disturb the solemn occasion of Tom's first proper funeral.

He had seen dead bodies before, of course.

The victims of industrial accidents or traffic collisions, the occasional corpse fished out of the murky depths of Regent's canal, the youngest children of the orphanage, who were the most susceptible to
pneumonia or pertussis. Outside the orphanage, he'd heard talk of suicides committed by underemployed men fallen on hard times, and fallen women who chose death over disgrace. But these were people whose passing hadn't warranted a service or a grave marker; most of them hadn't even gotten a coffin, only a bedsheet and a hole in the ground shared with a few other random bodies, an arrangement that came at the generosity of the local borough council.

When he was younger, he'd wondered if that was where his mother had ended up. He didn't even know her name—the little he knew of his parentage was limited to his given name and surname, and the speculations he'd made over the years: that his special "talents" were hereditary, that there was a good explanation for his father being absent at Tom's birth and Tom's mother's death, and that his looks had to have come from somewhere.

None of that mattered now that Tom knew he was a wizard, and was old enough not to need parents anymore; he possessed the skills to earn his own keep and manage his own household. He had made his own memories worth preserving, and they were leagues above the idle daydreams of things that had no basis in reality, no matter how hard he'd wished for them to be true when he was five years old and trying to drown out the sound of other orphans coughing themselves to sleep.

But back to the funeral—

What did people even say at funerals?

Tom's experience with funerals had been in seeing them at a distance when the orphans had gone to church and he'd passed mourners in black on the way out. He hadn't been inside a church since... 1937. By that time, he'd been old and well-read enough to debate theology with the matron, and instead of trying to argue with him, she'd given up and let him spend his Sunday mornings how he wanted to.

(Perhaps she couldn't contemplate sharing an eternal afterlife with Tom Riddle, after a lifetime of dealing with him in the mortal plane of existence. Or perhaps she'd convinced herself that, being paid to clothe and feed young children, the same duty of care did not extend to ensuring their spiritual well-being. If Tom himself didn't care about it, why should anyone else?)

Tom decided to do things his own way. It had always worked before.

"Incendio!"

The shoebox caught on fire, and quickly, before his hands began to burn, Tom slid it over the ice, skidding ten, twenty, thirty feet away from the shoreline before friction took hold of it brought it to a stop.

The box burned over the ice, red flames over white. The sun rose slowly above a jagged line of white-capped hills. Tom stood on the icy shoreline and watched the rising pillar of grey smoke, reminded of the day two years ago when he had set a wardrobe on fire. He had confronted his fears, and he'd destroyed them. He'd learned from that, and he'd learned from this as well: physical existence was frail and limited, but knowledge and information persisted beyond that.

Peanut was dead, and the years of training were lost for good. But in Tom that knowledge lived on; he remembered how to find his way through all the winding passages and dead-ends and dusty storerooms of the dungeons. He'd learned how to subdue animals with a thought. And he'd recognised that unquestioned devotion—loyalty unto death—was a gift that couldn't be bought.
Tom cast a warming charm over his cloak and pulled his scarf tighter around his throat, watching the ice melt in a circle around the charred box. Eventually, the ice thinned and the blackened remnants of velvet and cardboard plopped into the freezing water.

When it was done, he turned back to the castle, climbing the two hundred stone stairs up the rocky face of Hogwarts’ foundations. Entering the grounds proper, he noticed a figure emerging from the treeline of the Forbidden Forest. A large figure, too big to be a student, wearing a cloak with the hood pulled low.

Tom held back and watched.

Heavy, lumbering footsteps, something small and lumpy swinging from each of the figure's hands. In the soughing wind, the flutter of the cloak revealed inner robes in school uniform black... lined with red.

A student.

But not just any student—this had to be the one student that members of his House called the ‘Half-Breed Oaf’, because if there was anything worse than a wizard who didn't meet their standards for blood, it was a wizard who needed a hyphen to accurately describe his species.

This particular student was the bane of the mixed Slytherin-Gryffindor Potions classes, someone Professor Slughorn tried to avoid, because from one glance he knew that Rubeus Hagrid would never be worthy of The Shelf. Even Tom Riddle, the penniless outcast of Slytherin, despite the unfortunate circumstances of his upbringing having prevented him being told of his magical status, had in his First Year won the praise of his all his teachers by the end of his first term. To Tom, it was proof that wizards and witches weren't inherently equal by dint of having magic.

Tom decided to follow Hagrid. The Forbidden Forest was off-limits to students—there had to be an explanation for the oaf's breaking of school rules. And wasn't upholding student discipline Tom's duty, as one of the few Prefects who'd remained at school for the holidays?

Realising that wearing black in the snow was rather conspicuous, Tom concentrated on casting a Disillusionment Charm, which was a N.E.W.T. level spell for a reason—holding it for long periods could be tiring; it made the camouflage effect fade from near-invisibility and reduced one's extremities to blurry dark shadows. Wizards who wanted to perform hidden surveillance for hours at a time would do better with items enchanted with concealment spells, like Invisibility Cloaks.

Hagrid entered the castle, Tom following at a reasonable distance, the snow dried off his clothes with a quick application of the steam charm, his shoes Silenced against tapping on the stone floors. From up close, he could see that Hagrid carried dead rabbits in his enormous hands.

I hope he's not going to eat them, thought Tom, who had heard in the Slytherin Common Room that Hagrid was half troll.

Hagrid stopped at the door of a broom closet on the Second Floor, one of the many hiding places Tom had discovered back in his First Year. He unlocked the door with his wand, looked both ways down the hallway—missing Tom, who was holding his Disillusionment without an issue—then slipped into the closet. The door shut behind him.

Tom waited.
Two minutes passed, then five.

He began reciting the major grammatical cases of Latin, then moved to translating short sentences in his head.

*You await the oaf. I am waiting for the oaf. He waited for the oaf.*

After ten minutes, the door creaked open, Hagrid's head popping out to check the hallway again—*nothing to see, move on*—before he locked the door and went up the nearest staircase, not looking back. The dead rabbits were gone.

Tom waited for a minute, then began to cast Silencing Charms on the door, which unlocked with a simple *Alohomora.*

He entered the room, locking the door after him, not knowing what to expect. He raised his wand, tip alight with a non-verbal *Lumos.*

A dusty cupboard, bare shelves on the side with a few empty bottles of furniture polish and cauldron de-greasing potions, their labels faded and unreadable. A dirty mop and a dustpan missing the brush lay on the floor. He identified a strange smell that wasn't the herbal, astringent scent of cleaning solutions; there was also a metallic whiff of spilled blood, and then something earthy and stale and organic, reminding him of the nest of baby mice Mrs. Cole had once found in the back of the linen pantry.

At the back of the cupboard was a school trunk, wooden with battered brass latches. Tom could hear a soft tapping from within, and a scraping sound like fingernails being dragged slowly over a chalkboard.

*What has Hagrid done?*

Tom didn't think it was a boggart—they weren't living beings, so they didn't need proper food. And it was obvious that Hagrid had fed whatever it was inside the trunk those dead rabbits.

Tom pointed his wand at the trunk and with a well-aimed Banishing Charm shoved open the lid.

The thing inside the trunk had eight eyes, all of them gleaming in the light shed by Tom's wand.

"Hagrid?" it spoke in a quiet, wheezing voice, with a peculiar whistling quality to it, like a flautist at the end of holding a long note.

"*Stupefy!*"

Tom cast a Stunner with as much power behind it as he could, then slammed the lid of the trunk shut, binding the latches with a Sticking Charm and a jinx against unlocking charms. After a second's thought, he layered on a few anchored Silencing and Feather-Weight Charms. They wouldn't be permanent unless he enchanted the trunk with carved runes in the Arithmantically circumscribed locations—but he wasn't in the right state of mind right now to sit down and ponder the finer details of planar geometry.

That *thing* was a spider. A spider the size of a large cat.

Hagrid had a *baby Acromantula.*
Tom's first question was where Hagrid had gotten it.

Tom took Care of Magical Creatures; it had seemed the most useful class subject out of his remaining elective options, which were Divination and Muggle Studies. He'd read the textbook, and knew that Acromantulas were native to the Malay Archipelago, could live for decades, grew ten feet wide, and produced a highly toxic venom that was used in rare potions.

His second—*who on Earth thought it was a good idea to give or sell an Acromantula to a Hogwarts student?*

Hagrid was a Third Year, with less than four months' experience with the Care of Magical Creatures curriculum. He might have been a six-and-a-half-foot-tall oaf whose uniforms had to be fitted on him with an *Engorgio* or two, but he only had a couple of years of magical training under his belt. He was an idiot, but he was also a *child*.

What was Hagrid doing with an Acromantula? Was it supposed to be a pet, because he found the standard list of Hogwarts approved pets to be either boring or useless?

Then the third question dropped, and Tom's thoughts took a different direction.

*If I had an Acromantula, what would I have done with it?*

The parts could be useful as potions ingredients, he knew. A fresh specimen, even a small one like this juvenile here, could be sold on the black market for dozens of galleons. The summer Tom had spent in The Hog's Head had educated him on the trade of magical artefacts, imported animal parts, and Muggle-made luxuries like cigars and fine artwork—things the Ministry of Magic didn't approve of due to the implicit suggestion that some wizard middleman out there was skirting the Statute of Secrecy and defrauding innocent Muggles.

Tom was aware that the venom was the most valuable part, and like the golden eggs laid by a golden goose, killing it would cut off the supply.

But while money was nice, it was only a means to an end. Tom wouldn't mind being rich, but piles of gold only mattered inasmuch as it could provide for his essential needs and comforts while allowing him the freedom to pursue his higher objectives.

Namely, studying magic and becoming a powerful wizard.

Here was where the Acromantula could be *very* useful in pursuing his studies.

Acromantulas, as he'd read in the books, and had witnessed just now, were capable of speech and reason. They were *sentient*.

But they were also *creatures*, which meant that the legal protections which applied to wizards, witches, and various humanoid magical species like Veelas, didn't apply to them.

Tom had never had a sentient creature to try his mind control powers on before, and the incident he'd had with Nott in the bathroom had stirred his curiosity on what else he was capable of. He didn't dare try it again with Nott, not until he knew more about what he was doing. He remembered killing his first few rats with aneurysms when he'd pushed too hard. People would surely notice if Nott ended up brain-damaged. Nott wasn't as dull and feckless as Avery; he did well in academics, and
his father was a well-known author and genealogist who had close connections to all the old families of wizarding society.

Using Nott was too risky to be worth the trouble.

(He made no acknowledgement of the promise that Hermione had squeezed out of him back in First Year, when he'd agreed not to experiment on other students.)

The Acromantula it was, then.

This was the perfect opportunity, anyway. No one would be harmed, except for maybe Hagrid's feelings—but then again, it was his own fault for bringing a dangerous creature into the castle and trying to hide it in a room that could be unlocked with a First Year charm. He shouldn't have had an Acromantula; it was only Tom's Prefectorial responsibility to confiscate it, the same as he would have done for any student caught with Dungbombs in his pocket.

His mind made up, Tom transfigured the dustpan into a trunk similar to the one holding the Acromantula, scratching up the interior with a few thoughtfully placed Severing Charms. He broke the lock on the left side of the trunk and placed it on the floor, eyeing the two of them side by side. They weren't exactly identical, but student trunks only came in one standard size and shape. One was pretty much like any other, once you took off the luggage tags, custom engraving, and personalised stickers. He then cast a Disillusionment Charm on the original trunk and levitated it out of the room, leaving the fake one open on the floor. He didn't lock the door when he left; let Hagrid believe that his own stupidity and incompetence had allowed the escape of his pet spider.

How did anyone expect to keep a sentient beast as a pet and not expect it to figure out a way to escape?

(Keeping it as a pet was a whole different situation than keeping it as a captive. The person who did the latter was more inclined to take the proper precautions with what the textbook classified as a wild beast known to be capable of killing trained adult wizards.)

Tom brought the trunk into lowest levels of the dungeons, cold year-round and freezing in the winter. Few students explored this far down, and of the few, most of them were Slytherins who were either lost due to unfamiliarity with the castle (First Years) or lost their way due to ordering too many glasses of Firewhiskey on a trip to Hogsmeade (Seventh Years).

He found a storeroom that held folded piles of moth-eaten tapestries and began cleaning it up, Vanishing the dust and steam cleaning the salvageable fabric. He cast warming charms and ignited the sconces with magical fire, and when he was finished, he set the trunk on the floor and pointed his wand at the latches.

The spider uncurled its hairy limbs and clicked its mandibles.

"You're not Hagrid," it said. "Where is Hagrid?"

"He's not coming back," Tom replied. "From now on I'll be the one bringing you food."

The mandibles clicked some more. "Why did Hagrid leave?"

"It doesn't matter anymore," Tom told it. "You'll soon forget about him."
"But I wa—" it began in its soft, piping voice.

"Petrificus Totalus."

When the spider was frozen stiff—not Stunned; Tom's mind magic didn't work well on an unconscious subject—Tom dropped to his knees and gazed into the shiny black marbles of the Acromantula's eyes.

Willpower was the key to any magic, and Tom had discovered this form of it before he even knew what magic was. He could have pulled out the distributive tables from the back of his Arithmancy textbooks and tried to jury-rig his own spell with a calculated pattern of wand flicks, and a Greco-Latin incantation with the right meter and syllable count. Perhaps he could combine several words, like Mental-Spectate or Psyche-Perception. It would have been the formal method for focusing magical intent if there was no pre-existing spell to use.

Or he could do as he'd done from the age of six years old: use his power and raw intent to infiltrate someone's consciousness. He'd used it in the past to hurt people when they deserved it, or persuade them to do things that he wanted, but the most useful function it had served was to show him the integrity of their character. He always, always knew when people lied to him.

Now it seemed he could do more than gauge their trustworthiness.

He'd seen what lay in Nott's mind.

Tom couldn't tell if it had been Nott's thoughts or his memories, but he knew there was more to it.

And if he'd done it once, he could do it again, replicate the circumstances and direct the precise intent, just as he'd done when he forced the truth out of anyone who dared tell him a lie.

Let me see. Show me!

A great pressure began to form behind his sinuses, a growing strain that made his eyes water and his eyelids twitch.

Then he blinked and his vision had gone blurry; he could hardly see his surroundings—they'd dissolved into a featureless mass, unidentifiable with the exception of the strange, drooping black lump in front of him that stirred the air with its flapping wings and its loud, puffing breaths. This thing was warm and fleshy, just as his Hagrid was, but it wasn't Hagrid—nor was it weak; his instincts had designated it as one to be wary of, a greater predator despite how ungainly it was in its movements, dragging along the ground in clumsy motions that could be felt through the sensory hairs lining the lower segments of his—

Hold on a moment there...

Sensory hairs?

Tom pulled himself back, rubbing his eyes. His vision swam back into its normal state.

What was that?

I think I just saw into the spider's mind, and through its eyes, Tom concluded. This... this has promise.
If only it wasn't so unpleasant to see the world through eight eyes and smell it through a million strands of leg hair. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad once he'd gotten used to it.

Tom stunned the spider and locked it back in the trunk when it was time to go to lunch. He had two weeks of Christmas holidays left; there was no reason why he had to rush his research now.

He might run into complications once the holidays ended and the school term resumed, since the spider needed to be fed regularly if he wanted to keep it alive and in relative good health.

But Tom was a Prefect now, and although Prefects could travel the castle how they liked, most patrols were assigned to the areas around their own House Common Rooms, as they were the places where one could most frequently catch students out of hours. Ravenclaw Prefects, according to what he'd seen on Hermione's patrol schedule, were assigned to the eastern wing of the castle, including the Astronomy Tower, which was reputed to be a romantic place to view the sunset.

As a Slytherin Prefect, he had a reasonable justification if he was found wandering around the dungeons late at night.

Tom decided that having a Prefect badge wasn't as terrible as he thought it would be.

Chapter End Notes

— If it wasn't made clear, Nott is buttmad that Tom brought a girl into the Boys' Club, and she is going to ruin everything like Yoko did to the Beatles. He kind of has a point there, because Tom does give uneven treatment, and is an unreliable narrator. (I hope this is clear in the differences between Hermione's PoV chapters.)

— "Did you know that the mind control spell is only illegal when used on an unconsenting human being?" —Tom, Chapter 9. I mentioned (in various reader comments, don't know if you guys read through them) that the Canon CoS plot wouldn't go the same way in BoaF. Things that aren't butterflied by the AU will make an appearance.

— On Tom and Hermione: My interpretation of Tom (and how I've written him in BoaF) is that he's mostly aromantic. He enjoys validation from other people (special treatment, acknowledgement for being the best), and spending time with Hermione, but he doesn't necessarily need to be in a romantic relationship to have that. Of course, these labels and definitions didn't exist in the 1930's, so Tom has trouble articulating his feelings. I also believe that if Tom felt attraction to another human being, it wouldn't be in the same way of boys in his age group, because they are filthy peons and he is not. He wouldn't be interested in period-typical pin-up girls; instead he'd be attracted to power and intelligence first, and physical attributes second. Not the size of a gal's milkducts, but the size of her brain!!! (Or a fixation on some other body part, maybe.)

I've seen fics where Tom sleazes it up with half the girls in his year, and it doesn't jive with how I view his character as a neurotic, narcissistic nerd with daddy/mummy/everything issues.
If you've seen the meme: "**While you were having pre-marital intercourse, I was mastering the blockchain deepest mysteries of magic!**"

Feel free to share your own opinion on this.  "_(_Y)_⁄"
1943

Hermione showed Mr. Pacek her study planner when she went home for the Christmas holidays.

It wasn't the prettiest planner she'd ever seen, as she'd bought it from a Muggle stationers' for less than two shillings. The ones the girls in her classes owned looked nicer, embossed with prancing unicorns in silver foil, or bound in richly dyed dragon hide; those ones were heat and potion resistant, for any girl who did her homework on the same desk where she charmed her hair or concealed her spots. Hers hadn't come with any novelty features, but she didn't really want an automatically updating moon phase chart, not as much as she needed discretion and privacy.

"What do you think of it?" asked Hermione. "I don't suppose it's something someone would pay for, is it?"

Mr. Pacek opened the cover and inspected the bindings, drawing his wand along the seams. "It is certainly functional... and inconspicuous."

"I used the information you sent me on redirection wards," she said. "I thought that the best thing to do was to not draw anyone's attention in the first place. Do you think you could break the enchantment?"

"It is not a matter of if I could, but how long it would take." Mr. Pacek stroked his goatee and tapped the spine of the study planner with his wand. "I could tear the cover open and counter your runework with my own, or I could try the faster route and cast an overpowered *Finite*, which has a good chance of destroying the object before any information can be retrieved. Which brings to relevance the concept of ancillary effects: self-destruct mechanisms and tampering indicators. Rather harmless defensive techniques, but *offensive* warding and enchantment crosses over into the realm of dark curses—which I presume would bear little interest to you. And of course, they are not undetectable by your school authorities."

"I don't want to risk destroying it..." Hermione said reluctantly. "It's not as if I spent ages on writing out the rune sequences—I know I could create another planner if I had to, maybe a new one for next year—but all my research notes are in there. And I can't just... just destroy them."

Hermione's conscience shuddered at the prospect of destroying a book. Yes, it was a planner, not a rare manuscript with illuminated calligraphy, and yes, she'd tossed her fair share of essay drafts in the past. But destroying something that resembled a book in all ways, and contained valuable information as all books did... Well, it felt close to blasphemous to her.

"Have you read much on the subject of magical linkage?"

"Linkages? Isn't that what they use to make Vanishing Cabinets?" she asked. She'd read about magical inventions a few years ago, when she was looking into Mastery programs and what the requirements were to complete one. Those Cabinets could revolutionise magical communication if they weren't so expensive and time-consuming to build. But it took a skilled artisan weeks to create
a single pair, and wizards of that calibre were so few and far between that the Muggle concept of the assembly line just would not be feasible.

"That, and a number of other inventions. Magical mirrors and windows—my personal specialty—enchanted lighting systems, alarm systems. In fact, I had a classmate at Durmstrang who carried a fob watch linked to one of the bell towers of Kraków, on which he had to place a Silencing Charm because it would ring the hour, every hour," said Mr. Pacek, his eyes glazing over in fond reminiscence. "Enchanted linkages are very practical, and very versatile. I had the thought that you might create a secondary book, linked to your original one, so that whatever was written on one would appear on the other—and if you had to destroy it, the copy would remain."

"Oh, that's something I'd like to learn more about!" Hermione's expression brightened up considerably.

Practical, _useful_ magics were what interested her the most about the magical world, in stark contrast to Tom's preference for obscure spells with grand effects. She considered practical spells the wizarding world's equivalent of the Muggle world's industrial mechanisation; their existence meant that seven people out of every ten were not forced by the needs of society to spend their entire lives labouring on farms.

It was this type of magic that gave witches certain freedoms that women in the Muggle world were still fighting to achieve. Witches had career opportunities outside of the home, as magic made it so household tasks were not the sole dominion of any one sex. Although witches and women alike _were_ still under the expectation that they would do their duty to, ahem, propagate the species. (Hermione had decided to be as scientific about it as possible; Hogwarts didn't have a biology class, as they expected students' parents to inform them on these things—so she had no idea what terms wizards used, or even if magic made wizards a separate subspecies from Muggles.)

"After dinner, I hope," said Mr. Pacek, rubbing his stomach. "I believe I can hear Madam Granger's treacle-glazed ham calling my name."

At dinner, Hermione's Dad carved the ham, which was crispy and studded with cloves on the outside, and on the inside, savoury and tender. Mum served the roasted potatoes, and Hermione poured herself a glass of milk.

"Will Tom be joining us during the summer?" Mum asked, after everyone had finished passing around the plates and figuring out which pair of tongs went with which dish, because cross-contamination was gross. Nobody liked cauliflower in their chutney.

"Where did he end up going last summer?" said Dad, uncorking a bottle of wine for the adults.

"Oh," said Hermione, who wasn't expecting Tom Riddle to come up as a topic of conversation during her family's Christmas dinner. "Um. He got a job in the village near the school. He lived there instead of going back to Wool's."

"A job that paid enough for board?" asked Dad, a hint of disapproval in his tone. "Or did the employer provide lodgings? He's your age; he must have been fifteen at the time! You should have invited him to stay with us—it'd be safer here than out there with no proper guardianship. You don't know what sort of people out there are willing to take advantage of a young boy."

"I did offer!" said Hermione. "But he refused it. And it worked out alright for him, which means that he'll want to do it again next summer."
"If Tom wants to work, we can't tell him otherwise," said Mum, the voice of reason. "We aren't his parents. And I think having some sort of work experience in the summer wouldn't do him any harm. Hermione, have you thought of doing the same thing?"

"Taking on a job, you mean?" Hermione frowned, fork hovering halfway to her mouth. "But where? At the clinic?"

"Well, darling, when you were younger, you'd always seemed so interested in pursuing medicine," said Mum. "And you've only a few years left at Hogwarts. When you finish, and if you decide to stay in London, we could find you a place at the clinic, and if you wanted to enroll in a university, we'd help you there as well. With the war the way it is, taking a job on the reserved occupations list would meet the National Service requirements."

"The holiday is only ten weeks. I'm not sure I could do much good there—by the time I've gotten the hang of how to keep the books or operate the switchboard, you'd have to find someone to replace me."

"Then there are a few charity events during the summer I'm sure we can find time for," said Mum, who could be just as stubborn as Hermione when she'd found a cause worth supporting. The letters she'd sent Hermione during the school year had indicated that Mum had taken an interest in veterans' affairs, because soldiers who'd made it out as well as her father had were in the minority.

"We don't mind if you want to study for your Hogwarts exams during your holidays, but it would do you some good to get out of the house now and then," she continued, eyeing Hermione's winter skin and her faded freckles. "Your father's old army group has a fundraising evening that you might be interested in—there'll be specialists in attendance, and it'll be a good chance to ask them about career opportunities. And to introduce yourself, too."

"There'll be a pathologist. And a few chemists," Dad offered. "If you like the idea of research more than practice, it would be a good place to ask. I'm just a general practitioner, after all."

"You're not just a G.P.," replied Hermione adamantly. "You're my dad! Of course I'll go—I haven't made any firm decisions about what kind of career I want after Hogwarts, but it wouldn't hurt to learn more about my options."

"If you want to pursue an occupation in the Muggle world," Mr. Pacek suggested, tapping his wand to the half-drained bottle of wine to refill it, "I recommend that you make your connections as early as possible. Once you have your foot in the door, so to speak, you may find it easier to keep it there if the war ends and the soldiers return en masse looking for work of their own."

"He's right," Dad agreed. "Veterans were and are given preferential treatment; it was for that reason that I didn't challenge the recruitment office when they sent me my papers last time. I knew that if I'd tried for the Non-Combatant Corps—the service that the pacifists and objectors were sent to—it would be on my records and I'd have had a great deal of trouble applying at hospitals afterwards to finish my training."

"And then we'd never have met," added Mum, smiling at Dad.

Dad looked at Mum. Mum looked at Dad, and then they seemed to be communicating across the table without saying a single word; the conversation had suddenly and without warning drawn to a standstill.
Hermione busied herself with her baked carrots. It wasn't like it was embarrassing. They weren't doing anything but exchange glances over the platter of glazed ham.

But it was remarkably intimate, and some part of Hermione hoped that one day she would find someone who looked at her the way Dad looked at Mum.

When the holidays ended and term resumed, it was as if all the students who had been relaxed in the beginning of the year had remembered that they had exams in less than six months' time. The library was crowded, the professors' supplementary books missing off the shelves and reserved for weeks; even trying to track down and buy the books by owl order was met by apologies from the booksellers, who were back-ordered for months. It hadn't bothered Hermione, as she'd asked for and read through the recommendations list back in September.

On top of that, there was also a spontaneous string of emotional outbursts where a student would burst into tears at the dining table or in the middle of a class lesson, and soon you'd have three or four people follow suit.

Hermione didn't feel that she was particularly equipped to deal with this sort of issue, Prefect or not. She'd resorted to handing them off to the Hospital Wing for a Calming Draught, and conjuring handkerchiefs when she spotted the first signs of tears. She wasn't the best person to come to for emotional counsel; she tended to approach problems—other people's and her own—from such a logical perspective that she came off as unsympathetic.

(What was she going to tell them, anyway? "If you'd started your exam revision last year, you wouldn't be crying on the floor of the girls' bathroom today"?)

One of the few places where she felt like she could study productively was in Tom's homework club.

The members, for the most part, were the children of wealthy and prominent wizarding families, so they didn't treat their exam marks as the sole entry or barrier to their future careers. Of course, good marks in school were never a bad thing, but they were all Slytherins, so they were aware that perfect marks weren't the only means of getting them where they wanted. And being Slytherins, Professor Slughorn was going to be writing them a glowing recommendation letter when they left Hogwarts, no matter how they did.

Hermione couldn't quite bring herself to approve of their lackadaisical attitude toward academics, but there was something appealing about being able to study in a place where her fellow students weren't trying to make studying a competition. In the Ravenclaw Common Room, she'd heard people bragging about studying twelve hours straight and going to class in the morning with only three hours of sleep and a pot of tea brewed as thick as tar. That sort of thing was unhealthy and only served to fuel her exam anxiety.
True to his word, Tom had moved from practical Defense wandwork to textbook theory, and on the prompting of the study group's members who needed help with their homework, to Charms and Transfiguration theory.

"—You can turn a needle into a matchstick, but there are reasons why you—by that, I mean you in the individual sense—can't just transfigure that matchstick into a broomstick."

Avery scratched his head. "But they're both made of wood. Isn't Transfiguring like to like supposed to make the result more stable?"

"Transfigurations are dependent on other factors as well, not just how alike one object is to another," explained Tom, who in trying to simplify the fundamentals of magic that he'd read and understood from First Year, looked like he was getting closer and closer to tearing out his hair. "Apart from structural affinities, the stability and longevity of Transfigurations are also determined by magical power, intent, visualisation, and mass."

"But we Transfigured cups into cushions in class," said Avery, "and they aren't the same size."

"It's not just size—it's mass," Tom answered. "Or more specifically, mass and gravimetric density."

"What's density?"

Tom stared blankly at Avery for a moment, before he schooled his features, shut his textbook, and walked to the door of the classroom.

"Tom?" said Hermione, watching him reach for the door handle. "Where are you going?"

"I'm taking a walk. If you could finish the review of Chapter Six while I'm gone, I'd more than appreciate it."

"Aren't you coming back?"

"Probably not," Tom admitted, giving her an apologetic shrug. "Teaching Remedial Transfiguration is like being stuck in a revolving door, only without the door. I'll see you next week, alright?"

Hermione sighed. "This is your study club."

"The ultimate goal is to get an Acceptable or above on the exam. I could easily tell them how to answer the questions, and write an essay for them to memorise verbatim, but I'm sure that it would go against the spirit of academic integrity," said Tom, his brows furrowed in an expression of earnest concern. "But you care about their educations, don't you?"

"Fine," she conceded, rolling her eyes. "But you'll tell Selwyn that you're going to take my curfew patrols for next week."

"Deal," said Tom, leaning closer to whisper in her ear without being overheard. "Don't hesitate to be harsh on them if you need to; sometimes you have to take a firm hand if you want something done right."

Tom left, and Hermione, with some amount of reluctance, resumed the review session on Inanimate Transfigurations.
In dealing with those of 'lesser ability', a diplomatic way to call it, she had more patience than Tom, who grew frustrated when other people couldn't grasp abstract concepts as quickly or as intuitively as he did. Tom was used to being the fastest to complete his classwork during lessons, and had long since designated everyone else, with the exception of Hermione, as his intellectual inferior; he therefore considered it a waste of time to continue teaching them a concept if they struggled to learn it.

Hermione didn't give up quite so easily. She commiserated with these pureblood wizards who had never gone to primary school before starting Hogwarts, which was not far removed from Hermione's never having heard of the wizarding world before the delivery of her Hogwarts letter and her subsequent cultural immersion. It was only reasonable that they should be unfamiliar with modern scientific concepts that Tom and Hermione had studied as children. Their Muggle educations had instilled in them basic skills in logical thinking. It made Transfiguration, one of the most systematic of magical disciplines, easier for them than those brought up in the wizarding world, where logic was an option and not a necessity.

So she stayed and tutored the Slytherin boys, who were uncomfortable with her at first—to her relief, they didn't make any comment about her blood status—and by the end of the session, had stopped gawking at her like she was a talking monkey. Perhaps they were intimidated by witches, or a witch lacking a magical pedigree who was clearly better at magic than they were. Or perhaps they were unused to someone who showed no sign of intimidation or condescension in her interactions with them; as patient as Tom had tried to be, he couldn't hide all traces of disdain directed at the people with whom he'd shared a dormitory for the last four and a half years.

Slytherin really was an unpleasant place, or so Hermione thought. But at least the Slytherins didn't hold Tom's condescension against him. It appeared that snobbery and élitism were the natural course of things over there, so to them it was shocking for Hermione not to disparage any club member who worked at a slower pace than the others.

She called it a success when she'd gotten everyone to complete their Transfiguration homework without leaving a single question blank. And she called it progress when they called her "Granger" without drawing out the syllables in an annoying sarcastic drawl, because that was apparently how Slytherins were taught to greet students of other Houses.

When the other boys had packed up their books and gone to dinner, Hermione went to wipe the chalkboard clean of her wand movement diagrams. Nott, who had lingered in putting away his parchments, came up to the front desk.

"Granger," said Nott, eyes darting from side to side to ensure there was no one left, "I need to talk to you."

"Is this about Transfiguration?" asked Hermione. "Because you managed it well enough in class; I don't think I can give you any advice, unless you want recommendations for supplementary reading."

"It's not about the exams," he said, his voice lowered to a hiss. "It's about Riddle."

"What about him?"

The way Nott was looking at her was... suspicious. She didn't trust him; she'd noticed him looking at her and Tom oddly from before the Christmas holidays. She'd assumed that as a Slytherin, and one who believed that a witch or wizard's blood status was directly correlated to their worth as a person,
her friendship with Tom was some kind of rare spectacle. To outsiders, Tom was a very competitive person, and on the duelling platform, she'd been told he was ruthless, aggressive, and pushed the boundaries of what the rules called 'reasonable force', while Hermione was a goody two-shoes who, outside of class, was quiet and slightly awkward and could be found in the Hogwarts library more often than not.

They made strange companions, for anyone—*which was everyone*—who didn't know them like they knew each other.

"You can't trust him," Nott said, clutching his wand so hard that his knuckles had turned white. "Riddle's not the perfect Prefect everyone thinks he is. He's... dangerous."

Hermione glared at him. "Look here, just because Tom beat you in the Duelling Club doesn't mean you have to be sore about it—"

"He's a *Legilimens!*" snapped Nott.

There was a moment of silence.

"He's a what—?"

"Honestly, Granger," said Nott with a sneer, "you spend all your time with your nose in a book, and yet you're still so hopelessly ignorant."

"Not everyone has access to private family libraries," Hermione countered, folding her arms across her chest defensively. "Just tell me what it means."

"It comes from the Latin root *Legere*, which in the infinitive case means 'read', combined with *Mentis*—"

"—Tom Riddle reads minds," Hermione finished for him.

Nott's eyes widened, and for a second or so, his jaw hung slack. He quickly collected himself and remarked, "I see that it's not news to you."

"Um. Sorry," said Hermione. "Should it be?"

She'd seen Tom do magic—back then she'd thought it was telepathy—at the age of ten years old. He'd called it mind control, and it was how she'd thought of it too, and she'd been afraid of it. In imposing his will over hers, there was nothing she considered more invasive; it was the removal of her personal autonomy; it was a profound violation of self.

Mr. Pacek had called Tom's ability a unique form of magical perception, without using that word that Nott had just dropped, *Legilimens*. Mr. Pacek had told her that meditation would help her counter Tom's unique persuasive abilities, advising her on techniques that she had made a good attempt to practise over the years. But her mind was not a calm and tranquil place; Hermione often found it difficult to sleep due to all the thoughts buzzing around when her eyes were closed. She kept her planner on her nightstand in case she came up with an idea that she wanted to study later.

She admitted that she wasn't as good at meditation as she wanted to be—but there had been no urgent reason to prioritise it over her extracurricular projects. Tom hadn't tried anything since the beginning of First Year. She knew he could tell when people lied to him, so she made sure to never
do it in front of him; she had gotten decent at deflection and omission, and when she'd looked him in the eye while doing sums in her head, he had made no indication of ever being suspicious of her.

If she took the time to think about it, she trusted Tom.

He'd learned to restrain himself over the years. She knew he wasn't a perfect Prefect—but then again, neither was she. And she knew that he could be dangerous—but everyone who owned a wand had the potential to be dangerous. That Tom was skilled and magically powerful didn't automatically make him dangerous, or a danger to society. And it certainly didn't make him untrustworthy.

Hermione was suddenly reminded of that incident with her dorm mate Siobhan Kilmuir, who had accused Tom of being a cheater, back in Second Year. Siobhan had been correct, but she hadn't had solid proof other than hearsay, and Hermione had defended Tom.

And here was Nott, accusing Tom of... of being a mind reader?

Evidence or no, it wouldn't change the fact that Tom did possess some sort of magical control over minds.

She didn't know what to do now. Deny it, and cover for Tom? Or try to get more information out of Nott? He, very irritatingly, had access to resources that Hermione didn't.

"It doesn't matter," said Nott. "So. You know. How did you find out? Did he...?"

"That's none of your business."

"Yes," said Nott, who hadn't put his wand away. "It is. Don't you know what it means?"

"Since I'm so 'hopelessly ignorant', why don't you enlighten me?" said Hermione irritably, sliding her hand into her robe pocket.

"Riddle's, what, fifteen? Sixteen? And already he's a Legilimens of uncommon power, which suggests that he's been trained for years by a master, which I know he hasn't," said Nott, rattling off facts while pacing back and forth in front of the chalkboard. "I remember his first days here, when he was Slytherin's mis-Sorted Mudblood boy, with his second-hand books and his cast-off robes, his grubby Muggle name. No one would have looked at him twice, much less taught him something as valuable as Legilimency.

"The other explanation is that he didn't have a teacher—that he didn't need to be taught. From that, I surmise that he possesses some natural propensity to the art," Nott muttered, and whether he was talking to himself or Hermione, she couldn't tell. "A gift of the blood. Inherited magic—magical heredity—his name is Riddle; he's a Mudblood... unless he's not."

Nott stopped in his tracks. "Granger, what do you know of Riddle's family?"

"Why don't you ask him yourself?" Hermione spoke with unconcealed ill-temper; she was growing increasingly uncomfortable with Nott's impertinence and presumptuous manner. She was familiar enough with wizarding culture to be fully aware of what kind of language was considered acceptable in or out of mixed company, and Nott was completely out of line. She was within her rights to put him in detention, but that would mean sitting in a classroom with him for hours at a time... and his presence right now was more than too much.
"Because he doesn't like me. He'd start asking me why I'm asking him questions," said Nott, trying and failing to hide a wince. "But for some unfathomable reason, which I cannot account for at all," and here he looked pointedly in Hermione's direction, "—he likes you. Surely you could get information out of him."

"Surely," Hermione repeated in a flat voice, rolling her eyes.

Nott continued, ignoring her. "All you'd have to do is undo the top two buttons on your blouse and lean over a desk; Riddle wouldn't be able to resist—"

Hermione had had enough of him. She drew her wand and pointed it at him. "Flipendo! Expelliarmus!"

Nott, who hadn't been paying attention, smacked into the chalkboard, wand flying out of his hand and into hers.

She hesitated for the briefest moment, then twisted her wand into the curl-and-flick she'd practised in her parents' cellar during the summer. "Confundo!"

Nott slid down to the floor, back to the wall, chalk dust raining down over his shoulders. His eyes were bleary and unfocused.

"Why are you so obsessed with Tom?" asked Hermione, bending over him, his wand held tightly in her left hand, and her own wand pointed at his chest.

"Because... because he thinks he's perfect," Nott said dazedly, his words slurring together. "Perfect Prefect Riddle. Sluggy thinks he's the second coming of Merlin. Edmond-bloody-Lestrange would cut off his lopsided left foot if Riddle told him to. Does anyone else see it? Has everyone but me gone completely mental? Am I the only one?!"

"Why does it even matter?"

"Because he's a Mudblood!" Nott shouted, spit flying out of his mouth.

Hermione leaned back, grimacing.

Nott spoke again, his voice lower, barely above a whisper. "It doesn't make any sense."

Her anger dissipated; all she could feel for Nott now was pity. He made a pathetic sight, slumped on the floor of the classroom, chalk on his tailored robes and hair falling over his brows. His eyes were wild and bloodshot, his fingernails digging red crescents into the pale flesh of his palms. Like the teary-eyed girls Hermione had seen hogging bathroom stalls over the last few weeks, Nott looked as if he was experiencing a hysterical fit.

Wizarding children were deprived of the comprehensive education that the Muggle government provided to everyone under the age of fourteen. Hermione had gotten six years of science, arithmetic, grammar, geography, and history before she'd even heard of Hogwarts. She'd come to Hogwarts already knowing how a library was organised, how to write an essay, and how to read, research, and draw her own conclusions. The classmates of hers who had been raised in the wizarding world only got as much of a primary education as their parents thought fit to give them. In the case of pureblooded children—
If she called what their parents did as 'indoctrination', she didn't think she'd be far off the mark.

Nott was one such victim of childhood conditioning. But he was her age, sixteen or thereabouts, one year away from the age of majority in Magical Britain. He was old enough to assert his own beliefs, living at school as he did for ten months out of every year, so when he repeated the words and dogmas he'd heard at home, he wasn't some poor, innocent victim who didn't know any better.

He was a... a chauvinist sympathiser.

(The London newspapers used the word 'sympathiser' with the same tone and insinuation as the word 'heretic' had been used five hundred years ago.)

Hermione sat down next to him, just out of arm's reach. She chewed her lip, thinking.

Nott wasn't a nice person. He'd just slandered a fellow student, and used that word.

But it wasn't as if Tom was totally innocent, not if Theodore Nott knew that Tom could read minds. Tom wasn't blameless, and he wasn't nice; he was insensitive and cynical, and just like Nott, he had created a separate category in his mind for the people whom he'd decided were beneath his notice. The word he used was 'peon', and the way he said it was not much different than the way Nott said 'Mudblood'.

If Hermione dismissed Nott for good—and she could, because he hadn't done a single thing to earn her goodwill—and yet remained on good terms with Tom Riddle, then she might as well build her own separate category, label it 'Hypocrite', and jump into it headfirst. In this entire affair, not one of them had clean hands. Not even Hermione, who could have reported Tom a dozen times over for cheating in First Year to abusing his Prefect privileges in Fifth.

(She knew for a fact that Tom only volunteered to oversee detentions if it benefited himself, even as he spoke the words 'falling standards of acceptable conduct' with a straight face.)

"I think you're an absolute scrub," said Hermione, watching Nott's breathing slowly even out as the Confundus Charm wore off. "And you're acting like a spoilt child. Tom Riddle is better than you at magic, so you have to grasp for an excuse to justify your own narrow little worldview that blood status means something? And what about me? I get better marks than you on every test, and I've no more of a prestigious lineage than Tom. How do you explain that?"

"Hector Dagworth-Granger. Looked it up. Made Grandmaster of the Society of Potioneers in 1902. You have a wizarding name," said Nott, further adding, "though there's not much to say on the quality of the blood or the size of the fortune."

Hector Granger?

She wasn't completely certain, but she'd remembered an Uncle Hector on her family tree somewhere. Dad wasn't very close with his extended family, and Hermione hadn't grown up with cousins, so she couldn't say for sure. But her interest had been caught on one main thing: Dad was a Muggle, yet she (supposedly, if Nott's word could be trusted) had wizarding family? How did that work?

She resolved to look up wizarding genealogy the next time she was in the library.
"I don't understand your logic," Hermione said, having decided to treat Nott like a child, which included speaking in the same stern and disapproving tone that her Mum used to do when Hermione stayed up past her bedtime to finish a book. "And I'm not sure what your goal is. You want to prove that Tom isn't a Muggleborn?"

"Maybe you're too ill-bred to know any better, Granger, but there's a natural order for all things in our society," said Nott, his tone making it unambiguous as to where he stood in such an arrangement. "Everyone should know their place, whether they happen to be wizards, goblins, house-elves, or Muggles. Or upstart Prefects.

"From the the very first day Riddle arrived here, he was intent on ignoring the order of things, because he thought he was too good to know his place—or that the rules didn't apply to him. Arrogant bastard." Nott scowled, then continued, "I gave him the benefit of a doubt at first, because the Hat put him in Slytherin. But we've come to the point where we ought to confirm the facts. Why was Riddle Sorted into Slytherin? Is he of proper wizarding stock, or is he a fraud who's tricked half the House into licking his boots?"

"If I accept your assumption that any of that even matters, I don't see how it changes anything," Hermione sniffed. "Tom might be Merlin re-incarnated or Grindelwald's long lost great-nephew, or he might be a Muggleborn. But everything's still the same: he's still Prefect, he gets all Outstandings, and he's swept the brackets in Duelling Club for the last two years."

"It changes everything," said Nott. "The fact that you don't understand it is why I'm in Slytherin and you aren't." Nott paused for a moment, his eyes narrowed in calculation. "I saw the way you looked when I used a word whose meaning you didn't know. Information for information, Granger. I'll lend you my family's books on Leglimency, and in return you'll tell me what you know about Riddle."

Hermione was tempted.

She didn't know much about Tom's family, so she'd be giving up barely anything as her part of the trade—not that Nott knew. And in return, she was being offered books she'd never have access to. Leglimency, what little information about the subject that Mr. Pacek had divulged to her, was heavily restricted; the few books that might have been printed on the subject had never been sold on the open market; instead, like most books on rare magic, they had been bought directly from the authors and hidden away for years in family libraries and private collections.

(Hermione had researched Alchemy when studying the illogical rules of magic. She'd learned that there were recipes for permanent Transfigurations of base metals into precious metals, and not just the traditional formula of lead into gold, but iron into a magically-enhanced metal that the wizarding world called 'Goblin Silver'. Of course, what she'd read was more speculation than fact, because the details on how it worked were closely hoarded for being trade secrets. And there was nothing in the world—Muggle and Magical—more maddening to Hermione than being given a single page's worth of information and then being told she wasn't allowed to read the rest of the book.)

"What's stopping me from leaving right now and telling Tom what you're doing behind his back?" inquired Hermione, knowing that anything she did would have consequences, and even if this seemed like a good deal, there was such a thing as something that was Too Good to Be True.

"Why would you?" Nott sneered. "You'd throw away an opportunity and get nothing in return. That was a nice try at Slytherin-style thinking, Granger, but in the end you're too much of a Ravenclaw. What you have to realise is that people like Riddle don't have friends."
She didn't bother arguing that last point. "Fine," she conceded. "You'll lend me a book regardless of how helpful my information turns out to be? And you won't throw another fit about whatever answer you get?"

"I don't throw fits."

"And I'm not hopelessly ignorant."

"Alright!" Nott gritted out. "I'll get the book and you'll find us a place to make the trade, since you're the one with the Prefect badge."

Hermione groped inside her book bag for her study planner, turned to the nearest unused page—January 16, 1943—and tore it out of the book.

"Here," she said, shoving the page at Nott, along with the wand she'd taken off him earlier. "We can't send owls to each other because Tom knows what my owl looks like, so if we need to arrange a meeting, use the paper. Whatever you write on it will appear on another copy I have in my dorm—but do try to write small because I haven't figured out a way to erase the ink and reuse the paper without de-stabilising the runic sequences."

Nott took the paper, trying to hide his interest in the enchantment, folded it into quarters, and slipped it into his robe pocket.

He left the room without glancing back.

Three days later, Hermione found herself stamping her feet in the snow of the East Courtyard, behind the statue of Hipparchus the Stargazer. Hipparchus was stationary now, as it was daytime, and his sightless eyes were coated by a velvet rime of frost; ice had gathered into the crevices of his face and the folds of his toga. His features were distorted and blurry, and the unforgiving months of winter had rendered him more of a lump than a man.

She had arranged meetings behind the statue when she was in First Year because it was placed in a corner of a quiet courtyard near the rocky edge which overlooked the Lake. It wasn't en route to any outdoor classes, and few people passed through the area unless they were arriving from outside the castle grounds—and that number was limited to parents visiting severely injured children in the Hospital Wing, members of the Board of Governors, or any official guests invited by the Headmaster or the Heads of Houses.

The area behind the statue couldn't be seen by anyone unless they were looking out of one of the windows on the upper floors. The closest windows were the ones in the Hogwarts clocktower, and students only climbed to the top in their First or Second Years, as it was one of those sights that defined the quintessential 'Hogwarts Experience'. Similar to walking through a ghost, being paint-ballooned by Peeves, or splashed by an exploding cauldron in Potions, having done it once, one was
happy to never do it again.

To keep herself occupied, Hermione began tracing a rough outline into the snow, a basic warding scheme she'd put together with Mr. Pacek's help over the holidays. The Stargazer statue was convenient for this, since it had compass directions marked out on the plaque; Hermione could have told north by the angle of the sun, but in the tail end of winter, most days were wet and cloudy with no hint of sunlight or warmth.

*North, south, east, west:* the cardinal points were marked in the snow by the tip of Hermione's wand. They were followed by a series of runes in the corners, a few she'd used in enchanting her study planner, and some others she'd found in a book on wizarding woodcraft. She'd read that campers and naturalists used them when they wanted to hide their tents from Muggles, or their blinds from rare magical wildlife.

Not long after, she heard footsteps crunching over the layer of snow that coated the ground. Peeking around the edge of Hipparchus' toga, she saw Nott crossing the courtyard, the hem of his black winter cloak powdered white. He wore a fur-lined hat pulled low over his eyes; his chin and lower face were covered by a green-and-silver House scarf.

"Granger? Where are you?" he called. His head turned from side to side. "This had better not be a trick. I'm not here to play games!"

He passed in front of Hipparchus, digging into his pocket for a folded square of paper, and he didn't notice Hermione's presence until it was too late and she'd dragged him by the elbow, and then they were behind the statue and inside the diamond-shaped rune boundary.

"Sorry," said Hermione, who wasn't apologetic at all, "but you were making too much noise." She pointed at the runes melted into the snow at their feet. "If you stay inside the lines, no one will notice us."

Nott's gaze flicked from Hermione's face down to the ground.

"Algiz," he muttered. "And thurisaz reversed. I've seen this before—this is the Poacher's Pall, isn't it?"

Hermione had seen the logical applications of a ward that could hide a wizard from magical animals; the same spell that could hide a researcher from his subjects could easily do the same for a hunter and his quarry. She didn't approve of poaching, and as a native of suburban London, the concept of hunting for sport was far removed from her personal experience. Perhaps if she was younger, she'd have seen the value of restricting information from the general public in order to prevent its abuse by those of unscrupulous intent, a necessary sacrifice for the protection of innocent endangered creatures.

She was older now, and she'd been at the affected end of a number of information restrictions, so her view on censorship had developed a shade of nuance over the years. Academic magical theory was one thing; practical application was another. The lives of wizards and witches should be guided by moral principle, but adherence to morality was an individual prerogative. She therefore considered the use of magical knowledge a *personal* responsibility, and not a public responsibility to be taken upon the shoulders of a governing council or committee.

This was Hermione's respectful way of saying that she wasn't going to give up her book collection at home, questionable subject matter or not. And that she understood why wealthy families kept private
libraries and never made it public what titles they had or didn't have. She didn't like it, but it was the
standard way things were done in the wizarding world, and for now, there was nothing she could do
about it.

"I can't cast a Disillusionment Charm," Hermione admitted. "Not for long, at any rate. I'm sure you
can't do it either, so this works for both of us. And no, this isn't a poachers' ward. I've only got the
visual concealment down, without the scent or thermal components, so we're only safe from being
seen by students and teachers, not animals.

"Anyway," she said, knowing that a lecture on ward substructure was not why they had arranged to
meet in a deserted corner of the castle grounds, "did you bring the book?"

The material of Nott's cloak rippled as he rummaged in the book bag hitched over his shoulder,
under his robes. He drew out a thick book with a worn leather cover and deckled pages, so small
and compact that if Hermione pressed her hand flat on the cover, the tips of her fingers would stick
out from the top end.

Nott turned the book over to show her the title. *Insight of the Mind* was embossed in gold foil on the
leather cover, though half of it had rubbed away. The light tan leather showed the signs of use, too:
the corners were worn shiny, and there were several darker oval marks the size and shape of
fingerprints pressed into the front and back covers.

Hermione took the book from Nott, turning it over and rubbing the spine.

Soft, buttery leather on the outside, fine onionskin paper on the inside, the font-face within smooth
and regular, but lacking the serifed strokes of typecast text. Instead of being printed like most books
sold today, it had been copied with some sort of enchanted quill. She'd seen books like it at
Glimwit's, the antiquarian book dealer, and the shop assistant had told her that books produced in
small runs didn't merit the use of a printing press, where each page had to be set in metal type before
it could be printed.

In the past, specialty and rare books were produced on commission and advertised through word-of-
mouth and personal connection; a buyer would arrange a copy with the author directly, bringing with
them their own ink and quill and paper. Afterwards, they'd have the covers made to their
specification, often with heraldic crests on the cover and custom anti-theft enchantments in the
binding, so that the book couldn't be removed from the family library unless it was by a member of
the family.

"Have you read it?" Hermione asked, tearing her attention away from the book and back to Nott.

"Over Christmas," he said. "I knew what Legilimency was years ago, but never thought I'd need to
learn about the particulars of it... until very recently. It's rare magic, and a rare book—the Blacks
might have a copy, but I can't think of any other family library that would. This is my family's copy,
so if you get it confiscated, you will be breaking into a professor's office to get it back."

"I know how to take care of a book," Hermione retorted, holding the book close to her chest. "And
how to disguise a cover."

"Now," Nott prompted, rubbing his gloved hands together for warmth—or in hungry anticipation,
"what about my side of the deal? What do you know about Riddle?"

"Not much," said Hermione honestly. "Tom is a private person. And he doesn't trust people easily."
"I already knew that," Nott said. He gave an irritated huff, and white steam whistled out between his teeth. "Come on, give me something I can work with."

"He's an orphan," Hermione said, organising her thoughts and sorting out what was safe to share. Which things were secrets and which ones weren't. "He's never known his parents. His father's name was 'Riddle'."

"'Father's name was "Riddle"', was it? Someone owl The Prophet, we have a headline for tomorrow's edition," Nott said, lip curled in a mocking sneer. "I didn't take you for a swindler, Granger."

Hermione's nose wrinkled in distaste. He had just lent her a rare book, near-priceless in value by her estimation, which almost made up for the fact that Nott was a unrepentant rudesby.

"His middle name is 'Marvolo'. I assume it's after a family member, but I don't know who, or which side," she said.

"'Marvolo'," mused Nott. "I've seen his initials but didn't know what the M stood for. It must be a given name, if it's his middle name. Shame there's no family name to go with it, otherwise I'd have tracked down the bloodlines within the week. Is that all you've got?"

Hermione only had one other piece of reliable information. "If I tell you this, it's under the assumption that it'll never leave this ward boundary, alright?"

"I don't know," said Nott, a speculative smile forming on his face. "I'll take any advantage I can over Riddle, especially if it's something useful I can hold over his head."

"Well, if you go around sharing this one, I can't see it going very well for you," Hermione spoke in a cold voice. "The last thing I can give you is about Tom's... Legilimency. He's been able to do it since he was a child, before he started Hogwarts. Professor Dumbledore knows about it and suspects it to be inherited from a parent, but since they're both dead, he doesn't know for sure.

"On the subject of his abilities: Tom always knows when people are lying to him. Always. And I believe that he has a good sense of when people are hiding things from him, too. So if you try to gloat over him by saying that you know things you shouldn't, I'm sure it'll go over well for you."

"I haven't anything concrete... not yet," muttered Nott, kicking at a chunk of ice with his shoe. "Legilimency isn't an ability anyone announces to the public—makes it hard to trace it by blood when it can be hidden away, unlike the Metamorphs or Maledictions. But I know there are a few old families who claim it; it's only rumours but there's always some truth in those... The Wizengamot's chief interrogator last century was one, they said, who was it—Claudius Price? No, Claudius Prince, but there's no proof it being hereditary..."

He glanced up at Hermione, brows furrowed. "How do you know about it? You never answered how you knew what he was. He—he didn't try anything on you, did he?"

"I didn't think my personal welfare mattered to you."

"You're right," Nott agreed. "It doesn't. But it's the principle of the thing, Granger. A proper wizard wouldn't molest a witch like that, and for all that you don't act like it, you're still a witch. We're civilised people, not Muggle brutes. Though with a name like 'Riddle', I can't say I'm
surprised. Blood always tells."

"For your information, he hasn't 'tried anything'," said Hermione, her tone chilly. "And that's the last thing I'm going to tell you. We're done here. You can go now."

"Very well," Nott said stiffly, "I want my book back in two weeks. If you want to borrow anything else, then you had better have something good for me. And I don't care how you get it."

With that, he stomped out of the warded boundary and back up to the castle, grumbling to himself.

Hermione sighed, then looked down at the book in her hands.

This book was what she'd traded some of Tom's secrets for.

*I hope it's worth it.*

She opened it up to the first page.

*Legilimency is not, as the name suggests, and as it is commonly understood to be, a means of reading the mind. It is more than that: Legilimency is both art and magic, skill and explication; it is the ability to delve into the far reaches of human consciousness and interpret the convoluted layers of conscious thought and subconscious impression. It can be learned with sufficient instruction, it can be practised with or without a wand, and may come easier to the rare practitioner who possesses an inborn gift. Despite being an exceptionally useful and versatile talent when honed to the level of the master, Legilimency is not indefensible: it may be neutralised by its equal and opposite talent, the art of Occlumency, a meditation-based approach to achieving complete mental self-discipline...*

*This was worth it.*

The questions she wanted the answers to, the answers that Dumbledore had withheld from Tom all those years ago. She had them now, right here in her hands, and it had only cost her a few minutes of candour with Theodore Nott.

She drew her wand from her robes and began casting a charm to disguise the cover of her borrowed book. When she was done, she melted the runes of the concealment ward and stepped out from behind the statue.

*I'd never had expected it, thought Hermione, with the advantage of hindsight, that the few people with whom I can be perfectly forthright are two Slytherins and a Durmstrang alumnus.*
Meanwhile, the plot thickens...

Tom and Hermione are intelligent characters, but to maintain story balance, other characters are intelligent too. The difference is that they have opposing motivations, or they're working on limited information compared to what our protagonists have. Even our protagonists have limited information, as Tom and Hermione have no idea what the other is doing when they're not around.

Tumblr credit for the illustration.

I'm a bit salty at the movie designers who ruined Ravenclaw merch for all the IRL Ravenclaws out there. Blue and silver with a raven mascot animal, instead of blue and bronze with an eagle! At least the Ravenclaw Diadem design has an eagle on it, but it just goes to show how annoyingly inconsistent it is. This fic uses some elements from the movie (school uniforms, Hogwarts layout and general aesthetic, CoS Tom's perfect hair), but the books' blue and bronze is official for me.
By the time spring had arrived, the students of Fifth Year began marking the days before the exam on their calendars.

Tom counted the days before Hogwarts closed its gates for the summer. He didn't care about the O.W.L.s. Out of the entire Fifth Year cohort, it seemed as if he and Hermione were the only students who weren't stressing over the impending exams, at least not to the extent where they were vomiting in public or found weeping on the floor of the Common Room, surrounded by a stack of notes.

Whenever Tom opened his dormitory door and from the hallway saw Bronwyn Summers lying on a pile of parchment like she was making a snow angel, he closed it, took a deep breath, then cast a Disillusionment Charm before going about his day. This wasn't his responsibility, and neither was cleaning up a Second Year girl's bloodied bedsheets at five o'clock on a Saturday morning when she woke up, woke everyone up with her screaming, and made her dorm mates fetch the the nearest Prefect, preferably 'the nice one, you know, the dishy one with the good hair'.

Slytherin had two female Prefects and a Head Girl. Hogwarts had a Hospital Wing with a licensed Mediwitch. Why did they they wake him up to deal with it? (He learned later that it was because Hipworth believed it to be unacceptable to be seen in her nightgown outside of her dormitory, and it took twenty minutes for her to make herself decent. For some reason, it didn't matter to her if people saw Tom in his nightshirt and pyjamas, which he personally thought rather unfair. As unfair as it was for other people to count his magical accomplishments secondary in favour of his hair.)

Tom's reputation had preceded him by the time he was invited to Slughorn's office for his highly unanticipated career advisory meeting.

He'd already known what to expect from the meeting, with Avery and Lestrange having gone before him. There would be tea, and a plate of biscuits, and Professor Slughorn recommending career options, their number and variety directly proportionate to how much potential Slughorn saw in the student sitting across from his desk.

Rosier and Travers, waiting in the Common Room with him for their appointment—they'd all been assigned time slots, ordered by their surnames—weren't worried about their futures.

"I've always wanted to be a Quidditch commentator," said Rosier, fingering the slip of paper that marked his appointment for half-past three on Saturday afternoon. "All you have to do is show up to the pitch and spout your opinions into a speaking trumpet. And free tickets for every match! What's not to like about it?"

Tom didn't mention that he already qualified for free Quidditch tickets, as a perk of having the Press Badge awarded to him last year. Rosier would probably be appalled by the fact that Tom had never
written in to request a single ticket; if he knew, Rosier would have tried to talk Tom into using his Prefect privileges to sneak him out on a Hogsmeade weekend to attend a game. Tom didn't mind breaking school rules, for the right price, naturally—but there was something disgraceful about doing it for **Quidditch**.

"Your family wouldn't like it," Travers put in, fingers picking at the buttons on the leather chesterfield sofa. The Slytherin Common Room was littered with chesterfields and wingback armchairs in black leather and green velvet. At night, when the fires were lit and the Seventh Years commandeered the best seats for their weekly whisky social, the place more than not resembled an exclusive gentlemen's club. "Mine wouldn't; it's off to the Ministry after Hogwarts for me."

Quentin Travers was a sharp-featured young man whose temperament leaned towards dour on the best of days. His family were considered to be of good name and blood, but they hadn't the affluence of the Blacks, the Malfoys, or the Lestranges; instead, the Travers family had built their reputation on generations of civil service. Travers' father had been a former head of DMLE. He'd since retired, but remained on the Auror training standards commission, a sinecure position that let him in and out of the Minister's office on a weekly basis.

Rosier pulled a face. "Pater wouldn't approve, but commentator is better than player, in his eyes. I s'pose I could try out for the Department of Magical Games and Sports—you think I could get myself a spot where I wouldn't have to sit behind a desk all day? I've done more than my share of it already."

"If your father rubs elbows with the Director, I don't see why not," said Travers, shrugging. "I've heard that M.G.-and-S. always have a few bludge spots open for the bucks. They're never meant to be long-term though—if you're not there to make a career of it, they expect you to resign for fresh meat as soon as you settle yourself with a witch."

"I'll never get myself a witch, then. Simple as that," Rosier spoke candidly. "Pater has already started talking about getting a husband for Dru. She's looked forward to having her own house for years. I say let her have it, and let her carry on the family legacy."

Travers grunted in concurrence. "What about you, Riddle?"

Tom lifted his eyes from the pages of *Anatomica Arthropoda*. "What about me?"

"Got any plans for when you leave Hogwarts?"

"A few."

"Oh, come on, Riddle," Rosier coaxed, leaning forward and looking expectantly at Tom. "Do tell. Do you want to join the Ministry and shuffle parchment with the best of us? Or be a professor? You're heaps better than Merrythought, the old bag, and Sluggy would love to have you at his side for every meal at the High Table."

"Professor Riddle," said Travers in a slow, thoughtful voice. "Doesn't sound terrible; it all but rolls off the tongue. And could you do any better than that? Not everyone has the wherewithal to do whatever they want, like Edmond's family."

Lestrange and Avery were in the position of being able to choose their post-Hogwarts situations at their own leisure; of those choices, they were given the opportunity to do nothing at all. Respectable unemployment came part and parcel for those of their social standing. They had large family estates;
the estates had land set aside for breeding magical creatures or cultivating magical plants which were then processed for sale and export by estate personnel. The members of the family didn't have to lift a single finger to keep sitting on their piles and piles of gold.

"You talk of sitting by Slughorn's right hand three times a day as if it's a good thing," Tom remarked. "Believe you me, if you were made to sit through dinner with him trying to push one last piece of pineapple on you, then take another one 'for the road', you'd realise how vastly overrated it is to be in the Slug Club. Slughorn's useful, but sometimes he makes himself more trouble than he's worth." Tom glanced at the clock, noting that the time was ten to two. "Now if you'll excuse me, I've an appointment to get to."

Tom closed his book and got to his feet, to the farewells and well-wishes of Travers and Rosier.

When he arrived to the door of Slughorn's office, it was closed, suggesting that whoever had their appointment before him hadn't yet finished. Tom had arrived early in any case, so he was content to wait in the hallway and think up reasonable ways to refuse Slughorn's career suggestions.

I can't be a Mediwizard, sir; I get frightfully sick at the sight of blood. Herbology's out for me, sorry. I'm allergic to compost and any kind of fertiliser that came out of an animal's rear end. I'm afraid I can't accept that trainee post at the Department of Administrative Registration; I once got my hand stuck in the library's card catalogue and now filing cabinets give me night terrors—remember that time I set that wardrobe on fire a few years ago? That was because it gave me flashbacks, terrible things. Sometimes I go nights without sleeping a wink, Professor...

Two o'clock came, and a few minutes past the hour, Slughorn's office door opened to reveal Nott's anaemic-looking face.

Nott's eyes widened; he took a half-step back upon seeing Tom standing at the threshold. For a fraction of a second, their eyes met, and Tom got a sense of the churning emotions that Nott was attempting to suppress: anxiety, dread, concern on behalf of someone else, a person he strongly associated with powdered chalk and winter frost, then a sudden wash of mortification at feeling such concern—

Nott dropped his gaze to the floor and brushed past Tom, muttering "Riddle" in a desultory greeting as he walked away, shoulders hunched.

That was curious, thought Tom, watching Nott's retreating back. He knocked on the doorframe.

"Professor Slughorn, sir?"

"Ah, Tom! Right on time!" Slughorn waved him into the seat in front of the desk. "Sit down, sit down."

Similar to Dumbledore's office, Slughorn's office tended toward clutter over asceticism. While Dumbledore had his self-invented magical gadgets and enchanted doodads, Slughorn's collection consisted of memorabilia that he'd been given over the years by his former pupils and protégés: Quidditch player miniatures spinning about on animated broomsticks, small statuettes of carved whalebone and soapstone in the shapes of seals and Egyptian cats, a Polynesian tiki mask and an Oriental lacquered box containing what appeared to be brushes and thin black sticks of dried ink. Behind the Professor's desk was the shelf that took pride of place—Slughorn's real collection, row after row of framed photographs of his favourite students. Some of them were signed, and most of
them contained images of young men and women waving and smiling at the camera.

Tom sat, adjusting the drape of his robes, bought for the first time with his own money and not the pouch of galleons given him through the Hogwarts Relief Fund.

(During the summer, he'd replaced his old clothes for all new things. He'd long since thrown away the threadbare grey pyjamas he'd brought with him from Wool's, and outgrown the clothing the Grangers had given him in the summer after Third Year. After receiving his badge in the mail, he'd decided that as a Prefect, he ought to make a proper showing of it, and he couldn't do it with his cuffs riding up and his trouser hems skimming high.)

"Have you put any thought into your future occupation, Tom?" asked Slughorn, shuffling parchments about his desk. "I hold that you'd make an excellent Potions Master; I can't recall marking your work for anything less than an O for all your years here. Top marks on the essays, perfect potion every time, never seen anything like it!" In a conspicuous false-whisper, he added, "Last year, I sent your Pepper-Ups to the Hospital Wing with my own batch, and no one was the wiser, hoho!"

And that's not irresponsible at all, thought Tom. "I'm always happy to help when I can, sir. Hogwarts is a second home to me."

"Helping, eh?" Slughorn stroked his moustache. "With your current marks, you'd be set to take N.E.W.T. level Potions next year. St. Mungo's is always in need of good brewers and apothecary assistants—they'd take you on as an apprentice if you've got a recommendation or two to your name. You'd only have to ask, my boy."

"I'll consider it," Tom replied politely. It was predictable for Slughorn to try and steer him into an occupation of the professor's preference; it might have even worked on a student who was more aimless than ambitious in their future aspirations. "But what about my other classes? I've done as well in them as I have in yours—that's not to say I don't like Potions, which I do—but I've been told that I'm doing quite well in both my core subjects and my electives."

Slughorn deflated a bit, his moustache drooping down like the whiskers of a dejected terrier. "Well, Albus has always kept a keen eye on you, asking me how you were doing and so on. If you like Transfiguration or have an interest in Alchemy, I suppose some arrangement can be made..."

Obviously, Tom couldn't tell Professor Slughorn up-front that none of the options appealed to him. And he certainly couldn't say, "This is a waste of time, I've got better things to do", and walk out of the office. He had a job already. It wasn't a conventional desk job with appearance guidelines, an office with an owling address, and a Gringotts vault transfer that arrived on the same day every month. But it paid him good money, and all he had to do was submit a minimum of one article a month to be credited as a regular contributor. One article, and then he could spend the rest of the month on the kind of magic he wanted to study.

During the holidays, he'd begun thinning out the meat of his articles and padding it with filler content, answering the questions readers sent him in their fan mail. His responses came in the form of handy housework tips on how to de-crust an oven, renew lighting charms on Christmas baubles, or layer an Impervius over a heating charm on Wellington boots so that one spell didn't end up nullifying the other.

(No one, either readership or editorial staff, seemed to care how low-effort his submissions were; in fact, it only reinforced the impression of his being caring and sympathetic to the point that Witch
Weekly had created an official Mr. Bertram Advice Column, complete with a header graphic of a wand superimposed over a crossed spatula and dish brush.)

Tom just had to sit there and pretend, just like he pretended to be worried about the O.W.L.s, or that he cared about the feelings of twelve-year-old girls who filled their diaries with detailed accounts of that time Tom the Prefect asked them to pass the salt cellar at dinner.

"I'm rather partial to Defense, sir."

"Oh, yes," said Slughorn, failing to hide his disappointment in Tom's ambivalence towards a Potions career. He rifled through the parchments on his desk. "I see you've gotten first place in the practical exams every year. The Auror Training Program would have you if you applied—they want five N.E.W.T.s of Exceeds Expectations or higher, which I can't see you not getting, not with your ten O.W.L. subjects this year."

"The Aurors?" Tom inclined his head. "Sir, what's the difference between Aurors and hit wizards? I see them mentioned all the time in The Prophet, involved in various inquiries for the Ministry, but I wasn't aware of the distinction. Is one better than the other?"

"Hit wizards are our everyday law enforcement," Slughorn explained. "Burglaries, Muggle baiting, lost Kneazles, and so on—hardworking fellows they are, my boy, but you could do to set your sights higher. Aurors are the élite: they deal specifically with dark wizards, and with the Dark Lord on the Continent, it would be a coup on their part to recruit a young man of your potential, Tom—not that I want to see you in such a dangerous job, of course, but it's a worthy service. Very respectable, a good start for someone wanting to climb the ladder, as one might see it."

"Dangerous, sir?" Tom's expression morphed into one of concern. "What does that mean?"

Slughorn dithered for a moment or so. "My dear boy, dark wizards aren't the most friendly of characters. I know that Defense Against the Dark Arts does its best in teaching students how to prepare themselves for everyday life, but what you learn in class is far, far removed to chasing after and hunting down violent criminals."

"I see," said Tom solemnly, looking down at his lap and then at the professor. "Is it possible to learn more about what the job entails? I don't think it would be a good look to set my sights on the Training Program and then resign the first week for it not being what I expected. I'd still have all my N.E.W.T.s, but I can't see the Ministry being happy about someone so new sending in a request for an inter-departmental transfer."

"It's always well-advised for students to think carefully about their futures," Slughorn said sagely, nodding his head. "I should hate to see any of my Slytherins squander their talent. The Ministry can be ungenerous at times—unless you happen to know the right people—and it would be my greatest shame to see you wasted in Magical Maintenance or, Merlin forbid it, the mail-sorting office."

Slughorn's head gave a rueful shake, jowls quivering in imagined indignation. Then he fumbled in his desk, drawing out a library slip, on which he jotted down a few titles and signed his name at the bottom. "There are a few Auror training manuals in the Restricted Section. For the ordinary student, I would refrain from recommending such serious reading material until after the O.W.L.s. But your records, Tom, are beyond exemplary—I trust that you'd never let your marks slip."

Tom ducked his head bashfully. "Thank you, sir."
"Do come to me if you have any other questions, Tom," Slughorn said, folding the library slip in half and holding it out to Tom. Just before it dropped into Tom's waiting hand, Slughorn asked, "I'll see you at the next dinner evening, won't I?"

"Of course, sir."

"And do give our dear Miss Granger my regards." Slughorn tipped him a huge wink, and continued, "I hope you'll bring her with you next time; she's a lovely girl. I only wish she could be one of my Slytherins, but if you've already spoken for her, then I daresay that's good enough for me, oho!"

Tom visited the spider as often as his patrol schedule allowed.

'The Spider', as he called it, had been given another name by Hagrid, a peculiar and troll-ish sounding name that he'd discovered late one night while tearing through the creature's memories.

Doing so had given him a headache, as the spider's mind, having some semblance of organisation due to its sentience, didn't have anything that resembled human senses. Its memories weren't based on images like his own, but a succession of feelings and impressions: the movement of air currents, or the lack of them, within its egg, then the quiet stillness of the trunk in which it had been hatched; the texture and temperature of the half-frozen rabbits Hagrid snared in the Forest; the thermal variation of the room that Tom had locked it in, cold near the floors, but with bright points of heat on the far walls where the magical fires burned in their sconces day and night.

Tom checked in regularly to maintain the spells that kept the room clean and warm, as the Hogwarts dungeons were well known to be freezing in the winter. And he ensured that the locking charms on the door remained secure, so that what he had done to Hagrid could not be done to him.

He didn't like the spider, and from probing into its mind, saw that it didn't like him. It saw him as a threat, a danger, an unknown entity. Nothing Tom did—not that he did much—changed its view on him, since he always kept it at wandpoint in order to "train" it to keep its distance from him. He had also told it firmly from the start that Hagrid was never coming back, which made the spider chitter in agitation before Tom got tired of it and shoved it back in the trunk.

A few minor memory charms had faded those memories of Hagrid, but it turned out that Acromantulas had some form of imprint memory that never went away, a fact that hadn't been mentioned in the bestiaries.

It meant that Tom never turned his back on the spider, and the spider always kept alert when Tom drew his wand; several visits after the day its ownership had been 'transferred', the spider had come to understand that the white stick of wood meant bodily paralysis and darkness.

It was also getting to be quite irritating as the spider grew larger and its mind developed the capacity to think beyond its sleeping arrangements and the delivery of its next meal. Tom was therefore glad to have found some books that offered a solution to his problems.
Chapter One: An Introduction to Dark Wizardry

Practitioners of the Dark Arts have been many and varied over history, but they share one thing in common—the use of spells, potions, magical items, and dark creatures to perform illegal acts with malicious intent. To the modern Auror, the most indisputable exercise of Dark Magic is in the casting of the three Unforgivable Curses, whose use on a human being invokes the strictest of all penalties for magical crimes: a life sentence to an island in the North Sea known as Azkaban Prison...

"Huh," said Tom, putting the book down and marking his place with a quill. "There are only three so-called 'Unforgivable' curses. I'd have thought there'd be more, knowing how much havoc one competent wizard can create with the right motivation. But I suppose I shouldn't be surprised; competence among wizards is like finding a diamond in the muck, and you're proof of what I'm talking about, aren't you?"

The spider didn't reply. In the passing months, it had grown to the size of a dog, only fitting inside the trunk if its legs were folded in and squished down. The fangs had elongated and were now capable of producing a weak venom on top of its digestive fluid—an acid that was currently dribbling into a bowl of cold chicken, liquefying the meat before it could be sucked up through the spidery mouthparts.

Tom didn't stare too long at it. He'd packed his charmed lunchbox with a chicken sandwich of his own, carved from the same roasted bird that the spider was eating, and it would only put him off his own food to wonder what liquid chicken tasted like.

When he'd finished his sandwich, he returned to the book, skimming over the first chapter to move on to the next, which contained a summary of the Unforgivable Curses.

He spread out a clean roll of parchment on the floor of the abandoned classroom, set the tip of his Dictation Quill to the top corner, then began making notes as he read.

"The Killing Curse," said Tom, setting his shoulders back and clasping his hands behind his back. "Spell colour: green. Six syllable incantation, banned in competitive duelling, not recommended for combat duelling. Leaves no marks, an obvious sign of foul play by a dark wizard. Conclusion: obscure or fast-metabolising lethal poison is just as effective, and cause of death will not automatically be associated with dark magic.

"The Cruciatus Curse. Spell colour: red. Three syllable incantation, banned in competitive duelling. Potentially useful for combat duelling due to its short incantation, relatively direct intent, and shield-piercing ability. Commonly believed to leave no marks, but may cause potential nervous and neural damage from extended use. Aurors look for signs of broken fingernails, bloodied tongues, residual jitters, and heart palpitations. Conclusion: useful within limits. Can be substituted with a less detectable spell, such as the localised vascular constriction spell, or a hair-growth charm altered to produce ingrowths.

"The Imperius Curse," Tom dictated in a clear voice, slowing down as he waited for the quill to copy down his words. "Spell colour: yellow-green. Four syllables, not recommended for duelling, commonly believed to leave no marks. Aurors look for signs of unfocused gaze, milky eyes,
inexplicable personality shifts, unusual behaviour, and an inability to answer standard security
questions. Conclusion: extremely promising, but requires thorough preparation."

The quill scribbled the last word down and went still, poised over the bottom of the parchment. Tom
picked it up, read it over, then dried the ink with a swish of his wand.

These were the spells he'd chased after from First Year. And now that he had them in his grasp, he
couldn't help but feel a bit disappointed at how very underwhelming they were.

It wasn't as if they were bad spells. They weren't.

They were tried and true magical classics, a dark wizard's bread-and-butter for the last few hundred
years. The spells had a whole section in the Auror's handbook dedicated to identifying and resisting
them. They were infamous to the extent that speaking of them in company was apparently
considered poor form, which explained how none of the Hogwarts teachers had ever mentioned
them in class, not even by glancing reference, despite how advantageous it would be for the general
public to know the symptoms of their use. In criminal trials, the court adjudicates refrained,
whenever possible, from referring to the Curses by name, preferring blanket euphemisms such as
*illicit magics* or *grievous magical assault*.

Therein lay a problem: these Curses—this *dark magic*—might perhaps be useful, but they were
analogous to trademarked tools passed from hand to hand. A blacksmith's hammer and anvil,
handed on to his journeyman to carry the noble craft into the next generation.

Like a hammer, these Unforgivable Curses were *blunt*.

Like an anvil, when all your works were built on it, everyone knew you to be a blacksmith. Or in
this case, a *dark wizard*.

It was hardly inconspicuous for a wizard who wanted to go about his business without the Aurors
blasting his door down. And these days, the Aurors were on high alert with the number of dark
wizards gallivanting about Europe, most of whom were the agents of the darkest of dark wizards,
Lord Grindelwald. The Aurors were willing to arrest on the barest suspicion; in these chaotic times,
public confidence mattered more than reasonable doubt. And thus it made the use of textbook dark
magic more of a liability than an advantage.

Some part of Tom, the part of him that was repulsed by conformity, at the notion of being *ordinary*,
was loath to use those spells, despite—or rather, *because* of how traditional they were.

*Tradition*.

In Tom's eyes, that was another word for *unimaginative* and *uninspired*.

But he decided it was worthwhile to study them anyway, because the other parts of him were
realistic and practical; they recognised that something couldn't ascend to the status of a tradition
unless it was effective.

(He recalled a dinner table conversation from years ago, on the subject of crystal balls and human
sacrifice. Dark wizards wouldn't be throwing around Unforgivable Curses if there was a kinder,
non-dark alternative that worked just as quickly and effectively. A spell intended purely for human
torture—and wasn't dark—seemed a bit of a stretch, but had anyone even tried their hand at
inventing it?)
Tom took a deep breath and drew his wand, pointing it at the spider.

One of the spider's eight eyes caught the movement. The disgusting clicking and slurping of liquid chicken stopped. It lifted up its front two forelegs, hooked claws poised for action.

"The Aurors say this won't leave a mark," Tom spoke softly, staring down at the dog-sized Acromantula. "Let's see if they were right."

The spider leaped at him.

"*Imperio!*

A beam of yellow-green flashed from the tip of Tom's wand.

In the middle of its jump, the spider's limbs curled up around its abdomen, and when it hit Tom's Shield Charm, only its back made contact with the shield, before it bounced off and rolled onto the floor in a compact ball.

Tom kept his wand trained on the beast as its legs unfolded and it backed away from him, forelegs gathered under its thorax, hooks pressed to the floor. The black marbles of its eyes had lost their shine.

*So,* thought Tom, holding his wand steady and concentrating on maintaining the spell, *A successful casting of the Imperius is nothing but a contest of my will against another's.*

All he had to do was wish for the spider not to hurt him, but as it had already jumped when the order came, its compliance was limited by both inertia and its own physical strength.

That was a weakness there: the Imperius Curse wasn't infallible. Its effectiveness directly corresponded to the limitations of the spell's subject. The spider would bite people if he commanded it to, but it couldn't sneak into the Restricted Section at night to transcribe books with a Dictation Quill, because it couldn't read. (And Tom was not interested in teaching it; he'd had enough of this with the members of his homework club, who'd shown him that devising magical methods of self-lobotomy could be a more constructive use of his time.)

"I wonder what else the book got right," Tom mused, mentally ordering the Acromantula to remain still. He lowered himself to his knees and peered into the eight milky eyes, wand held at the ready. "*Show me.*"

For an instant, there were two Toms in the classroom, one Tom Riddle looking down at the floor, and the other looking up into the familiar dark eyes and pale features of his own face. His perception was split between ten different eyes pointed in six different directions, his senses expanding in a disorienting manner to encompass the entirety of the room, from the cold draught slipping through from under the door, to the wafting warmth of the lit torches on the walls, and the smallest scrape of shoe soles on the stone floor; it was not just the sound of it he heard, but he felt it, too—through the lightest of brushes against his skin, every tiny movement translated into a sequence of vibrations that he could just barely separate into its individual elements; it was like having a cup of sand poured from a height into his palm, then discerning the journey of a single grain.

*A blink—a flicker—a forceful press of will—*
Then Tom moved from the exterior senses, piercing into the spider's inner mind; he felt what it felt, and what it felt was...

_Comfort._

It was pure sensation that swept through him—it—they, of being secure and sheltered, darkness curving around them on all sides in the egg, then the firm and gentle hands of Rubeus Hagrid peeling back the shell to reveal the shape and colour of the world.

It was the contentment of being held, the tender caress of a kindred spirit, reassurance by way of a powerful, irresistible connection that was not merely physical, but something greater and more profound. They were made glad by the warmth of this feeling, and they wanted this feeling to continue; they wanted nothing more than that. _There existed nothing else in the world that mattered more_—

Tom pulled his mind back and broke eye contact, immensely disturbed by what had transpired.

_So this_ was how the Imperius Curse worked.

No wonder people used it all the time. He himself had almost been drawn into it, tempted by the false sensations it offered. And it was false—extremely so. It was artificial to the point of offensiveness, a pale forgery of what he knew the real thing felt like.

Tom was torn between a mix of disgust and discomfort. He felt as if the spell had infringed upon something personal, taken something private and... and _special_, then produced a distorted imitation of it, which was then tossed in his face—the same way the boggart in Merrythought's wardrobe had dredged up his deepest fears in the middle of the classroom.

He cleared his throat, adjusted his wand grip to keep his hand from shaking, and said, "Well, that was one down. On to the next, then."

Tom bumped into Hermione after lunch that Sunday, when he was returning the Auror handbook to the library. Hermione had her own armload of books and was waiting impatiently for the librarian to finish stamping the return date slips in the back cover of each book.

"Tom!" said Hermione, waving at him.

"Shhh!" said the librarian.

Hermione hand flew to her mouth. "Sorry," she whispered.

The librarian's only response was to purse her lips and continue stamping books at a glacial pace. Stamp the slip, dab the stamp into the inkpad, open the next book, repeat _ad finitum_. For all the practice she'd put in over the years, Tom thought she was terribly slow at her job. One would think
that at some point the Board of Governors would have stepped in and replaced her with an enchanted stamp.

Tom waited for Hermione to collect her books. When she had trouble fitting all of them into her bag and had to dump everything and re-organise the contents to make room, Tom grabbed the books and motioned to the door. They left the library together.

"That was a book on Aurors you returned," Hermione remarked, once they'd removed themselves from the librarian's jurisdiction. "Is that what you want to do after Hogwarts?"

"Not particularly," said Tom. "I just needed an excuse to keep Slughorn off my back, otherwise he'd keep thinking I want to be the next Potioneer Grandmaster. And I remember you saying how Slughorn's career advice would be better than Beery's—a book turned out to be more useful than he was. How was your career advisory session, by the way?"

"Ugh." Hermione grimaced. "Professor Beery gave me a pocketful of leaflets. One to an amateur production of The Lake of Shining Waters, and a few W.A.D.A. pamphlets."

"W.A.D.A'? Never heard of it."

"The Wizarding Academy of Dramatic Arts," said Hermione. "He said it was very exclusive, but when I asked what the N.E.W.T. requirements were, they have didn't have any!"

"What an outrage," Tom agreed.

By this time, they'd reached the door of the classroom that served as the homework club's headquarters. Tom had charmed the lock so that only he could open the door. It wasn't his intention to prevent other members from using the room for practice sessions during the week, when he wasn't around—he simply didn't trust them to clean up after themselves. He liked the floor clear of blood and the furniture intact, thanks. He didn't want to sit down on a chair and have it fall to bits right under him; there wasn't an ounce of dignity in his being forced to prise splinters out of the seat of his pants.

It was half an hour before the other boys were scheduled to arrive, so for now, he and Hermione could discuss topics unrelated to school assignments or the upcoming exams. Muggle news and Britain's contributions in the war, for instance, were things that he didn't speak of in the presence of other Slytherins.

"Have you made plans for the summer?" Hermione asked, taking her newly borrowed books out of his arms and laying them on a nearby desk. "I can't imagine that you'd want to go back to Wool's. The rationing's gotten even stricter these days; they're no longer giving out civilian petrol tickets, so Dad has to save his for work emergencies—no more driving me to Diagon Alley every week like last summer."

"I'm not going back to Muggle London," said Tom. "I'll find a wizarding place to stay. If it's not the same one as last time, I'll give you an address or a post box to write to."

He wasn't sure about risking another summer at The Hog's Head, as he'd almost been caught out last time and had only just fixed the problem with his own quick thinking. Had he been out for any longer—gone to The Broomsticks for a breakfast fry-up, or the Hogsmeade grocer to pick up the day's bread—and had Old Ab been more of a Slytherin instead of confronting him head-on in typical Gryffindor fashion, things would have been much worse for Tom.
As it was, he'd avoided Ab every time he went near or into The Hog's Head. From then on, as everyone else did who frequented the place, he went in with the hood of his cloak on and ordered the house slop without complaining about its strange taste, Vanishing it wordlessly from under the table. (He wasn't sure if everyone else did that too, but if they didn't, they should definitely start.) He knew that if he hadn't made an effort to pass as a regular when hawking vials of Acromantula venom, the other patrons would have formed suspicions of his being a plainclothes Auror on the hunt for smugglers.

"I was wondering," Hermione began nervously, her hands fidgeting over the stack of books; she'd been sorting them by size in order to fit them into her bag, "about the summer..."

"What about it?"

"My Mum volunteered me into going to a veterans' fundraiser event. It sounded like a good idea when she introduced it to me—I've always wanted to do something to help with the war, since Mum's church group evacuated out of London and we can't visit children's homes and orphanages anymore—but then I found out yesterday it wasn't just a fundraiser," said Hermione, the words pouring out of her in a breathless rush.

"And?"

"It's a—a charity gala!" she squeaked. "A ball!"

"How exciting," said Tom. "Although I'm not sure of its relevance to me."

"I wanted to invite you as my, um, guest," Hermione said, the pink in her cheeks accentuating her freckles. "I saw the guest list—they're old army contacts, Dad's classmates, their wives and children too, and I just know that they'll be asking me why I didn't go to Donwell Prep. I haven't been to a Muggle party since before Hogwarts, and I'm no good with making up stories, and, and—"

"And I am?" Tom raised his eyebrow in question.

"You have a gift for... interpreting facts," Hermione confessed. "I'm not saying that you have free rein to lie to them. Just make it seem like I'm getting a proper education, so it won't be strange if I ask them later on for a reference to enroll in a Muggle university."

"'Muggle university'?" Tom frowned. "What's this—you're going Muggle after Hogwarts?"

"I'm keeping my options open," said Hermione. "I'm not going to W.A.D.A., but I understand Professor Beery's reasons for offering it as an option: it's because most of the top offices in the Ministry are buttoned up by a handful of closely connected people whose families have held positions there for generations. Anyone who doesn't have those connections has to start from the bottom and work their way up, knowing that promotions will be few and far between. I don't have 'friends' like yours to help me out, Tom. So I'll have to rely on 'friends' I can find on my own."

"I can't say I'm fond of Beery's recruitment technique, but he's got a point about the Ministry," said Tom, who had been reading in bed while Rosier drafted letters to his father on the subject of inviting the director of the Magical Games and Sports Department to dinner during the summer. The other residents of the dormitory had found scrunched-up wads of paper inside their shoes for days. He let out a slow breath. "I'll go with you to your charity ball... but I want something in return."
Hermione regarded him with scepticism for a brief moment, before she appeared to have made up her mind. "What do you want?"

"You'll go with me to Slughorn's dinners for the rest of the year. No excuses, no Prefect patrols—ask Mandicott to assign someone else to oversee detentions if you have to," said Tom. "He'll give in if you tell him it's for the Slug Club."

Tom was unlucky that one of the Heads this year was Hortensia Selwyn, a Slytherin. As a favour to Professor Slughorn, who'd given the recommendation to Headmaster Dippet that she be made Head Girl, Selwyn made sure the Slytherin Prefects had some or all of their Friday evenings free of official duties. This meant that the Prefects of other Houses took up the slack, but most of them didn't care about Slughorn's social club as much as the Slytherins did.

Hermione's nose wrinkled. "But there's eight weekends 'til the end of the year! Eight for one, that's unfair!"

Tom gave an indifferent shrug. "When have I ever cared about fairness?"

"Fine," Hermione sighed in resignation. "But you'll pretend you wanted to come to the ball, instead of moaning about talking to Muggles or having to wear a bowtie—and yes, you'll need a tie and tails! You'll smile for the photographer, shake hands with people even if you saw them lick crumbs off their fingers after eating the canapés, and be a Good Boy for Mum and Dad..."

"And pedal a unicycle backwards?"

"No, dance at least once."

"Even worse."

"It's five minutes at the most—what could go wrong?"

"I could tell you right before the music started that no one taught me how to dance."

Hermione choked. "Are you playing a joke on me, Tom? If you are, it's not funny!"

Tom gazed at her impassively. "Does it look like I'm joking you? Where would I have learned? Wool's didn't have a wireless set, and the only place I might have done is at a Muggle music hall—if they'd have let me in at my age. I haven't exactly spent much time in Muggle London since Second Year."

"I'll teach you," said Hermione quickly. "It wouldn't be music hall dancing, anyway—not in an event meant for selling tickets to rich people. All you have to do is count the time and keep off my feet. Here—"

She held out her hands, glanced down at them, wiped her palms on her skirt, and held them up to Tom again. Her eyes were bright and expectant.

Tom looked at her hands as if they were the last crushed beetle at the bottom of the student ingredient cupboard's communal jar.

"We made a deal," Hermione reminded him. "Please?"
Tom was very rarely confronted by the proof of his own ignorance. In class, he knew most of the subject material months or even years before they started. It wasn't hard when Flourish and Blott's kept a book list for years First through Seventh at the front counter, for all the students who'd forgotten their lists at home when they arrived to Diagon Alley to shop for their school supplies. When he learned something he didn't know, it was usually some small and irrelevant detail that wasn't written in the textbook, like the fact that Tentaculas were more docile when handled in low-light conditions.

This particular situation put him in mind of First Year, to his first broomstick riding lesson in Flying Class. It had shown him that there was only so much that a textbook could prepare one for. That he couldn't be an undisputed expert at every subject straight from the start. And that there were certain things that couldn't be learned through reading a textbook—at least not as well, and not as thoroughly, as being taught in person.

The person teaching him now was Hermione Granger.

Why shouldn't her knowledge be made his knowledge, too? There was no reason why it shouldn't. Hermione had never felt resentment about sharing information when they were younger, when all the books that he'd kept in his wardrobe at Wool's were books that had once belonged to her. And he had not resented her, at least, not after the first year or so when seeing her name on the interior bookplates had filled him with bitterness—but he'd quickly gotten over it after she'd initiated their friendship arrangement.

He begrudged her no longer. There was no reason why he should refuse her now.

He took her hands, and some detached part of his mind observed how slight they were compared to his own, and how every time he saw her, there was a different ink stain on her fingers. He remembered the first time when her hand had reached for his—he had wanted to slap it away. He couldn't recall why. Seeing her, having her close enough to touch, brought him to the verdict that nothing about it repelled him; instead he was drawn closer and closer, his gaze lingering on the delicate blue tracery of veins that ran from her soft palm down her wrist and into her sleeve.

"Eight for one," said Tom, tearing his gaze away. "The deal goes both ways."

She clasped his hands tightly. "Just do your part, and I'll do mine. Here," she nodded toward their feet, "watch and copy what I do."

She took a step to the side, and Tom followed. Then a step back, another step to the side in the opposite direction, then forwards.

"Just think of it as ornamental walking in the shape of a zigzag within a rectangle, repeated over and over," Hermione explained. "The point isn't to go anywhere, but to stay in one place until the music stops."

"I can't see why anyone bothers," Tom remarked.

"Socialisation, I suppose," said Hermione. "It was the only way young men and women in the old days could talk to each other privately. People cared about supervision back then, to an almost excessive degree."

"Hm," said Tom, who had picked up the steps and was now attempting to walk in reverse, so that he took the lead instead of Hermione. "What do you think they were talking about, if they needed the
privacy for it?"

Hermione snorted. "Probably asking if they could address each other by their Christian names instead of Mister This and Mademoiselle That. Things were rather mild in those days." She glanced up at him, noting the lift of his brow and the glint in his eyes. "Why, what did you think they'd be saying?"

"Oh," said Tom, a smile curling up the corners of his mouth, "I don't think I should say it; we haven't any supervision, after all."

"Well, I'm not sure if I want to know anymore," said Hermione, her steps faltering. She looked at him somewhat dubiously, brows furrowed in consternation. "When you say mysterious things and act intentionally vague like that, it's never a good sign."

Tom's grip on her hand tightened; he leaned in close and said, "To everyone else but you, Hermione."

A second later, the doorknob rattled and turned. The door was flung open, to admit the members of the homework club, laughing and chattering amongst themselves. Avery was burdened by a number of class textbooks, Rosier a stack of colourful magazines. Lestrange was crunching on an apple, while Mulciber was working on a thick wedge of Bakewell tart wrapped in a cloth napkin.

Upon their entering the classroom, the laughter withered away.

Hermione tugged her hands free and stepped away from Tom, her cheeks reddening in quiet mortification.

"Are we practising footwork today, then?" asked Black, his question echoing in the sudden and uncomfortable silence. "I've never seen anything like that on the duelling platform."

"They weren't duelling, you idiot," someone hissed from the back. It sounded like Nott.

"Yeah, I know," Black replied over his shoulder, "but someone had to say something. Riddle has his killing face on."

"This happens to be my regular face," Tom interjected, exuding charm through a placid smile fixed on his face, in plain contradiction to the tense atmosphere of the room. His gaze traversed the length of the classroom, regarding each member of the club with a second or two of eye contact. Nott glanced away immediately, his scrawny frame ducking behind Avery's much larger one.

"Er," said Black. "Same difference?"

He could sense their discomfort, the prickle of it feeling as if the hairs on his arms and the nape of his neck were being tugged with a gentle pressure. Concentrating more, delving further, he sensed in them a mix of embarrassment, nervous regret, and then, for one brief moment, a flash of curiosity intertwined with sordid appreciation.

"If there's anything you'd like to say," he continued, gesturing at the door with an open hand. It swung shut without having to draw his wand or speak an incantation. "You have my permission to speak. As members of this group, I value all of your opinions." He paused, but aside from a few shuffling feet, chewing sounds, and the rustle of paper, no one made a peep.
"No?" said Tom. "Very well, then. The topic of today's meeting is Inanimate Object Conjuration and Vanishing. Granger will help me demonstrate."

The session that followed was the most productive they'd had the whole year. No one asked to go to the bathroom or fetch something from their dormitory—a five minute task that some members had in the past stretched to near half an hour. No fires were set, nothing exploded, and by the end of the lesson, even the Fourth Years could reliably Conjure and Vanish a functional chalk duster.
— If Professor McGonagall is the "Have a biscuit, Potter" kind of teacher, then Professor Slughorn is the "Have a pineapple, Riddle" teacher. Just imagine him passing over the box of crystallised pineapple with his fingers coated in powdered sugar like the old "Pass me the controller, bro" meme with the Cheeto dust.

— Next chapter is the last of Fifth Year, which covers the end of the school year and the start of summer. No basilisk Chamber of Secrets subplot for now, sorry guys. It doesn't fit with the current sequence of events and I dislike railroading canon plot elements where they don't fit. If you've read Harry-centric AU fanfiction where he was born a Metamorphmagus, yet somehow goes through the whole plot of Book 1 with exactly zero changes to the original plot, you'll know what I'm talking about.

— The Veterans' Gala is not just a fanservice-y Yule Ball equivalent. It's got a plot relevant payoff, I promise! It's also a way to balance out the tone, because Tom is not being much of a Good Boy in this chapter.

**Tumblr credit for the illustration.**

The Slytherin Common Room is a place that screams old money, and isn't actually that comfortable to sit in, but it's still good for them Instagram photos. And for some reason, I imagine that it smells like swimming pool chlorine.
1943

Hermione had put so much preparation into taking the O.W.L.s that she was shaking on the walk to her assigned exam desk. An inkwell was set into an indentation in the desk, and beside it lay a brown quill, its metal nib stamped with the words 'Patented Anti-Cheating'. There was a cover sheet on the desk marked with the insignia of the Department of Magical Education, the time and date, and the name of the subject being examined. Beneath that was the official exam paper.

When the proctor announced the start of the exam and allowed the students to turn over the cover sheets, Hermione couldn't help but feel disappointed.

**Question 1.a:** Discuss the effect of the Stunning Charm when cast on a human wizard, magical creatures (Redcap, Erkling, Dragon), and an inanimate object.

**Question 1.b:** Give reasons for why the potency of the Stunning Charm may be affected by its subject. Include examples.

**Question 1.c:** List three common precautions taken when using the Stunning Charm to defend against a subject of unknown quality and quantity.

All of the questions were straightforward, practical, and phrased in such a way that she could tell what answers the examiners were looking for. Many of the theoretical concepts underpinning the practical magic (which was a separate part of the exam) overlapped with her other subjects.

Anyone who had read about the basics of magical theory knew that the increasing rate of difficulty between Vanishing a button and Vanishing a rabbit was a direct parallel to the difficulty in Stunning a rabbit versus Stunning a dragon. She had studied this topic for her Transfiguration exam, and she ended up quoting from the same authors and textbooks for the Defense exam. She was glad of the Anti-Cheating Quills; if the exam markers noted that her answers were suspiciously similar, the Quill proved that she wasn't copying from a smuggled answer sheet.

Hermione came out of the exam relieved that there hadn't been any surprises.

(A few weeks before the exam, she'd had a dream of turning over the cover sheet and finding that she couldn't answer a single question. She had screamed and fallen out of her four-poster; Twyla Ellerby had tossed a vial of Calming Draught from the stack on her nightstand before going back to sleep, pillow over her head.)

Well, no surprises to her, at least. When she left the exam room she could hear Clarence Fitzpatrick anxiously asking a few other Ravenclaws what they'd put down for Question Sixteen, 'Explain the meaning of a "Counter-Jinx" and how it differs from an "Anti-Jinx". Name an example of each.'
She found herself congregating with the Slytherins in the antechamber outside the Great Hall; she recalled that they'd waited here back in First Year, before they were led in by Professor Dumbledore for the Sorting Ceremony.

"Last exam of the year. Wonder when they'll send us our results," she heard Lestrange saying. "Mother said that if I get seven O.W.L.s, she'd buy me a new broomstick for next year, and I need time to practice. It's Crockett's last year—Sluggy'll have to pick a new Captain and Deputy this summer."

"Pater promised me tickets to the England versus Wales Quidditch trials if I get three or more Outstandings," Rosier bragged.

"My father said I'd be spending my summer learning the ropes at the Auror Dispatch Office no matter what marks I got," said Travers glumly. "I had better get at least five Exceeds Expectations. Or else."

"I've got one exam to go," said Tom, who'd made no mention of parents or summer plans, "so unlike the rest of you lot, I've not yet had a chance to relax."

"What exam do you have?" Hermione asked, joining the group. "They've finished the last of the core exams, so it's only the electives left."

"Muggle Studies," said Tom, his face impassive.

"But you're not even in that class!" Hermione cried. "I've never seen you there!"

"You signed up for that rubbish?" said Nott, his expression torn between a mix of scorn and disbelief.

"I don't take the class," Tom explained, one brow raising slightly at the vehemence of their reactions. "I asked Slughorn to put me on the exam roll as a bit of an experiment, you see. Is it possible to get an O.W.L. in a subject I don't take, provided that I've studied the subject from the textbooks? If it's at all possible, then I might as well keep History of Magic on for the N.E.W.T. next year, since showing up to the lesson is no different from not going at all."

"And Professor Slughorn let you do that?" said Hermione, scowling. She didn't want to feel jealous about it... but it honestly was a good idea. Why hadn't she thought of it too? She wasn't fond of Divination as a magical discipline, but she did quite well in Astronomy, and interpreting star signs and Tarot cards came down to memorising long lists of qualifiers. Care of Magical Creatures was the other Hogwarts elective she hadn't signed up for, but the exam had a practical component on animal handling, and she didn't think she could complete it with nothing but textbook instruction. "That's unfair to the rest of us."

"Slughorn lets me have anything I ask for," said Tom with supreme smugness. With one finger, he flicked the Prefect badge pinned to his robes so that it gave off a sweet chime. "I'd go so far as to say that he's quite fond of me."

The rest of the boys snickered, Lestrange looking at him in servile admiration. Nott, however, looked just as disgruntled about the situation as Hermione did.

Nott glanced in her direction, his eyes darting to the door.
"I'm heading back to the east wing for some revision," Hermione announced. "See you later, Tom."

She turned on her heel and left the group, whose conversation had devolved into a comparison of whose parents had offered the best gifts and the worst punishments for their impending O.W.L. marks. She personally found it distasteful that most of them had to be bribed or coerced to do well in school, as if they had no motivation of their own to study hard, no personal investment in ensuring their own success.

But things were different for their sort, weren't they? Success wasn't a personal achievement to them —success was an extension of a family legacy. Those Slytherin boys were accessories to a notable lineage, and their success was a reflection of prestige on a family name, a name that overshadowed any one individual identity or accomplishment.

Perhaps they admired Tom Riddle because Tom didn't care about their family names. He didn't care who was related to whom, or whose family controlled the most seats on the Wizengamot. He was talented and successful without the benefit of familial advantage; he treated one and all with the same cold disdain. He was a consummate egalitarian... until he encountered the rare person who earned the title of 'Special'.

She puzzled out the strange friendships of Slytherin House on her way to the East Courtyard, where she was met by Nott a few minutes later, who kept checking over his shoulder to make sure he hadn't been followed.

Hermione cast an alarm jinx to warn her if anyone approached the vicinity of the statue.

"You were right about Tom being a Legilimens," she said, somewhat reluctantly. "I think he's been using it on other people for weeks. According to the book, comprehensive Legilimency requires a wand and an incantation, but surface level sensing only needs prolonged eye contact."

"Weeks?" Nott gave a snort of derision. "It's closer to months. He's been doing it more and more lately, and the others haven't noticed a thing. I'm not good enough to block him—not if he's drawn his wand—but I can feel it when he's looking at me."

Months.

Hermione didn't volunteer her suspicions that Tom had been using surface level perception for years.

The book she'd borrowed, Insight of the Mind, had described examples of the many finer applications of Legilimency, and as she'd gone through the list, she'd found herself ticking box after box of things that applied to Tom Riddle. She'd recognised them at once; there had been too many coincidences over the years for it to be some fluke of accidental magic.

Perception, projection, transference, intrusion.

The second time she'd met him at Wool's. The few throwaway lines in the letters he'd written her, saying that he prided himself on judging others on their character. It wasn't the Muggle concepts of telepathy or hypnotism, but Legilimency that explained Tom's ability to spot those with dishonest intentions towards him. It was why he had allowed Hermione to be his 'friend', because he had seen that her offer of friendship had been made in goodwill. Tom's natural intuition; the way she'd heard his voice in her head; his special 'technique' of training animals. Sienna and Peanut in First Year, her
Owl Gilles in the summer before Second.

Of course, she couldn't say that he'd been doing any of it out of malicious intent, but he also wasn't doing it for any other reason but his own advantage. And if Hermione asked herself whether or not Tom would consider performing Legilimency out of malice, then the answer was a solid and resounding Yes.

"You've been studying Occlumency on your own?" Hermione asked. "I've noticed that you never look Tom in the eye anymore, not since Christmas."

"If I can help it, I try never to be alone in the same room as Riddle," said Nott, shoving his hands in his trouser pockets. "I don't know how you stand being around him. In fact, since Christmas, I've rather noticed you cosying up even closer to him."

"He's an interesting person once you get to know him. There's no one else in our year who understands magical theory like he does," Hermione said defensively. Then she glowered at him, adding, "And cosy or not, that's got nothing to do with you."

"I prefer it that way," Nott retorted, his lip curled in evident disdain. "That part of it is none of my business. Frankly, I find it all rather sickening. And in any event, you already know what I want to know."

She could hardly forget it, nor the deal they'd made.

Hermione would have felt guilt about sharing his secrets, if Tom had wanted his unique abilities to be kept a secret. But he hadn't, had he?

Before he'd known he was a wizard, he'd used it on her, and Hermione had doubts that she'd been the only one affected. The way he'd spoken to her, more like ordered her to tell him the truth, couldn't be a spontaneous fluke—not in the most generous person's interpretation of 'reasonable doubt'. It was practised, and he'd known what he was doing. Even before Tom had met her; before he'd known about the jurisdiction of magical authorities, or the legality of mind-affecting spells, he would have had no reason to restrain himself, especially as not one of the people around him had merited his concern or respect.

And now—even now—he was using Legilimency almost casually.

They hadn't been secrets she'd shared, anyway. Tom's full name, address, and guardian status were a matter of public record. Professor Dumbledore, who had visited Tom in the orphanage in the delivery of his Hogwarts letter, knew. Professor Slughorn, as Tom's Head of House, knew. The Board of Governors and the Headmaster, who signed off the bursary records indicating which students were to be given financial support each year, would most likely have access to that information as well.

So, they weren't secrets, not as such.

They were more like uncommon knowledge, just like the locations of each House's Common Room, which the average student assumed was a secret confined to members of each House... but anyone enterprising enough could find the other Common Room locations if they asked the right people or looked in the right books. Hermione knew that the Hufflepuff Common Room was on the Ground Floor somewhere, near the Kitchens. And the Slytherin Common Room, which Slytherin students were told had never been seen by non-Slytherins for centuries, was somewhere in the dungeons.
She'd deduced this from the references made by the Slytherin boys when they excused themselves from the homework club classroom to fetch a book from their dorms; they always left and came back within ten minutes, which ruled out any of the castle's towers.

(Hermione had figured out years prior that Gryffindor's Common Room was in one of the west towers, because of the red and gold banners they hung out of their dormitory windows during end-of-the-year Quidditch finals. When it came to subtlety, Gryffindors were sorely lacking in it.)

"I'm afraid there's nothing else I can tell you," Hermione said, tracing the carved vines on her wand with a finger. "Especially since I know that what you really want is something to hold over Tom's head. It's worth repeating how much of an awful idea that is."

She didn't have more information, anyway. From First Year, she'd tried to impress the importance of responsibility when it came to Tom's use of magic. It was one thing for him to delve too far into his magical research and run afoul of the law due to his own carelessness; it was another thing for Tom to find himself in that situation because she had, intentionally or not, incriminated him. And if that happened, it would be a tremendous waste of Tom's talent, when he could have been better off directed towards pursuits that were intellectually stimulating and far from being labelled morally unsound or socially objectionable.

"Is that a no?" said Nott, refusing to be turned off so easily by her refusal. "Not even for a book on Occlumency? Dream Divination or Animagus transformations? How about unpublished potions recipes? I think we have a book on brewing Memory Enhancement Potions—obviously, they're classed as a restricted substance by the Wizarding Examinations Board, but they're otherwise fine for everyday use." He fumbled into his pocket and came up with a folded slip of paper, offering it to Hermione. "If you learn anything new during the holidays, these are my directions. I have access to the whole library when I'm at home—I'm sure there's something that might convince you to re-evaluate your position. Something to make it worth your time."

She took the paper, and looked at the contents.

_The Mews_
_Broxtowe Abbey_
_Nottinghamshire_

"_The Mews?_" Hermione read. "You live in a stable?"

"You could try and make an effort not to sound so common, Granger," said Nott haughtily. "For all his faults, Riddle at least pretends he's not as common as dirt, and he makes it believable. I live in a manor house. The Mews are where we keep our owls and hawks. I won't have you sending letters to the house, so address them to the Mews and our elf will collect them when she cleans out the roosts."

Hermione had forgotten how antiquated the lives of pureblooded wizards were. For the most part, they wore the same uniforms and spoke the same English as everyone else at Hogwarts, although their accents tended to be closer to the drawling refinement of the British aristocracy compared to the accent shared by Tom and Hermione, which was the London standard of the educated classes, spoken by Mum and Dad and the broadcasters on the wireless.
She'd known that members of prestigious houses married young to preserve family names and family money, a custom she considered beyond archaic. From proofreading papers in the homework club, she'd noticed several boys spelling *connection* and *choose* as *connexion* and *chuse*, with Unnecessary Capitalisation all over the Place, which she thought an amusing quirk that made their writing sound like a treatise by Pepys or Swift. She hadn't expected—though she shouldn't be surprised, now that she thought on it—to find that if they didn't understand modern scientific terms, then it wasn't so unusual for them to be using words whose meanings had changed in vernacular, or rather, *Muggle* English.

(She understood the reasons for it, but not why Nott had to be so condescending about it.)

"There's little chance I'll find anything new during the holidays." Hermione lowered her voice, peering around furtively to check on her alarm jinx, before she continued, "It's not something that comes up in normal conversation."

Nott set his jaw in obstinance. "Can't you find a way to introduce the subject?"

"You know," said Hermione, flicking her wand to disable the alarm, "you sound as obsessed about Tom as those girls who just about lose their minds when the professor announces a new group project."

"Mum says we'll have to meet up in Diagon Alley next week so you can get fitted for your jacket," Hermione told Tom, as they put away their uniform robes on the Hogwarts Express. "The tailor in Diagon does alterations on Muggle clothes if she has a pattern to work from, and we've moved our custom there since many of the London shops have closed due to the war. The ones that are left are only making uniforms for officers."

"And naturally, you told your mother the minute I said I'd come," said Tom, pressing his temple against the cool glass of the window.

"Of course I told her," Hermione said, observing the downward curve of Tom's mouth; he'd been lukewarm about delivering on his side of their agreement. "Oh, poo-poo for you. There's no reason why you can't be gracious about it—it's as much of a career opportunity for you as it is for me. Mum paid for the tickets and your formal fittings, which you'll get to keep; you could wear it under a dress robe if one of your 'friends' ever invites you to a wizard party."

"I can't imagine that she was pleased about buying the extra ticket."

"Why shouldn't she be?" Hermione asked. "It's all going to a good cause."

"Hm," said Tom, gazing out at the rolling miles of farmland, green and lush and ripe with wheat. "I just had a feeling."
Hermione bought a few bars of chocolate for her family when the sweets trolley came by. With sugar rationed for the last three and a half years, sweets were hard to come by, and chocolate was one of the small luxuries that was sorely missed in most British households. The Grangers had toured the confectionery shop in Diagon Alley before the start of the war, and wizarding chocolate had been her parents' favourite out of the vast selection. They'd never developed a taste for the strange jelly beans or the squeaking peppermint mice, and they hadn't been courageous enough to try the cockroach clusters, even though the shopkeeper had assured them that they tasted like peanuts and nothing else.

Chocolate, however, was universal.

She was excited to see her family again. As much as she loved Hogwarts, her love came from its being a centre of learning, and Hermione's love of learning was different from her love of family. Hogwarts wasn't home to her; it didn't mean the same thing to her as it meant to Tom.

She always looked forward to the end of the year, because it meant going home to Mum and Dad, who for most of her life had guided, cared for, and loved her. The professors at Hogwarts guided, and cared—as much as was required by the terms of their employment—but she was one of a hundred Ravenclaws to Professor Beery, her Head of House. For most of her time at Hogwarts, they were distant figures while she was expected to be self-sufficient, and after the issuance of her Prefect badge, she was herself expected to be a carer to the Ravenclaw First Years.

(She was only supposed to take care of the First Year girls, with Fitzpatrick as the guide to the First Year boys, but after a week or two of Fitzpatrick bumbling about when answering their questions, his default response had turned to, "Go ask Hermione". Her know-it-all reputation had transformed into an advantage overnight, though she couldn't say she was entirely happy with the increased workload.)

It was difficult to express her thoughts about it, because Home was more than a specific house on a specific street, more than familiar rooms whose every inch she'd explored over the years, or the right people who knew her favourite stories and cooked her favourite foods. It was a combination of all of the above: connection and attachment, closeness and familiarity, all the things that couldn't be reproduced by magic, no matter how powerful the caster.

These thoughts occupied her mind when she and Tom waited on the platform for the crowds to clear out of the way.

"Where should I send my letters?" asked Hermione, setting her owl cage atop her trunk. She got onto her toes and peered into the crowd, which was obscured by the billows of steam pouring out from the locomotive's boiler. She sighed; there were dozens of people waiting to pass through to the Muggle side of King's Cross.

"I'll be at the Leaky Cauldron for the summer," Tom said, who had grown tall enough that he didn't have to crane his neck to see over the heads of other people. "It's dearer than Hogsmeade, but I booked early this time, so they didn't try to shove a double on me like they did last time."

"You're in London—that's fantastic news!" Her smile began to wane. "Oh, I wish they hadn't cut our petrol tickets; I'd have liked to visit every other day."

"Try a Refilling Charm on the petrol tank," suggested Tom. "Liquids are easier to duplicate than solids, especially if it's not food. The visualisation is always harder when you have to make sure it tastes right."
"I've never practised refilling anything other than water," Hermione said, her brows knitting together while she parsed her way through Tom's suggestion. She'd made it a habit of doing so when it came to Tom; whenever he came up with grand ideas he often left the logistics of them up in the air. 'Operation: Order of Merlin' was one such example of his 'ideas'. "I'm afraid to cause an accident if I was experimenting with petrol. According to The Theory of Transformative Charmwork, a perfect duplication copies all the original object's physical properties, which includes the phase states—and petrol in any open container produces vapours. It sounds terribly dangerous to me."

"You know, Hermione," said Tom musingly, "I can't see how the Sorting Hat ever thought you'd make a good Gryffindor. A Gryffindor would have just done it with no questions."

"And blasted off his own eyebrows."

"And that," Tom agreed. "How about practising on paraffin wax or petroleum jelly first? They're quite similar on a structural level, and if you've learned to duplicate them, you can always Transfigure them to petrol if you can't cast a Refilling Charm."

"No," Hermione shook her head, "I'm going to master the Refilling Charm this summer. It's on the N.E.W.T. curriculum—"

"—We just finished our O.W.L.s a few days ago."

"Which means we have to start worrying about the N.E.W.T.s," Hermione said, but Tom didn't try to refute her statement; he just gave her a look of fond resignation and waited for her to continue. "Refilling a cup of wine is on the Charms practical exam, so only being able to do water isn't good enough. If I can successfully Refill a petrol tank, then I can try learning to enchant with it—if our motor's tank tops itself off, then Dad won't have to count his ration tickets whenever he has to visit a patient."

"Enchanting Muggle artefacts now, Hermione?" remarked Tom, a pleased smirk creeping across his face.

"It's for a good cause!"

"If that's what you tell yourself, I wouldn't dare to correct you."

"Well!" Hermione planted her hands on her hips, eyes bright with defiance. "If it lets me visit Diagon Alley every day, then you'd benefit from it too."

"Would I?"

"I'd help you with your writing; no one researches like I do. And you'd help me work out how to add more enchantments to the motor. It stands to reason if I can Refill the tank, I could Silence the exhaust or Cushion the suspension, too."

Tom's smile grew wider and wider. "Oh, what's this? Could it be what the Ministry calls 'Improper Use of Magic'? Is our dear little Hermione finally seeing the light?"

"Hey!" cried Hermione, who was older than Tom by several months and hadn't hesitated to point it out when they were ten years old and exchanging letters. At that age, the difference of several months was counted as something significant. "I'm not little!"
(She could deny that particular point, because Tom was right about the other one. The Ministry wouldn't approve, but the Ministry wouldn't know, so it was all moot.)

"Don't complain about it," said Tom, patting the top of her head. "It's endearing."

Tom's fingers were in her hair.

Somehow—and despite the tone of his words—it didn't feel at all condescending. It had nothing in common to the primary school hair tugging done in class by little boys who sat one row behind little girls. Instead, it was soft and gentle and Hermione found that she'd leaned into his hand, and was leaning in rather close to Tom's chest by the time he'd pulled his hand back, the slightest touch of colour high on his cheekbones, although that could have been explained by the combination of high summer and the radiant heat produced by a dozen locomotives in the enclosed structure of a busy train station.

Tom cleared his throat. "The queue's gone now. Come on, let's go."

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Dear Tom,

When I tried to duplicate petroleum jelly, I keep getting a thin, oily liquid mixture. It should be a semi-solid state at room temperature. What am I doing wrong?

---

Dear Hermione,

Your mistake is trying to duplicate too much at once, from too small a sample of starting material. If I had five loaves of bread, and was told it had to feed five thousand people, I wouldn't immediately try to multiply one loaf into five thousand. I'd do it in batches of one loaf into three or four, although most people would find it hard to maintain focus on anything greater than that number. A lower ratio keeps the spell boundaries more stable, resulting in a more stable product.

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Dear Tom,

It worked! It seems that it's easier to refill a half-used container of petroleum jelly than it is to fill a container that's all used up apart from a few smudges at the bottom. I wish I'd known that before I spent two hours casting the spell over and over on a near-empty container...
Dear Hermione,

Simpler materials are easier to duplicate at higher ratios. It would take a master level wizard to turn a single crumb into a whole cake, but a competent wizard should be able to duplicate a scoop of flour or sugar into a large bag in one go. The reason why wizarding grocery stores are still in business is because the average wizard is terminally incompetent.

I have a question of my own: Why is it unacceptable for a woman to fix her lipstick at the dinner table?

The first few weeks of the summer holiday passed in a daily exchange of short notes about magical theory on Hermione's side and women's insecurities on Tom's, because apparently targeting his readers' self-esteem was the most efficient way to sell lifestyle advice.

On one hand, Hermione was pleased that Tom's choice of occupation was so innocuous, and that focusing on writing his articles meant that he no longer seemed to be interested in mind control spells or going out and joining the Anti-Grindelwald volunteer resistance. On the other hand, it didn't mean she was happy to see Tom condoning wasteful materialism, or encouraging lady hostesses to turn their summer parties from a friendly gathering of family members into a petty battle of dominance between herself, her neighbours, and her mother-in-law.

("They actually believe that the mark of a good wife and mother is the ability to stack a trifle ten layers high," wrote Tom in one of his letters. "If they believe it—as ridiculous as it is—why should I dissuade them from it? Why shouldn't I sell them on a temporary Hardening Charm technique to build their meringue up to fifteen layers? It's mutually beneficial for the both of us.")

One evening, when Hermione was summarising the progress of the day's studies in her homework planner, she realised that Tom had not become a better person by taking up writing as his hobby and summer job. He'd merely exchanged one form of manipulation for another, and the form he'd chosen was one considered socially acceptable.

Her consolation came from the fact that readers had a choice whether or not they took Mr. Bertram's advice; what he shared was magical knowledge, a different and more accessible format that differed from the clinical style of a textbook, but the effect was the same. The intent with which they used the knowledge was up to the readers' determination, and it wasn't Tom's responsibility to decide for them. That was what separated it from the manipulation of the Imperius Curse, whose malicious potential didn't involve consent from the parties involved.

Despite her misgivings, it wasn't enough to make Hermione reconsider inviting Tom to the Veterans' Charity Gala. The tickets were already ordered, the clothing prepared, and the travel arrangements made.

The evening of the event, the Grangers drove the motorcar to Charing Cross, where they picked Tom up outside the Leaky Cauldron, and proceeded to the hotel off Hyde Park where they'd once shared an afternoon tea after shopping in Diagon Alley. That had been several weeks before the start
of the war, and Hermione hadn't been back since, so the changes due to wartime austerity were more striking than ever.

The taxi ranks were empty, and the street in front of the hotel was quiet for what should have been a popular thoroughfare of central London. The retraction of the civilian petrol ration had taken its toll on the segment of the population who owned automobiles. Hermione had noticed the quietness when she'd returned for the summer to the house on Argyll Street, where most of their neighbours had owned motors, but now it was only the Grangers who regularly drove anywhere—and even that, for the most part, was limited to medical emergencies.

Hermione had, after a few weeks of practising, successfully managed the Refilling Charm on petrol, after working her way up from petroleum jelly, cooking oil, and kerosene. At first, she had been nervous about testing her product, but she'd realised that she didn't have to test the burn rate of an open bowl of petrol by throwing a match on it and running. She was a witch: she could stand well back and cast an *Incendio* at a distance, and protect herself with a Shield Charm in case it exploded.

She'd filled up the family motor car, and was planning to fill several jerry cans for when she left for Hogwarts in September. She hadn't quite got the hang of enchanting the tanks to fill themselves up, but she had speculated that it would be similar to the way the cistern in their tent's bathroom never ran out of water.

Until then, she and her family could drive around London at their leisure. Mum had even offered Hermione driving lessons since they had the fuel to spare, and the roads around their neighbourhood were empty of other motorists. Hermione had accepted. She hadn't liked broomstick training back in First Year, but operating a motor car involved sitting in a padded seat while turning a wheel and moving a few pedals around. It wasn't physically demanding, so surely it couldn't be too difficult?

Hermione recounted the story to Tom as they sat in the back of the Grangers' motor, while Dad drove around the back of the hotel to find a parking space.

"...We stopped on Willoughby Street because I flooded the engine and it overheated, so Mum and I got out to wait. A man came out of his house and asked what happened, then another man appeared, and soon enough we had four strange men arguing with each other about what had gone wrong with our motor," said Hermione, who had not enjoyed the experience of being out on a hot summer day, with an engine that burned at the touch. "And then one of them said that this was what happened when women were allowed to drive. Mum got so cross at him."

"I'm not certain I'll like the end of this story."

"Everything ended well," Hermione assured him. "Over half the farms in Britain are being run by the Women's Land Army. If women hadn't learned to drive, no one would have anything to eat."

"*They wouldn't,*" Tom pointed out. "*But they're Muggles."

"Tom!" Hermione cried, peering out of the window to check if there were other people nearby. "You promised you'd be a Good Boy! One of the conditions of our deal is that you can't say the word 'Muggle' for the rest of the night. You know that the Ministry urges wizards to blend in when out in public."

"By that they meant wizards should take off their pointy hats when leaving Diagon Alley. But since you sat through eight of Slughorn's dinners," sighed Tom, "I suppose I can refrain from using the 'm-word' for the rest of the evening."
"Good," said Hermione brightly, patting him on the shoulder. "You can start now."

She opened the passenger door and slid out of the motor car, Tom following behind her.

The exterior windows of the Royal Aspen Hotel were covered by black-out curtains as a deterrent to German aerial bombers. By contrast, the interiors dazzled. The hotel was well-lit and well-appointed, with gleaming parquet floors, a grand staircase in the foyer where several couples were queuing up to have their portraits taken by a hired photographer; crystal chandeliers were the centrepiece of the ballroom, the walls of which were draped in regimental banners representing the prior services of the veterans in attendance. Hermione's eyes lingered on the snake within a laurel wreath that was the insignia of the Royal Army Medical Corps, her father's service.

"I wonder what the soldiers would think of all this," said Tom, waving a hand at the table loaded with finger-foods, and the section at the end where a hotel attendant was ladling punch and pouring sparkling wine for the guests.

The food wasn't as sumptuous as it would have been before war rationing, as she could see by the square edges on the potted meat served on crackers that it had come out of a can. The devilled eggs were more devil than eggs, and she was sure that the hotel chefs had used salad cream instead of proper mayonnaise. Even the drinks weren't really from Champagne or Bordeaux; the punch was more seltzer and syrup than actual alcohol—not that Mum would accept that as a valid excuse for Hermione to have a glass.

There was more than enough for everyone, but it lacked the extravagance of the past; the event organisers had done their best with what was available. Hermione acknowledged that a spread like this was better than hardtack and pork hash or whatever soldiers were served in the field.

"I don't think it matters," she said. "Not if it means the money raised ensures supplies and comforts for the soldiers. And besides, it's not like they'll ever know about this party."

Looking around the ballroom, Hermione saw that she and Tom were two of the younger guests in attendance. The rest of the guests were veterans of the Great War and their families, and by the uniforms she saw them wearing—which were decorated with rank badges and medals—they were mostly commissioned officers. There were also a few young men in modern uniforms with officers' pips on their shoulders; she presumed them to be the sons and nephews of the ladies who'd organised the evening, visiting London on leave.

"Should we introduce ourselves around, or eat something first?" Hermione asked, glancing at Tom.

Tom regarded the food table with a look of disdain. "There's nothing here that I find appetising. I think I'll just have a tray sent up when I get back to The Cauldron."

"Fine," Hermione huffed, grabbing him by the elbow. "Let's go make some acquaintances."

"I've never seen you like this at Slughorn's dinner parties," Tom noted.

"That's because Professor Slughorn is always asking about other people's families, and since they're all wizards, there's no one I know or recognise," said Hermione. "But these are people I do know. Oh! Over there! That's Roger Tindall—his father and mine are members of the same Alumnus Society."
She dragged Tom in the direction of a slender young man with curly hair that was a shade between brown and blond. He had a few moles on his cheeks and the side of his chin that detracted from the overall symmetry; nevertheless, they gave him an interesting and not unpleasant appearance when viewed as a whole. His eyes were a clear blue, his features charming enough, not that she paid much attention to how people looked when she could focus on what they said and how they acted. Like Tom, he was dressed in civilian garb: white tie and stiff white shirtfront under a black tailcoat and pressed black trousers.

"Roger!" Hermione called, and he turned aside from his conversation to examine the new arrivals.

"Hermione? Hermione Granger?" he said, his eyebrows rising up in surprise. "I haven't seen you in years."

Roger Tindall came from a well-regarded old family whose wealth lay in the breadth of their connections. He was a few years older than Hermione—he must be nineteen or twenty now—and their mothers used to have tea together at the Royal Aspen before the war. She'd known him then, but that was before she had gone to Hogwarts, and since Hogwarts, she'd had very little contact with Muggle friends and their families. In fact, the people (who weren't family members) with whom she spent most of her time outside of Hogwarts were limited to Sigismund Pacek and Tom Riddle.

"How do you do?" said Hermione. "Mum said that you've gotten into Sandhurst. Congratulations! I'd have never taken you for having military inclinations, but I suppose everyone wants to do their part these days."

"I'm well, thank you. Give Mrs. Granger my regards," replied Roger, who had gotten over his surprise and was now looking her over. She expected she was rather different to the ten or eleven year old Hermione he'd known in the past; she couldn't say she'd grown that much taller, but she was a bit more confident now after learning about her magical birthright. And she was wearing a new dress from Gladrag's which had been tailored to size by the saleswitch, and professional magical tailoring was just as good as Muggle bespoke.

"You look very well, Hermione," continued Roger, "I heard you got into Donwell, though I would've been shocked if they hadn't let you in. As for military inclinations: I can say I've no interest in going to the front—not that Mother would let me even if I wanted to. I find that I'm rather set on Military Intelligence. There are a great many opportunities to study thermionic tabulators with them that aren't offered to civilians."

"Computers!" said Hermione excitedly. "I've only studied the old punch card tabulators—mechanical, of course—but I hear there are great strides being made in electronic tabulation. A great deal more complex, to be sure, but anyone invested in secrecy wouldn't dare code information so simply that it might be broken by hand."

"Exactly," Roger nodded. "And you, Hermione? When we were children, I recall that you wanted to be the next Doctor Granger. Should I expect a stethoscope and Gladstone bag when next I see you? Though I should hope that won't be in ten years' time."

Hermione laughed, cheeks flushing. "Perhaps you will. My parents have offered to start me in the clinic when I'm eighteen, although that's as much for wanting to support the effort as it is to stay on the vital occupations list—just as you said, I've also got no interest in the front. But there are other things that I feel I'm up for."

"As tenacious as I remember!" Roger toasted Hermione with his glass of punch, then his attention
turned to Tom. "She must be a handful at times, Mister—? Pardon me, you seem to have me at a disadvantage."

"Tom Riddle," Tom spoke smoothly, offering his hand.

Roger shook it, very briefly, and seemed to wince when he drew his hand back. He studied Tom for a few seconds, his eyes tracing Tom's features, with a puzzled look in them, as if he was trying and failing to place Tom Riddle as a familiar face in the family compendium of social connections.

Tom stared back at him unflinchingly.

"'Riddle'," murmured Roger, taking a deep swallow of punch. "Any relation to the North Riding Riddles?"

"Tom is an—" Hermione began.

"Yes," said Tom.

Roger's momentary confusion dissolved, and he nodded politely to Tom.

Hermione's head whipped around to Tom. "Tom..."

Tom's hand brushed against hers, then she felt her hand being squeezed by his—a fleeting gesture of wordless reassurance—and then he let her go and was inclining his head toward Roger Tindall, his face smooth and blank of all expression, except for the flicker of twitching muscle on his cheek.

"I am," Tom said. "My father is also named 'Tom Riddle'. You've heard of him?"

"Not personally, no," said Roger. "But I believe my grandfather knows him. Fought with him in, what, Ninety-Nine? I say, that's half a century ago! They were in the Nineteenth Regiment—" he jerked his head in the direction of the wall, hung with banners. "That black one, the crown and cross, that's theirs—Princess Alexandra's Own. But enough about him. What do you do, Riddle?"

"I study at a boarding school in Scotland. It's small and very exclusive, or so I've been told," said Tom, whose shoulders had stiffened at Roger's words; he now appeared to be vibrating with impatience for the end of their conversation.

"You're a Gordonstoun man, then?" Roger asked.

"The school's farther north, actually," said Tom. "It doesn't have Gordonstoun's reputation or renown, but that might be a good thing as I've never seen any use for their famous discipline."

Roger chuckled. "I went to Charterhouse, and the worst they had was cloister football—and that was strictly optional. Never saw the use for Gordonstoun's methods, but then again, I've never been one in need of the old 'straightening up'. I shouldn't expect you to be one either; Hermione wouldn't put up with a bloke who can't keep his nose squeaky clean. Isn't that right?"

"Yes," Hermione agreed, giving Tom a sideways glance. "And that goes for boys who can't keep up with me. Tom's always been a good boy on both counts."

"And I never forget her birthday," Tom added, returning her glance with a fond smile of his own, which was for Hermione's benefit as much as it was for Roger's. "She says it's my best quality.
Speaking of good qualities, do you mind making an introduction to your grandfather? If he served with my father, I'd like to pay my respects to him."

"We'd like to," Hermione corrected him. "It's been years since I've seen Major Tindall; I wouldn't want to leave tonight without a 'How do you do' at least."

"Er, of course," said Roger, whose expression had shown the barest hint of disappointment in Hermione's imminent departure. "He's over by the corner, in the smoking section. Not one for mingling, as you can tell."

Roger led them over to where the older veterans had congregated, their uniforms pinned with more gilt and ribbons than on any of the younger men. They'd lit cigars and cigarettes, the burning tobacco eddying in a smelly haze around them. Someone had broken out a snifter of brandy, if the short glass tumblers filled with amber liquid were any indication.

Hermione could see why these old gentlemen weren't interested in the social mingle; a number of them had canes leaning against their chairs.

Major Tindall was one of them. He was heavy-set and moustached, looking comfortable with a smouldering cigar in one hand and a brandy glass in the other. He wore a white waistcoat—the buttons of which were clearly straining at the stomach—under a uniform mess jacket with thick gold braid on the shoulders and white piping along the sleeves, marked with a pip on each cuff in the shape of a crown. His left leg was propped up on an unoccupied chair, the hem rolled back to show a length of his upper foot and ankle, which, contrary to one's expectations, was not wrinkly, liver-spotted flesh, but a carven section of smooth wood.

"Grandfather," said Roger, greeting the old Major, "may I introduce a few guests? This is Hermione Granger; she came to Annabelle's birthday, that year Father got us a pair of puppies—"

"I remember her," Major Tindall interrupted, dropping his cigar into the ashtray at his elbow. "Dear Helen's little girl! My word, you're not so much of a girl anymore, are you? Roger, m'boy, you've better eyes than this old man—surely you've noticed—"

"Ahem," Roger coughed, looking away in embarrassment. "Helen Granger's daughter, yes. Quite accomplished in her own right, but I digress. Grandfather, may I acquaint you with Hermione's, um, friend? Riddle, this is my grandfather, Major Walter Tindall."

"Tom Riddle," said Tom. The lines of his body were rigid, but his eyes shone bright with eagerness. He offered his hand. "Pleasure to meet you, sir. Your grandson tells me that you served with my father. Nineteenth Regiment, he says."

Just as Roger had done, Major Tindall fell silent for a moment. Taken aback, as if experiencing a split second of uncanny déjà vu.

Major Tindall swept Tom over with his eyes, squinting at him and even tilting his head.

"Sir?" Tom prompted.

"Oh... Oh my! I say!" Major Tindall pressed one thick-fingered hand, which had a minute earlier been holding a cigar, over his chest. The other hand lifted his glass of brandy to his lips, whereupon he took a fortifying gulp. "Thomas, you sly old dog. No! Don't tell me—you didn't—!"
"I'm sorry," said Hermione, eyes flitting from the Major to Tom. "What's happening?"

"I don't know," whispered Roger. "Grandfather?"

"Riddle," Major Tindall mumbled through a mouthful of brandy, "Lieutenant Thomas Riddle, I knew him—was his superior officer during the war. Went mufti with him in the Transvaal for a fortnight—shot ourselves a good half-dozen antelopes each—they called 'em springboks over there, as good as beef but twice as lean. Never took that man for a rakehell; oh, certainly he could charm a girl—I remember there was that lovely little Flemish farmer's daughter who had her eye on him—Saskia van Something-or-Other, a sweet young thing, dead shot at eighty paces with a Mauser, if I do say so myself. Took the recoil with nary a flinch..."

Major Tindall cleared his throat and went on, "Riddle always got more than his fair share of looks whenever we billeted the troops. But he found himself a wife and brought her home right after the war ended and he left the service, while I stayed on for the next war." He nodded at his left leg. "And you can see what I got for it—got one foot in the grave, hah, as the old army sawbones called it."

"The war?" said Tom, returning the conversation back to the subject of his interest. "You mentioned the Transvaal. I assume you're talking about the war with the Boer states of Africa? The second war ended in 1902."

The Boer War.

Hermione remembered a book she'd had—she remembered most books she owned—that she'd given away years ago in a Christmas donation. It was military history, full of maps and battle diagrams and casualty lists; it was informational, but not at all enjoyable. She'd put it in the charity box, because she recalled there was a boy at the orphanage who had liked that book on Napoleon, another book she had had no qualms about parting with.

_Skirmishes of the Second Boer War._

Tom obviously remembered it too.

"Yes," said Major Tindall, who looked a fraction more composed, though his eyes still lingered on Tom's face. "He married his girl in Aught-Three or Four. Good God, that must be forty years ago! You can't be more than twenty, can you?"

"I'll be seventeen come December."

"Goodness. Poor Mary," Major Tindall muttered to himself, setting aside his brandy. "The shock of a lifetime, dear Lord. Of course she'll have to be told; it's the right thing to do. This isn't the sort of thing one can keep hidden away forever... A proper gentleman ought to take responsibility if he's any man at all..."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Tom, "but who might this Mary be?"

"Mrs. Mary Riddle," said Major Tindall. "Lieutenant Riddle's wife. She'd be your, ah, stepmother? Roger, have the young folks got a name for it? I can't for the life of me think of better."

"I'm afraid not, Grandfather," Roger answered, who was looking rather pale. "Riddle, are you sure you're not their lawful son...?"
"I've never met a Mrs. Mary Riddle," Tom said. "I've never heard of her until just now. My mother named me after my father, and I was born and raised in London. If they're the Riddles of North Riding—Yorkshire, I presume—I don't suppose you have their directions? I'd very much like to contact her—them—if it would be at all possible."

"It's been years since I last spoke to 'em," said Major Riddle regretfully. "They don't partake in the London life—" here he gestured at the ballroom and the crowds of milling guests. "They live in the country and as far as I know, keep to themselves. I can't recall their address, but I'm sure that if you know someone at the Military Records Office, they'd pull his directions from their files."

Tom's eyes darted to Hermione's, and they shared a significant look. This was a lead they should follow up on, as soon as possible.

For the next half hour, they made conversation with Major Tindall, who had a large trove of amusing anecdotes from his military days, although Roger's pained expression indicated that it wasn't that large, and that he'd heard the punchline of every story before. Roger's discomfort didn't fade by the end of the story, which was about an enlisted man in their company who had gotten drunk and traded his rifle for a native's spear, then showed up to parade the next morning with it.

In fact, it grew more pronounced as Major Tindall waxed nostalgic about the good old days when men were men, and not scoundrels like the Lieutenant Thomas Riddle, or milksops like his nephew, who had apparently got a doctor to diagnose him with something serious enough to have him struck off from potential service, and whether or not the ailment was real was made ambiguous. The Major then started on Roger Tindall's hopeful future service, all the strings pulled for Sandhurst, just for a desk commission...

"I, personally, find it very admirable," Hermione put in, during a lull when Major Tindall went to refresh his throat with a second helping from the brandy snifter. "I think everyone should find a position that suits their strengths. Not everyone has to be able to shoot a rifle or dig a trench to do their part for Britain. I couldn't do that—in fact, I get tired digging up carrots in the local victory garden."

"No one's expecting you to do any of that," said Tom quickly, searching for some way to settle any contention and take his leave politely. "General consensus says that each sex's strengths lie in opposite directions. And for men, that's manual labour."

"I don't see why what they say matters," said Hermione. "Few people understand the concept of differencing algorithms, and there's no sense in throwing away talent just because certain people expect things due to other people being born a certain way."

"Very well said." Roger gave Hermione a relieved smile, which looked slightly forced. The whole situation must have been desperately uncomfortable for him, Hermione realised. Being made privy to the tawdry details of other men's personal lives could do that to anyone's composure. "The band's warming up. Grandfather, do you mind if we bid our adieus for now?"

"Get on, then," Major Tindall waved them off. "Take her for a turn around the floor, Roger. I'd volunteer myself, but these old bones have let me down one too many times. Riddle, stay and keep me company, won't you?"

"Hermione?" said Roger, offering her his arm. "Would you like to dance?"
"Oh," she said, glancing at Tom, who was topping up Major Tindall's glass. Did the brandy snifter look fuller than the last time he'd poured from it, or was that just her imagination? Hadn't there been around a quarter left? "Um. Why not?"

She took Roger's arm, following him to the dance floor as the musicians began to play.

"So..." Roger began, hesitantly. One hand reached for Hermione's, the other for her waist. "Your, ah, friend Riddle is someone's natural-born son. Grandfather can't keep his mouth shut, so half the veterans will know by the end of the evening. Good job the Riddles live in Yorkshire; they'd be the centre of a scandal if the news broke with them in London."

"Tom has never met his father," Hermione replied, with as much confidence as she could muster. Half her attention was spent making sure she didn't squash Roger's toes beneath her low-heeled slippers. "He's never been to Yorkshire. He deserves to know who his family is."

"Some family," said Roger, shaking his head. "If my memory is accurate, then your Tom has an older brother—half-brother—twice his age, also named Tom. Family name, of course, but it'll make things terribly messy, especially when you throw the inheritance into question."

"What inheritance?"

"The Riddles own a village up in the north. Old family—they made a fortune in coal back when the mines were running flush. The mines are mostly closed these days with the men all gone, but the land around them is still theirs."

"I see."

Hermione could see Tom being pleased by that—coming from an old, wealthy family must have been every orphan's dream. But she could see him equally bitter about it, because he'd been raised as a nameless and destitute orphan, his magical birthright denied to him until he was eleven years old, his familial connections a mystery until tonight, only revealed to him by an uncommon stroke of fortune.

"Hermione," spoke Roger in a quiet voice, over the strumming of the band, "he's not done anything untoward, has he? He might have old blood, but I can tell he's not been raised that way—not if his father is the scoundrel that Grandfather thinks he is."

"No!" said Hermione fiercely, squeezing Roger's hand with more force than she'd intended. "I've known him for years, and he's never been ill-mannered to me. Tom isn't his father; he can't be, not if he's never even met the man."

"I'd have worried about you," said Roger. "And I still am. You must see, Hermione, that he's not exactly our sort, is he?"

"I'm not sure what you mean by that."

"Just... be careful, please?" he said. "I know men like him—he's a smooth one, a charmer. I can tell that he's going to go after the family money, and he won't take no for an answer."

That sounds like Tom, she thought. He can be incredibly single-minded when he sets his sights on a goal. The only way to dissuade him is to distract him with something of equal value.
"He's entitled to have it," replied Hermione. "He's part of the family too."

"He also looks at you as if he thinks he's entitled to your company," Roger whispered, then his eyes followed the movement of something over Hermione's shoulder. "Here he comes. By the look on his face, I don't think he likes me. Right, Hermione, I'll see you later?" He dropped a perfunctory kiss to the air by Hermione's cheek, then let go of her hand. "Write to me; my mother forwards my correspondence when I go back for the new term."

Roger made himself scarce, just as Tom stepped up to his vacated position and offered his own hand to Hermione, his face peculiarly blank, his expression unreadable.

"Come on, didn't I promise you a dance?" asked Tom.

Hermione let him take her hand and set his other hand on her waist; he held his arms at stiff angles from his body, and she guessed that he was unused to this particular form of nearness. She couldn't recall many instances of his touching other people in or out of class—not willingly at least—and he hadn't had his hand on her waist when they'd practised dancing that day in the empty classroom. She could feel his fingers curling around the ribbon sash sewn to the waistline of her dress; they were close enough that she could discern the direction of hair growth beneath the line of his jaw, the follicles ever so slightly dark from where he'd shaved that morning. She noted that it would be years yet before he could grow a full beard: the area between his chin and upper lip was far from being connected.

She had to wonder if Tom was looking at her in the same way. Was he observing how the part in her hair was off-centre? Did he notice black smudges above her eyelids where her mascara had smeared? Mum had helped her apply it with a tiny toothbrush, but Hermione had worn cosmetics so rarely in her life that she hadn't gotten into the habit of keeping her hands from touching her face. She wasn't so much self-conscious about her appearance—she'd never known Tom to be overly concerned with other people's comeliness or their lack of it, or even his own vanity—as she was curious about what things suddenly became prominent in such close quarters.

Tom held her a lot closer than Roger had, and it turned out that this was so he could murmur in her ear without being overheard, his mouth so close to the curve of her ear that when they turned with the rest of the dancers on the floor, she felt the lightest graze of his lips.

"We are going to break into the Military Records Office."

Hermione jerked back. "That's a horrible idea!"

"Shhh!" Tom looked quickly over his shoulder, but no one had noticed.

"It is!" whispered Hermione. "We can't use magic outside of the cellar without the Ministry's Trace finding us. And those aren't the only rules we'd be breaking. What do you think will happen if the police are called? Getting expelled from Hogwarts is only the least of it; they'd execute us as spies if they caught us!"

"If you've a better idea, let's hear it, then."

"I'm going to tell Mum," said Hermione in her most assertive voice, ignoring Tom's scowl of displeasure. No doubt in Tom's mind, the notion of telling Mum was an infraction equal to calling the police or dobbling to a professor. "She doesn't know everyone here, but she knows people who know other people. And once they know of the circumstances, they'll be eager to help, even if that
includes pulling a few favours."

Tom sighed, and the warm puff of his breath whistled past her ear. "I'm still keeping 'Operation: Break-In' up my sleeve. Just in case."

"It's going to stay there," Hermione told him. "Because you won't need it."

Tom's response was another non-committal sigh.
— To the readers who complained in the comments two chapters ago that Hermione making a deal with Nott was "out of character", Hermione of canon "betrayed" Harry and Ron when she took the Firebolt Christmas present and gave it to McGonagall. She also badgered Harry through OotP because he wouldn't tell anyone about his weird dreams or Umbridge's torture detentions, and then continued through HBP when Harry refused to turn Snape's textbook in. Hermione may be loyal to her friends, but her ethics are just as—and sometimes more—important, especially if she has to choose between doing the right thing versus standing aside and letting friends get hurt.

— It should be worth pointing out that Tom is so good at lying that he can do it without actually telling lies. He also presents himself with a different persona depending on his audience. Compare the way he acts around The Boys, around Hermione, and around adult authority figures.

— THE BIG REVEAL. Readers were wondering about how much the canon plot would be reflected in this story, and part of that was the reveal of Tom's family. I wanted it to be organic here, so while Tom gets some information, it's not all the information. Just to clarify: Tom Sr. isn't Tom's half-brother, but they don't know that. Though that would be pretty wild if it was true...

— This chapter covers the end of Fifth Year and the beginning of summer. Summer will continue for the next 1.5 chapters, before Sixth Year begins.
1943

After Major Tindall's shocking news, the rest of Tom's evening passed in a confusing welter of emotions.

He was asked to dance a few times by other guests, which he refused. He was asked to pose for the photographer, and since it was Hermione who had asked him, he couldn't refuse without reneging on their deal. Later, Tom tagged along as Hermione engaged several academics in an animated discussion about the newest medical breakthrough, some anti-infective treatment called 'Penicillin'. Apparently it was extracted from fermented fungus, which to him was just as off-putting as milking Murtlaps for their tentacle secretions. Murtlap Essence, the magical world's equivalent of Penicillin, had been invented by wizards several centuries ago, so Tom found the Muggle invention not as much of an achievement as all the doctors and scientists thought it to be.

He listened with only half an ear, his thoughts churning from one idea to another; there were so many things he wanted to do, courses of action he could take instead of standing around and sipping seltzer water while hearing old men reminisce about the days when laudanum was considered the Magic Bullet of modern medical science.

The options that he'd come up with were to:

Go back to his room at the Leaky Cauldron, throw up a Silencing Charm, then toss the furniture at the walls until nothing was left but broken wood and scraps of bedsheets. (That was equivalent to saying farewell to his room deposit, unless he repaired everything before the day maid arrived to deliver the paper and change the towels.)

Go back with the Grangers and set fires in their cellar. *Incendio, Confringo, Bombarda, Reducto,* some of the more destructive spells in his répertoire, but had never had a place to cast at the magnitude that he knew he was capable of, over and over until he was wrung out and trembling with exhaustion.

Go to the Office of Military Records in Westminster, less than two miles away from the hotel, which would be closed from tonight until Monday morning. He could sneak around the back and try to pick the locks with magic—wandless magic if he could manage it—and at this moment, Tom missed Peanut more than ever. He could use his wand if he had to; Travers, whose father worked at the Ministry, had said that underage wizards got two or three strikes unless it was a serious offense, and anything not serious could be appealed by knowing the right person.

Go to King's Cross Station, less than a mile away. Hop on the next train out to Leeds or York, then look for his family. There could only be so many Riddles, and he knew where to start—Major Tindall had told him that Lieutenant Thomas Riddle was a few years younger than he, born in or around 1880. A prominent family in the area, the Riddles were, one that sent their sons to expensive public schools. There would be records in the archives of the civil authorities.

*And then what?* Hermione would ask. He could already hear her voice in his head, reciting facts
and figures from her encyclopaedic brain. *York is two hundred miles from London. The train goes fifty miles an hour and stops at every other major station in the Midlands. If you leave now, what are you going to do when you get there, assuming you aren't forced to wait for transfers?*

*Knock on their door at four in the morning? Shout, "Lo and behold, the prodigal son has returned!" while they're standing at the door in their dressing gowns?*

Laying out his options like this showed him that, while he could think of many amusing things he could do to people for whom he had no reason to like, there was no clear objective to his actions. It was an emotional response, which he would have enjoyed—just as he would have enjoyed seeing Lestrange permanently crippled, Hastings made a laughingstock for life, or Nott brain-damaged beyond repair—but there was no tangible gain beyond his own amusement. A few years ago, he might have deemed it worth it, and to be truthful about it, some part of him still did.

However...

Wasn't it wasteful?

What if they could be useful?

He'd never know, not if he incapacitated them first and realised later that he had questions he wanted to ask.

("*When you've purged your senators,* Hermione had once asked him, *"who will collect your taxes?"*)

There were things he wanted to know, questions missing their answers.

He wanted to hear them answered.

(Another part of him wanted to hear them plead.)

*Were you so confident to think that no one would ever know?*

*Was it but a momentary lapse of judgement to you?*

*What did you think would happen?*

*Why were you so weak—*

*How could you—*

*How dare you—*

And in that instant, all of his emotions narrowed into a sharp point, a single focused bead of rage. A wave of righteous anger blazed through him, a sensation that smarted in his throat like his first taste of brandy, setting his skin afire; it was burning heat from his eyes to his veins to the very tips of his fingers, and his right hand—his wand hand—curled around something that should have been there and found nothing.

In his chest there grew a blistering cold, unfurling itself in the crucible of his wrath, itching, stinging, aching—
Numbing him from the inside out, immune to the raw burn on the surface of his skin, freezing his limbs where he stood; it held him breathless and speechless and motionless, held him like a fist clenching around his heart.

_How dare he?_

They would see how _he_ dared.

They would see it at four in the morning, in their dressing gowns and nightshirts and carpet slippers. Why should it matter to Tom what they wore? _What he_ wore, what he ate, where he slept—none of that had ever mattered to Thomas Riddle.

His hand slipped into his jacket, feeling for the narrow pocket along the breast that the Diagon Alley tailor had added to a Muggle-made pattern for a few extra sickles.

"Tom?" came Hermione's voice from behind him, the heels of her slippers clicking over the floor, "are you alright? I told Mum, and she said she would start making enquiries tonight, and ringing people up tomorrow if they might know something and aren't here now. You must be excited; I know how you've always wondered who your family were."

He blinked. Intention drifted from thought; thought dispersed from the vague stirrings of action; the connections between What-Could-Be and What-Will-Be began to dim and dwindle, pulling apart like a length of fraying rope, half-formed threads vanishing before they reached an irreversible point of convergence.

His hand stilled from where it pressed over his heart, over the carved yew handle warmed by his skin, a layer of worsted wool between it and him.

Tom stared down at the picked-through selection of things-on-crackers laid out on the canapé table. The hours had drawn toward midnight, and the families who'd brought young children were long gone. The remaining guests were the old men nursing their brandies, and the younger couples who wanted to enjoy the festive ambience and live music for as long as they could, before they had to go back to their war-fraught lives. A life where casualty lists were announced on the wireless each evening, and newspaper headlines each morning warned of enemy saboteurs behind every corner, or some new directive by the government meant to safeguard the populace, but only served to curtail personal freedoms.

He had wandered off to a corner of the ballroom, far from the dance floor, and out of range of the tobacco smoke drifting from the veterans' section.

_Cigarettes._ He had never liked them, even as a child who had seen tobacco use as a near-universal habit among the adults of South London. Nowadays, he considered it a vice shared by the stupidest and weakest-willed members of society, much like addiction to drink, gambling, or solicitation of the flesh.

Street proselytisers called them Social Evils.

Tom saw them for what they were: _filthy Muggle habits._

Their existence had, a few years ago, inspired Tom's childbearing license system, which Hermione
had rejected out of hand within minutes of his pitching the idea to her.

"My father is a M—" Tom stopped before he finished the word, then continued in a hoarse voice, "a You-Know-What. No wizard would volunteer himself in a war against farmers and tribesmen."

Hermione blinked at him in disbelief. "Does it matter? My dad's not a wizard either. He went to war; he's a veteran just like you. You should be proud that your father served Britain—and he did it as an officer, too."

"I assumed for so long that he was the source of my... unusual gifts," said Tom. "That not having given me anything else in my life, at least he'd given me a legacy of some worth."

"Why is a legacy even important?" said Hermione, pursing her lips as she always did when she was clearly frustrated with him, but still trying to follow his thoughts to their logical conclusion. "I don't have one, and it doesn't bother me. I've never cared if other people had one or not, since nothing about it changes who they are as people—not their achievements, or their potential. With or without a legacy, you're still Tom to me. The Tom I've always known, who likes the colour green, reading about Roman history, chocolate without nuts, or the smell of new books.

"The people who read your articles don't care a whit about legacies—they don't even know the real person behind the pen name. Yet they still like what you've written, they listen to what you say, and you've won their recognition on your own merits. If anything, having your gifts be a result of another person's legacy diminishes your own efforts, as if someone else is to be given credit for the work you've done. And I don't like that, not in the least, because nothing about that is fair!"

Tom was silent for a half minute, contemplating the merits of her argument.

Avery and Travers: they were two boys who had grown up shouldering their respective family legacies. Avery bore the weight of a dusty old name that struggled to remain relevant in a society where those old names were becoming an ever smaller minority, due to the influx of Muggleborns and war-displaced émigrés. To stay afloat in his academics, Avery took remedial tutoring with magical newcomers Riddle and Granger, all while hoping his noble parents never found out what their once proud son had reduced himself to.

Travers, on the other hand, lived his entire life in the shadow of his father's career—Auror by twenty, fast-tracked to Head Auror, then head of one the largest Ministry departments, the DMLE, which was only rivalled in importance by the DIMC, International Magical Co-operation. Travers got private summer lessons, but had never once ranked among the top five in Hogwarts' Duelling Club. Lacking the most of basic Auror instincts, he was physically unco-ordinated and fumbled his wand draw during their speed duelling sessions.

Tom had very rarely examined the lives of the people he interacted with, beyond what it took to manipulate their thoughts and actions into a more convenient direction. Other people were like starlings to him, their lives irrelevant to his own. If he was a star, then they were bits of orbiting asteroid; if he was the steak sirloin—and he was really scraping the bottom here for these analogies, but he did what he had to do to make a point—they were the parsley garnish. When they weren't making themselves useful to him, their ground state of existence revolved around proving him to be superior in every possible way.

"The Roman Republic had a concept they called the Novus homo," said Tom in a conversational tone, while Hermione looked puzzled at his apparent non-sequitur. "It means 'New Man', and it referred to someone who was elected to Rome's highest public office, someone who couldn't trace
his ancestry up the line to a family member who had served before."

"I'm sorry, but... what?" said Hermione, perplexed by this shift in their conversation. He'd observed years ago that Hermione thought in straight lines, making logical connections between Points A and B, through to Point Z at the end with no deviations along the way. It was useful at times: for example, when he wanted her to check that his recipes and spell diagrams were written with the right sequence of instructions. At other times it was self-limiting, or so Tom believed; his personal thought patterns could be described in terms of intuitive leaps. Illogical to Hermione, who complained about it when she read over his notes and the first drafts of his articles, but it wasn't nonsensical to him.

It was brilliance.

"You've always been clear about how much you dislike the Ministry of Magic, the whole idea of working your way through the ranks for a run at the Minister's office." She paused. "Unless you've changed your mind about that?"

"I'm not interested in being Minister—"

"But you said that there's never been a Muggleborn Minister before!"

"I never said I wanted to be the one," Tom interjected. "I was going to say that the New Men of Rome earned their right to rule; through their achievements, they elevated their entire lineage to the rank of nobility, and forged their own legacies."

"So," said Hermione, tilting her head, "you were going to say that my argument was valid?"

"Possibly..." Tom gritted out.

"And that I'm right?"

"Not in so many words, no."

"Oh, Tom," Hermione sighed. "You can lie through your teeth all you want, but no one can lie through a hug."

And having said that, she flung her arms around his chest and squeezed him in a tight hug.

He was struck by a bizarre clash of familiar and alien sensations: Hermione smelled the same as she always did, sweet and floral; it was a scent that clung to her skin and clothes so that when she shed her outer robe during duelling practice, he always knew which robe out of the pile of shapeless black uniforms was hers. Her skin was soft, her body a warm and solid weight, her hair a gentle tickle against his own skin.

But some things were so completely different that his memory stuttered halfway through dissecting the differences between Then and Now, where Then was a fond recollection that he'd analysed from all possible angles during late night meditation sessions in his four-poster, and Now was Hermione Granger in a ribbon-trimmed evening gown pressed against his chest. This version of Hermione was inordinately small compared to the one of his memories: this time, her arms didn't reach all the way around, and the top of her head stopped right under his nose, leaving her fluffy hair to whisk against his lips.

She lifted up her face to look at him, and said, "I think I'd have been devastated if someone else had
been made Prefect instead of me. No, not 'think', I know I would have been. And every time I saw someone with a Prefect badge—it doesn't matter what House—I'd look at it and ask myself why I didn't have one. I'd be crushed if I got my O.W.L. results and saw an Acceptable where I'd expected Outstanding. I'd spend weeks questioning myself, wondering what went wrong. Was it me? Did I not study enough? Did I finish the test without noticing that the back of the page had questions I never even saw? Did the professor teach the subject poorly, or was it the examiner and the textbook author?"

She gave him a wry smile and pressed her cheek to his starched white shirtfront. "I bet all of that sounds stupid to you. And honestly, it is remarkably silly, only I'd never know it unless I'd stopped stewing in my own misery. Because the truth of it is that it doesn't matter. So what if I never got to sit in the Prefect compartment? So what if I got an A, or even all A’s? None of that would ever change the truly important things: that Mum and Dad love me, and will always love me no matter what. That if I had to run away right now and live in a tent for the next three months, you’d come with me. And that I'm a witch who can do the impossible with a wave of my wand. Nothing could ever take magic away from me. Not even a Troll mark."

In a much softer voice, she added, "There are things you'll always have, too. You're a wizard. You're brilliant. You're good at teaching and writing. You have ridiculously perfect penmanship. You have magic—and nothing else can ever compare to that."

His arms rose up, wrapping tightly around Hermione's waist. She was scarcely more than an armful—at what point had she become so small? He couldn't remember, as he had never gotten into the custom of returning her hugs; it was always Hermione who designated the location and duration of each hug, while he stood stiffly and allowed her to do so. He did enjoy it while they lasted, something he wouldn't have admitted a year and a half ago, but until now he'd always refused to participate, believing that there was something undignified about the whole concept of extemporaneous physical contact.

Tom rested his chin on the top of her head. "I also have you."

("Why on Earth do I need friends like them?" a twelve-year-old Tom had once asked. "I have you.")

"Don't be silly," said Hermione. "We have each other."

A minute of reflective silence came and went.

"I read in a book," Hermione began, starting her sentence in the same fashion as she had a hundred times before, "that in Ancient Rome, many Romans chose their own families. They used to adopt children left and right back then. And not just children, but grown adults, too."

"They also chose their own ancestors," Tom said. "Every other Emperor, once he got himself crowned, claimed descent from the gods."

"I don't think that's the same thing, Tom."

"Of course it is, Hermione. Which of us is the designated fact interpreter here?"
For the next several days, Tom joined Hermione at the Grangers' house after breakfast at The Leaky Cauldron.

Ostensibly, they'd decided on this arrangement for practical reasons.

Hermione wanted to practice driving while her magic use was restricted during the summer, a skill she deemed useful in the event she decided to stay in London after leaving Hogwarts, or if she was faced with an emergency. In the meantime, it would be useful to get around Muggle London when they lacked access to the Floo Network. (The lack of a Floo Connection was acknowledged by the Granger family as a terrible inconvenience, but Hermione couldn't lodge the registration forms until her seventeenth birthday, which was less than three months away.)

So she drove the family motorcar thirty miles from Crawley to Charing Cross to pick him up, since she knew the roads well from being chauffeured by her parents over the previous summers. Her father had attached a Medical Corps sign to the rear window, civilian motorists having become rare to non-existent due to the constriction on petrol rations.

Tom used their time together to work on various projects: for Tom, it was writing articles for his advice column, which the Editor-in-Chief had wanted published fortnightly if possible; for Hermione, it was enchanting the motorcar to ensure her parents could still use it when she was away at Hogwarts for the school term. She had considered using the Refilling Charm on a dozen jerry cans for her father to top up the tank when it was empty, but the idea of leaving that much petrol laying around when an aerial bomb could fall at any moment made it a more dangerous idea than it was worth.

"Every time I get in, I feel like I'm boarding a metal death machine," remarked Tom, gingerly closing the passenger side door from where he sat inside the Grangers' motorcar. "How do Muggles even trust these things?"

"I trust them," said Hermione primly. She tugged on her driving gloves and started the motor into neutral. "This 'metal death machine' was built on an assembly line. Every part is identical to a part used in thousands of other motorcars, and if they combusted spontaneously on contact, I'm sure someone would have noticed." Looking both ways, she peeled the motorcar out into the thin flow of traffic, adding, "I don't see how it's any different from trusting the Hogwarts Express, which was built by Muggles—stolen from them without payment, I'll have you know—but everyone gets on it every year, even the purebloods, and no one complains about it... Well, they do about the trolley's snack selection, or the lack of it. But that's a separate issue."

"The reason why they don't complain is because the Express has the Minister of Magic's seal of approval on it," Tom pointed out, leaning back into the leather upholstery of the front bench seat, one eye watching Hermione work the foot pedals with her plimsollled driving shoes.

Driving a motorcar was less intuitive than a wizarding broomstick, where one merely had to shout Up! at it to get it started, then lean to change directions or altitude. Simple enough for an eleven year old to operate, although some specialty skills weren't taught in Flying Class—he'd heard Rosier and Lestrange debate a technique called 'countersteering' from their Quidditch magazines, which involved turning the broom in the opposite direction than the way you wanted to go; apparently it was something the professionals had come up with to turn fast corners on the brand new Comet
"Even though it was a major breach of the Statute to steal the train, the Minister back then signed off on it, and made the Obliviators hush it up," Tom continued. "Purebloods complaining about the Minister being a Muggle-lover for using their contraptions wouldn't have a leg to stand on because everyone saw how she robbed them blind. Platform Nine and Three Quarters used to be a part of King's Cross, and she took that too—not only can't the Muggles see it, but they've forgotten that it exists."

Hermione's eyes darkened; her hands gripped the steering wheel, leather gloves creaking at the seams. "Don't they realise how contradictory it is? Muggles produce inventions that are worth the effort of taking, but not worth compensating them for? The whole thing must have happened last century, based on the design of the Express, but somehow I doubt that anyone since then has ever thought about giving it back. I know the average wizard doesn't think much of Muggles—"

*Not just the average wizard,* thought Tom, but he kept that comment to himself.

"—But even if they overlook who the victims were, they can't deny that theft is a criminal act!" Hermione scowled, shoulders hunched inwards. "It's wholly indefensible. It's *unconscionable!*"

"Wouldn't things be different if you were in charge?" asked Tom in an innocent voice.

"I, for one, wouldn't sign off on institutional thievery," Hermione bit out.

"What *would* you sign off on?"

"Heaps of things!"

"Hm," said Tom, his eyes half-lidded in the bright sunlight streaming in through the windshield. "You'd never sign anything if you stayed in Muggle London."

Hermione shook her head in bemusement. "I know what you're doing, Tom."

"It's called 'helping'," Tom replied, folding his arms behind his head. "Or, to be more precise, helping you to help yourself help other people."

"Sometimes I wonder if you ever listen to yourself talk," said Hermione, her lips pressed together where she was suppressing a smile.

"All the time," Tom answered, "and I never tire of it."

"Sometimes I wonder if we'd be friends now if we hadn't been limited to sending letters to each other back then." Hermione looked aside, her left hand reaching for the gearshift as they entered the Grangers' neighbourhood of Argyll Street. "If I had to listen to you speak at length—without knowing you—I can't say I'd have been won over."

"But I managed it in the end, didn't I?" asked Tom, in a distracted tone, fiddling with the handles on the inside of the passenger door. Why did the passenger even need a side mirror? "With the help of my ridiculously perfect penmanship, naturally."

Hermione flushed. "You're never going to forget that, are you?"
"I'll always remember such a heartfelt speech; I'm not afraid to say that it won me over." Tom, who had been gazing out of the window, suddenly straightened up in the bench seat, cocking his head. "Someone else's motor is blocking your drive. You'll have to park in the street."

"Right," said Hermione firmly, knuckles tightening over the steering wheel. "Hold on to something—I haven't quite got the knack of parking parallel."

They made it into the house twenty-five minutes later, after Tom had discovered the purpose of the passenger's side mirror. With the mirror, he could see where Hermione had drawn up to the kerb at an angle instead of being level with it. Hermione had had to reverse the motor, then inch back in until she'd gotten it straight; Tom had almost begun to regret pointing out Hermione's mistakes, as he hadn't expected she'd take the Drivers' Road Regulations Handbook so seriously.

"You'll have to move the motor once whoever parked in your drive leaves," Tom was saying. "The third time was almost straight enough; no one would have noticed that you were off by ten degrees." His shoes had only touched the footpath outside the Leaky Cauldron before he'd slid into the motorcar, but he wiped them on the doormat anyway, as it was both the hygienic and polite thing to do.

Hermione unbuttoned her driving coat in the vestibule, hanging it up on the coat stand inside the door. She hesitated, one arm raised over a hook, eyeing the row of coats occupying the other spaces.

"That's funny." Hermione's voice came out soft and subdued, as if she was speaking to herself, "I can't remember Mum ever having a mink in this colour. She usually keeps her furs boxed away until September."

"Maybe she bought a new coat?" Tom suggested, willing to humour her, but nevertheless impatient to dive into his magical projects. There was an article he'd written on vanity charms that he wanted to show Hermione; she'd always had a good sense about what things best appealed to the average witch.

"Mum hasn't bought any new furs since before the war," said Hermione. "And she wouldn't buy any now—with the rationing on, she's been careful with what we get from Diagon Alley. I don't think this is her coat."

Upon saying that, she stuffed her driving gloves into the pocket of the matching coat, leaving them hanging in the vestibule. She ventured cautiously into the house proper, looking both ways, one hand pressed to the pocket of her skirt. Tom followed her, reaching for his own wand.

Hermione's soft-soled shoes padded quietly over the linoleum floor tiles of the entrance-way, passing an umbrella stand in the corner, Wellington boots on a floor rack, and a series of framed botanical illustrations on the walls, depicting the various stages of a mushroom's life cycle. Tom didn't understand why anyone had chosen them for home decorating, but he supposed that to the scientific sort, mushrooms were a natural curiosity, being something in between animal and vegetable without falling into either category. For some reason, people liked collecting curiosities. He himself enjoyed rare spells, particularly the more gruesome medical ones: one of his recent favourites was the Debridement Spell, which the Healing textbooks recommended for removing warts or cleaning wounds before applying potions, but could be cast at a greater power to pare off flaps of skin as easily as peeling a potato.

The dining room, when they peeked in, was empty. So was the family sitting room, where a basket of yarn balls occupied the squashy armchair closest to the currently silent wireless set.
The Grangers' formal parlour, however, was not empty.

There was a stranger sitting in the parlour, looking mildly distressed by such a vivid representation of the middle class lifestyle. She clutched her handbag in her lap as if she was afraid that someone would jump up from behind the settee and snatch it out of her hands. The way her lips were pursed was familiar to Tom; he'd seen it on many a Slytherin girl when they passed the latest victim of one of Peeves' pranks in the corridors, or the unlucky girl they'd unanimously decided to shun for the week. (As Tom limited his contact with the girls in his House, he didn't know how the winner was chosen. Not that he particularly cared; they were interchangeable to him for the most part, being as that they rarely said anything interesting or did anything useful.)

The stranger—she was a woman—hadn't glanced their way when Hermione entered the parlour, hand to her pocket. She sat stiff, with her posture straight and her legs crossed demurely at the ankle, dressed in a matched jacket and skirt in a handsome hacking tweed with a line of pearls peeking out at the throat, a heavy gold filigree brooch pinned over her breast, and shiny heeled shoes on her feet that bridged the gap between sensible and fashionable. While her clothes were an indication of her station, her hair was an indicator of her age: it was a rich brown streaked with grey and tightly pinned up at the back of her head, showing that she was much older than either of Hermione's parents. Its severity suited the tight lines around her eyes and mouth, which was pinched together as if she was in the midst of doing something she regretted, and was halfway to changing her mind and taking her leave at once.

"Excuse me?" Hermione stepped away from the door and into the parlour. "I'm sorry, but who are you?" she asked, but the sharpness in her tone gave the impression that her real question was, 'And what are you doing in my house?'

The woman's eyes flicked over her, noting Hermione's fluffy hair and her casual summer clothing—white blouse with a girlish round collar, pleated skirt, knitted stockings—all of which were unremarkable for a school student during the holidays.

"Mrs. Mary Riddle of Hangleton," the woman said, not rising from her seat. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance." Her manner of speech was precise and crisp to the point of frostiness, with not a single extended vowel or dropped consonant that one would expect of a Yorkshire native; in fact, it had very little to distinguish it from the urbane public school dialect spoken by Roger Tindall and his set.

"Pleasure," came Hermione's automatic response, manners taking over in lieu of the tactful affront that Tom could tell she'd been prepared to deliver. "I'm Hermione Granger, daughter of Doctor and Mrs. Granger of Crawley. You must be Tom's—"

Mrs. Mary Riddle's attention was suddenly diverted from Hermione, having noticed the figure standing behind her at the doorway.

Hermione glanced over her shoulder, then at Mrs. Riddle sitting before her in an itchy, horsehair-stuffed formal armchair. The woman stared at Tom, eyes scanning him from top to toe and lingering on his face; her expression morphed from one of shock, to a kind of misplaced familiarity, then to a queer delight, her eyes brightening up and the lines around her eyes not quite as cold and severe as they had been.

Tom stared back.
"You look just like your father," she breathed.

Those two words, *Your Father*, had never in Tom's life represented anything good. When he was a child, it was something that other children had but which he had never known, and all his tricks and talents could never seize it from them to bestow it upon himself, to cleanse himself of the ignorance that they flaunted in his face. When he was old enough for school, they were words that fell from the mouth of Reverend Rivers, spoken in tones of solemn disapproval, describing a majestic yet remote figure who was more discipline than guidance, more symbol than man. *Your Father* was Everyone's Father, omnipresent and universal, and hearing the Reverend read his sacred words to the orphanage flock had only made the six-year-old Tom feel smaller and more insignificant than he already felt.

And in his most recent memories, *Your Father* was a character known second-hand, talked about in muttered voices among the people who knew of him. A disgrace who had fallen from social esteem; a gentleman in only the economic sense of the word, lacking the true gentility of his rank due to the public airing of his misbehaviours.

Tom's hand dropped down to his trouser pocket, groping for the yew handle that stuck out past the edge. As his fingers closed around it, he felt the tight clasp of another set of fingers closing around his wrist.

He'd taken a step forward without conscious thought.

"Tom!" Hermione hissed. "*What are you doing!*"

She pushed his arm down where he was fighting her to lift it up, raise his wand—point it—*aim it*—

"Hermione? Tom?" called Mrs. Granger from behind them. "I've just put on some tea. There's butter cake, too—I know you've never been partial to the ones shortened with margarine."

Mrs. Granger bustled past them, burdened by a loaded tea tray, unaware that Tom had almost drawn his wand on a Muggle. *On a houseguest.*

But Hermione knew it, and she took hold of his right hand, fingers twining through his, pulling him away from his wand and over to a settee.

"This is my house, not Diagon!" Hermione's voice was a harsh whisper. "You can't do that here! You'll get me expelled!"

She didn't let go of his hand as Mrs. Granger set the tray on the coffee table and began passing out cups and teaspoons. In addition to the teapot, there was a platter containing a sugar-dusted Victoria sponge, and several small pots on the side with sugar cubes for the tea, and beaten cream and lemon curd to go with the cake.

Mrs. Granger, as the hostess, poured the tea without spilling a drop, and after the circulation of the sugar tongs and the cream, brushed off her hands and took a seat at the sofa opposite Tom and Hermione.

"I suppose the introductions ought to come first," Mrs. Granger spoke, smoothing down the folds of her apron. "*Mrs. Riddle—?*" she nodded in the direction of the other woman, "my daughter, Hermione, and her friend from school, Tom Riddle. Tom, this is Mrs. Riddle, your grandmother and your new guardian."
Hermione coughed over her tea. The serving knife in Tom's hand skidded over the platter, splattering cake crumbs and globs of cream over the coffee table.

"Guardian—?"

"Grandmother?!"

They spoke at once, both of them utterly flabbergasted. Hermione's face was pink where she'd kept herself from spraying tea over the sofa; Tom himself had paled, his eyes wide in shock, clutching onto the knife when he couldn't go for his wand, which had, for the last few years, been the solution for the vast majority of his life's problems.

(When Gordian's knot had been brought before Alexander the Great, the Emperor had taken his sword and solved the puzzle with one swing. Tom's yew wand was the same thing—a single wave could obliterate most obstacles from existence.)

"I should explain," began Mrs. Riddle, setting her spoon by the side of her saucer with a definitive clink. "A week ago, a vicious rumour which began circulating around London was brought to my attention by a group of concerned souls, including Mrs. Granger and Mrs. Blanche Tindall of Weybridge. This rumour cast aspersions upon my husband's character, made insinuations upon myself that I could not indulge, and thus I sought to redress them. And to my surprise, I found that this rumour had its root in something that could not be brushed aside for being unworthy of my—my family's—consideration."

Mrs. Riddle undid the clasp of her handbag and drew out a small square of paper, which she turned the right way around and placed on the coffee table, clear of the spilled cream and cake crumbs.

A photograph, a few inches per side, black and white.

Hermione's face smiled up at him, and at her side stood Tom in his tailcoat and evening whites, his expression stony and cold. His brows were set stubbornly on his pale face, his eyes shadowed in contrast to the fairness of his skin; his dark hair fell over one side of his forehead in an elegant wave. In the photograph, he made a striking sight, even in the static image produced by a Muggle camera.

"I've come to London to rectify a great disservice," Mrs. Riddle continued, and her gaze fell once again on Tom, as if she was attempting to devour him with her eyes. "My son Tom—he shares your name—in some flight of youthful fancy, took up with the daughter of the village tramp and married her near twenty years ago. He and the girl moved to London, living in dissolution, until he ran out of the banknotes he'd brought with him; then, coming to his senses, he left her—your mother—and returned to Yorkshire."

Mrs. Riddle held up her hand as to forestall Tom when his mouth opened to comment. "I make no excuse for his deplorable behaviour; neither myself nor my husband look very well on it. I consider it a stain upon our family, one that has only grown with the recent rumours. But you must understand that he is our son, our one and only child, and as his son, you are our family. And after the name of that girl, a Merope Gaunt Riddle, was traced to a marriage registrar in York, the connection is unquestionable. As such, I've had arrangements made with the matron of the—" her nostrils flared in pique, "—the orphanage, to have your guardianship transferred, and your adoption papers processed. Your belongings have been collected for our return to Yorkshire with the morning train, which will be departing King's Cross at half-past ten tomorrow—"
"I'm not going," Tom interrupted her.

A chilly silence descended upon the Grangers' formal parlour.

"Tom," murmured Hermione, nudging Tom with the sharp point of her elbow. "She's your family!"

"I don't need one," Tom said, lifting his eyes to meet Mrs. Riddle's. "I've gone without one my entire life, so I don't see why I should need one now."

Mrs. Riddle had blue eyes, and within those eyes, Tom sensed first and foremost a sour streak of forcefully repressed mortification, then a weighty and palpable tension induced by the constraints of her current situation, a public scandal that she had had hopes of quashing, only to find her hopes quashed, and now, all the options presented to her were unequivocally unappealing, and yet she knew she had no choice but to take one of them.

A series of vague impressions stood out to him: a letter in the morning post, a black and white photograph sliding out onto the breakfast table, then a burst of fearful apprehension at the violent flight of tableware, glass and porcelain crossing the room in a blink of an eye and sparkling in pieces on a Turkey carpet, hot tea and wheat porridge soaking down to the floorboards. Arguments, bitter and cutting, slammed doors; arguments, sharp and imperious, slammed telephone receivers; arguments, displeasure and vexation, papers and banknotes swapping hands.

"Family is not a business of need or want," said Mrs. Riddle. "You have one, and that is that."

"Then I choose to un-have it," Tom replied in a cool voice, his chin lifted in challenge. "If a child can be disowned, then so too can a parent. I'm a year and a half from eighteen—hardly a child at all. If a child was what you wanted, then you should have picked one up at Wool's. The place has plenty of orphans who would be more grateful for a family than I am."

"Indeed, any orphan should be grateful," Mrs. Riddle said, "but you're not an orphan, Tom."

But I could be, thought Tom. It would be so easy; they're only Muggles.

"No," she went on, as the tea went cold and undrunk in her cup, "you're the beneficiary of my husband's estate. A thousand hectares and a country house—they'll be yours one day. As of now, if our solicitor has earned his retainer, it's your new home. The matron at that ghastly orphanage won't have you back; your room there has already been cleared out."

"I already have a place to stay," said Tom. "I've hired a room in Charing Cross. It's paid up for the rest of the summer."

"Before you go to Professor Dumberton's charity school, is that right?" Mrs. Riddle sniffed. "I'm told that you do well in academics; I hope he's been preparing you properly for Oxford or Cambridge when you finish."

Tom pushed his tea and cake away, his appetite gone. "Excuse me."

He stood up from the settee and stalked out of the room, taking the very familiar path down the hall to the entrance of the Grangers' warded cellar.

The door flew open with a jerk of his wrist, and then his feet were pounding down the stairs, his wand flown up into his hand, lighting the lamps on the walls and illuminating the vast space with
magical fire that began as the soft blue-white of the standard spell configuration, to the warm yellow colouration used in the corridors of Hogwarts, then to an eye-searing red.

Black shadows wavered over the walls and under Tom's feet; his skin took on a red cast, the pale wood of his wand coloured red in his red hands; he imagined that this must have been the boggart's view from the inside of the burning wardrobe—what Old Ab's goats, Laurel and Curly, saw when the blood vessels of their eyes burst under Tom's wand—what the spider's compound vision perceived when Tom went down the list of Unforgivable Curses and found the one whose power manifested itself in a scarlet jet of light.

The book said these Curses were among the most difficult spells to cast, and the Aurors' handbook had provided no pronunciation guide, no wand movement diagram. Only intent was described, and that had been enough for Tom, who had found it laughably simple to focus his mind on generating the right emotions, visualising the right images. Intent and willpower; he had more than plenty of each, enough that the tip of his wand was crackling with red light before he'd even spoken a syllable of the incantation.

"Tom!" cried Hermione from the top of the stairs.

She shut the door behind her, her own wand held aloft, a bobbing point of white in the shifting shadows of red and black as she scrambled down and made her way over to him.

"Tom," she said, lowering her arm, wandlight dimming but not extinguished.

Tom took a deep breath and turned around, a deep scowl on his face. "Who does that old hag think she is?"

"She's your grandmother," said Hermione. "Your family."

"I don't want her."

"That doesn't change the facts."

"We're wizards—the facts can be whatever we want! Lure her down here, alter her memories, then send her away. She'll never know what happened; she's just a Muggle—"

*I'll know what the truth! So will my Mum."

"But you'll keep it quiet, and your mother will too, or I, I—"

"Shut up, Tom!" shouted Hermione. *Accio wand!"

Tom's wand flew into her hand, and then Hermione was clutching his wand and her own close to her chest, her eyes wet and glittering in the red light of the flickering lamps.

"You should think before you speak, or before you do something stupid," she snapped. "Mum went out of her way to find Mary Riddle—"

"For all the good that's been!"

"She's done nothing but good for you, Tom." Hermione spoke hoarsely, wisps of hair flying out of the neat pins she'd been wearing earlier than morning. "You wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Mum.
I'd never have met you that day at the orphanage, if it wasn't for her. You'd never have stayed here over the summer if Mum had said no. Mum allowed it because of me—because I wanted it—because that's what families do when they care about each other. Question Mary Riddle's incentives all you want, but at least she's doing something instead of hiding away in her country house and pretending you don't exist. She came all the way here for you; you could at the very least show her some respect, and—and give her a chance."

"A chance to replace her worthless son with the next best thing, you mean," Tom interjected sourly. "You must have noticed how she kept looking at me."

Hermione sniffled, then she fell silent for a few seconds. "She's not perfect, but that's the thing about families—none of them are." She swallowed, and when she continued, Tom could hear that she was trying to hide a quaver in her voice. "Another thing about families is that they keep trying anyway. The decent ones, at least."

Tom's eyes narrowed. "You want me to go with her."

"I don't want you to throw this away! This is how you'll never have to worry about money again. You can get any job you want in the Muggle world; attend any university, with or without the entrance exams, and on top of that, your family connections will see you out of conscription if the government ever comes around with your papers." Then Hermione added in a forceful voice, "In one swoop, you've been offered everything that people like my Dad have worked years to have!"

"There's an issue with your logic," Tom pointed out, "in that none of it applies to a wizard."

"Only if you don't want it to," Hermione retorted. "But I know that Llewelyn Caldwell had the sense of mind to take advantage of it."

Tom's face went blank. "Who's Llewelyn Caldwell?"

Hermione huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. "Gryffindor Prefect, three years ahead of us. Muggleborn—but his mother's father was an earl. Honestly, Tom, don't you pay attention?"

"Was he that poncy one? The one who wore knickerbockers and gaiters every Sunday?"

Tom vaguely recalled one upper year Gryffindor who'd stayed at Hogwarts during all the holidays, and because there were no classes, had showed up to each meal in Muggle clothing. Not knitted jumpers sent from home that a few Muggleborn students—including Hermione—wore over their white uniform blouses, but entire curated ensembles that made him look as if he was minutes away from popping off to the greens for a round of golf. The Slytherin girls had whispered to each other about Caldwell's taste, or his lack of it, which was an affront to the name of wizard... but Tom wondered if they whispered about other things as well, since Caldwell made no pains to hide the signet ring on his finger, which was as heavy and ornate as any pureblood heir's.

"I'm sure he'd be pleased to be remembered by his clothing choices," said Hermione, sniffing. "Yes, that one. He's now studying marine magizoology, and plans to convert one of his family estates in Wales into a reserve for selkies and other magical creatures, where the money made from collecting parts will go into his personal research. The Ministry's Department of Magical Education would never have given him research funding due to his lack of connections, but that didn't matter, because his family supported him!

"Mr. Pacek told me," she continued, gesturing with her hands, Tom's wand in no danger of slipping
out of her grasp, "that they've restored the crumbling old family castle with magic at a fraction of the cost it would have taken with Muggle labour. And now that the land is registered as a wizarding residence, the Caldwells can bypass the new estate taxes that the British government put on the Peers to pay for the war. So, you see, there are advantages to keeping a foot on both sides—and you'd throw it away when it's offered to you, because you're too proud to take it?"

Hermione made a frustrated harrumph, rather similar to the sound a cat made when someone sat down in the Common Room without first checking the sofas. "It never seemed to bother you before."

"You're trying to use logic on me," Tom said accusingly. "Is it working?"

"It won't change my mind about Mary Riddle," said Tom. "I've a good mind to believe that she's a pretentious shrew who thinks that 'all boys need a good thrashing to become men', and only regrets that her own son wasn't thrashed enough. And that she complains about every penny the greengrocer charges, even though she's the richest old harridan in town. I know her kind; she's the worst sort of cheek-pinching Granny God-botherer. And to top it all off, she's my granny."

"And your guardian, too."

A sullen silence descended between the two of them. The red light cast eerie, jaundiced shadows over their faces, until Hermione flicked her wand at the walls, the shadows shifting and the lights brightening up to yellow-white, resembling natural sunlight rather than the electric bulbs used upstairs or the enchanted candlelight of the Hogwarts classrooms.

"You'll be seventeen in December," said Hermione. "And I'll be seventeen in September. If you have to live in Yorkshire, you can visit every day once we open a two-way Floo Connection. And we'll have Apparition licenses by summer of next year, too."

"I'll be eighteen when I finish Hogwarts," added Tom. "She won't have a hold on me by then."

"Are you going to tell her you're a wizard?"

Tom's laugh was brittle and humourless. "Forget Oxford or Cambridge; she'd try to talk up sending me to a seminary."

"Well, if you need to get away from her, I'll always have a tent you can borrow," Hermione offered, jerking her chin in the direction of her family's magical tent, which had the dimensions of a portable changing stall he'd seen on the annual seaside trips taken with the rest of the orphans.

"Once we've gotten rid of her, I'll have a mansion," Tom said, a flicker of a smile on his face.

Hermione's nose scrunched up. "Tom!"

"Hermione!"

Hermione heaved a great sigh of exasperation, then tossed his wand at him. "Come on, we should go back up. They'll be wondering what happened to us."

When they climbed the flight of stairs back up to ground level, they came upon a very unwelcome
sight: in the parlour, Mrs. Granger and Mrs. Riddle were sharing a pot of tea, their heads bent over a large book, the pages of which were pasted with a neverending series of family photographs.

"This one was taken when we went to the opera; a Puccini, I think—that was for Christmas of Thirty-Seven. Look at how small Tom used to be!" said Mrs. Granger, turning over the page. "This one's from the summer of Thirty-Nine. We got Hermione a pet owl that year, and here's Tom feeding him. You'd think it'd be a messy business to turn owls into pets, but the place that sold them trained their birds like homing pigeons."

"Oh, this one is darling," murmured Mrs. Riddle, pointing at a photograph on the new page. "He looks like his father at that age. He must be thirteen here?"

"Fourteen," said Mrs. Granger, "taken in the summer of Forty-One. Tom shot up like a weed that year; he'd have eaten any other family out of house and home. If you're amenable to it, Mary, I can have a set of copies made for your own family album."

Tom and Hermione exchanged glances, their expressions exact mirrors of one another: complete and utter horror.
— As you might expect, Tom has a troubled relationship with his family, and this chapter isn't the end of it. Tom is milder when he's around Hermione, and this is why he isn't flying off the handle like Canon Tom... but he goes darker when he is off on his own. This will be a continuing theme for him.

— The Riddles in HP canon were not nice, kind, and charitable people. They are not nice people here either, and making Tom part of the family isn't motivated by niceness. However, like all the other characters in this fic, they have shades of nuance and won't be 100% irredeemably selfish snobs because that makes them boring characters.

— As mentioned in the comments section and chapter notes, starting from Chapter 19 (beginning of Fifth Year) the pacing will be slower compared to the earlier chapters, the timeskips will be smaller, and plot events will be spaced closer together. You can see that this chapter follows directly off the events of the previous. It may give the impression of the slowburn feeling slower, because less time passes during each chapter, and yes, I'm aware of that. I'm attempting to balance that with narrative plot progression, as this is, and was always intended to be, a plot-centric and character-focused story. Shipping characters for a HEA ending doesn't work unless the characters are mentally and emotionally prepared for it.
1943

The next few weeks were excruciatingly awkward for Hermione and her family.

Tom refused to leave London for his grandparents' home in Yorkshire. Mrs. Riddle couldn't impel him while the solicitor was still finalising the adoption, transferring Tom's status from a Ward of the Crown to being in their charge, a beneficiary in equal standing to their own son, whose existence Mrs. Riddle did her best not to acknowledge in casual conversation.

The Grangers' home was used as a sort of No Man's Land, neutral ground where the two contentious parties could meet in as much mutual cordiality as each side could muster.

And meet they did: every weekend, Mrs. Riddle would take the train down from York, let a room at a first-rate hotel, and come to the Grangers' house for tea, or else invite the Grangers—and Tom—to the tearoom of her hotel, where she would turn back and forth from interrogating Tom about his childhood and the state of his education, to attempting to cajole him into moving into the Riddles' stately home in the Yorkshire countryside. She didn't quite try to present Tom with a freshly-weaned puppy or a pony tied up with a bow, but Hermione had a feeling that if it would work, then Mrs. Riddle would offer.

Mrs. Riddle was firm on one thing, however: the paperwork would be completed by October, Tom's official address settled for good, and so he would be expected in their home for the Christmas holidays, and the summers away from school as well.

Tom had looked irate at that, and the conversation had gone stilted.

"The school allows students to stay for Christmas," said Tom, glaring across the table at Mary Riddle. "The professors organise a supper feast so no one misses out on any holiday festivities."

"Ah," said Mrs. Riddle, swirling her tea around with a languorous twist of her wrist, the silver bowl of the teaspoon never once jangling against the side of her cup. "I've written to the professor in charge of student enrollment. The matron gave me the directions to one Professor Dumberton, the man who brought over the scholarship offer—and he's assured me that he'll do his best to see you off at the school station come December."

"Pardon me," said Tom in a rather strained voice. "You wrote to Dumbledore?"

"Yes, darling; do keep up," replied Mrs. Riddle. "Furthermore, he seems like a sensible chap; he was delighted to hear the news that you've left that awful orphanage to be reunited with your proper family. A family man, I take it," she declared emphatically. "We surely need more men like him in this day and age."

Tom grimaced, looking as if he was debating the merits of debating his grandmother in a public venue. Hermione knew that Tom had never liked Dumbledore from their first meeting; she also knew that Dumbledore was unmarried and had no children, and for all their years at Hogwarts, had
shown no evidence of his romantic inclinations, either Magical or Muggle, British or of more exotic persuasions.

As much as Tom might dislike it, Hermione was glad that Professor Dumbledore had written back; many wizards would have ignored post that arrived in the Muggle fashion, and would never have gone to the effort of sending their responses through the same. By the way that Mrs. Riddle hadn't mentioned an owl flying through her drawing room window, Hermione assumed that the response had been sent in a standard postage-stamped envelope. Which represented more than the Professor's sympathy toward Muggle sensibilities, but also his active interest in Tom's personal affairs.

Hermione hadn't appreciated the ambivalent way the Hogwarts professors had dealt with student safety during the years of London's evacuation and the ensuing aerial bombings. Professor Dumbledore had been one of the teachers who had disappointed Tom in that regard, to the extent that Tom no longer appreciated the man's advice when it wasn't related to schoolwork or academics. But she did appreciate—to Tom's annoyance, no doubt—that drawing Dumbledore's notice meant any clandestine plans Tom had made to "get rid of" Mrs. Riddle would have to be abandoned for good.

(She wasn't sure to what extent that off-the-cuff comment had been made in Tom's brand of sarcasm, but Tom was capable of many things in a moment of great passion, and nothing made him more passionate—in an overzealous, reactionary way—than being told what to do by white-haired elders.)

"I'll come and visit you during the holidays," Hermione ventured, glancing at Tom, Mrs. Riddle, then at her Mum, who had been shafted by necessity into the rôle of mediator, just as she had been. "If you'll have me, that is."

It was uncanny how alike and unalike they were at the same time: Tom was decades Mary Riddle's junior, dark of hair and eye, the softness of his chin and cheeks dissolving into the more angular lines of true adulthood, blooming with the energy of youth, with the subtle hum of magic crackling from his eyes and the ends of his fingers when he was feeling particularly incensed. Mrs. Mary Riddle was thin and straight-backed, fair of complexion, with papery skin and greying hair; she was stiff and polished like a department store mannequin—and she was as modish as one, judging by the parade of furs and jewels she wore to tea and dinner each weekend.

But in common with Tom Riddle, Mrs. Mary Riddle possessed a certain commanding air shared by any person who, for most of their life, was used to being obeyed and unquestioned, who had rarely if ever been confronted by the evidence of their own shortcomings. In them was such an ingrained surety that the universe was more likely to be at fault rather than themselves.

So of course they'd find it difficult to agree on anything, and to get anywhere, it was up to Hermione to step in and force a compromise.

"I seem to recall that I'd have a room appointed for me," said Tom, inclining his head in grandmother's direction. "Would it be so difficult to slip in a trundle bed? If you can't spare the space, I'm sure Hermione wouldn't mind sharing with me, however it can be managed."

Hermione kicked Tom's shin under the table, which caused him to wince and glare at her.

"Tom's joking about that—obviously, a separate room would be the most proper thing to do," Hermione said quickly, biting back a nervous laugh. "I also know that Tom reads in bed all night and never turns the light off, so I wouldn't want to share with him anyway. Even if he was gracious enough to offer."
Tom's lips twisted into a faint smile. "At least I don't talk in my sleep," he countered.

"That was one time!"

"And you never told me what that was about."

"Well, you'll never find out, so that's that."

"We'll see," Tom began, before he was interrupted.

Mrs. Riddle cleared her throat. "Hermione, dear, if you see to it that Tom arrives to the station at the right time and place, you can have your pick of our spare rooms. We've a dozen guest suites and a library, too. Your mother has said how much you enjoy reading; we hardly use the library ourselves, so you'll be free to make use of it as you wish. You can even pick out new additions, if you'd like—my father-in-law had an interest in buying first editions, but the collection hasn't been touched since then."

"Hermione's too clever to fall for that—"

"First editions?" said Hermione eagerly. "Oh, I just can't wait to read them, Mrs. Riddle."

Tom grumbled to himself, probably about being condemned to a Circle of Hell lower down than the "Suburban Purgatory" that he called living with the Grangers. Purgatory was one of Tom's overly theatrical exaggerations, because Mum and Dad had always tried to be welcoming to him, and didn't expect him to take on any household chores outside of changing the linens, folding his own laundry, and tidying up after himself in the bathroom—which was what students were expected to do when living in the Hogwarts dormitories.

But Hermione still wondered whether Tom had a point about the downsides of living with the Riddles, because their country house was on the edge of a village, which was as far a cry from the clean, lamp-lit neighbourhoods of Crawley as Crawley was from the hustle of London's Oxford Street during the morning shift change. Villages didn't have well-stocked news agents with dozens of different papers and magazines on offer every day, so that Hermione could pick and choose the one with the most informative articles. Villages had small, closely-knit communities where all the residents knew one another and had a shared disdain for uppity city folk with their airs and graces and dissolute city ways.

Hermione had always tried to be open-minded about things: while she supported Britain's contributions to the war, she also sympathised with the civilians on the other side, whom she couldn't lump into the category of being a "Danger to British Sovereignty and Freedoms", as the morale broadcasters wanted the population to believe. To add to that, she'd never prayed for the souls of British soldiers overseas, and her church attendance was also rather spotty—yet another black mark against her as far as a hidebound village traditionalist would see it.

Soon after, their Christmas holiday plans were arranged between Mum and Mrs. Riddle, and the dates set in stone. After Hermione examined her reservations about the matter with a logical eye, the only person still unhappy about it was Tom, but then again, he did like to complain—but that was his problem for having such ridiculous standards about everything.

(She was sure that if she quoted the Beggars Can't Be Choosers line at Tom, he would just grace her with one of his inscrutable expressions and ask her why she thought it had any relation to his
situation. Tom Riddle had no equal, in more ways than one, and that was not always a good thing.)

The final weekend of the summer was marked by a dinner party at the Grangers' house, to which the Tindalls, the Riddles, and Mr. Pacek were invited.

It was strange for Hermione to think of The Riddles in plural; for almost ten years, she had thought of Tom as the Riddle, a singular being whose uncommon appearance and temperament she had never encountered in anyone else, before or since going to Hogwarts. At school, whenever someone, teacher or fellow student, referred to Riddle, she knew instantly that they were speaking of Tom Riddle, the top duellist and all-around star pupil, a credit to his House and a standing counterargument to the common-held attitude that Slytherins were arrogant or unpleasant.

But then she met Mr. Thomas Riddle, who had arrived with Mrs. Mary Riddle the evening of the dinner party. When he hung up his hat in the vestibule and turned around, arms laden with a fine vintage cognac and a box of cigars for Dad—who didn't smoke—she saw why Major Tindall had only taken an instant to make his guesses at Tom's paternity.

Thomas Riddle was an older gentleman, tall and lean and looking distinguished for his years, his hair thick and shiny, though lightened with streaks of grey about the sides and temples. He wasn't an exact copy of Tom, far from it, but the more Hermione looked, the more similarities she saw: the perfect waves of hair, of course; the same high-set arch of the brow; the angular structure of jaw and chin; a trim and elegant figure that could make second-hand robes look brand new. Mr. Riddle had a greying bottlebrush moustache and longer sideburns; Tom's eyes were darker, his skin paler and much less lined—but the familial connection between the two of them was undeniable, and if the truth had not been made known, Thomas Riddle could have passed as Tom's much older father.

Tom noticed it too; it was unavoidable that the subject come up, as the arriving guests could not help but comment on it, crying: "Oh, here's Tom! He looks just like your old tintypes, Thomas; I saw the resemblance in one glance!"

The introductions wore on, with Tom getting grumpier and grumpier, because there was nothing he liked less than being compared to someone else. In Hermione's experience, Tom was used to being the standard of comparison to whom other people were compared, and when it happened, it only made the ways in which they fell short of Tom's accomplishments even more obvious. Tom's sulking grew when Mrs. Blanche Tindall complimented his darling manners, which caused Mrs. Riddle to lay her hands over Tom's shoulders and preen over him like a horticulturist and her blue-ribbon begonias. It was all very disturbing to Hermione, who had years ago tried to imagine what Tom would be like adopted into a family of his own, and given it up after drawing a blank.

"I don't think anyone expected this," Hermione remarked to Mr. Pacek in a corner of the room, a glass of iced grenadine soda dripping over her hands in the heat of late summer. "Least of all Tom. He looks like his soul is shrivelling up."

"They lack a certain je ne sais quoi, to put it delicately," said Mr. Pacek, observing the Riddles out of the corner of his eye. "I expect young Mr. Riddle was disappointed about it—I have long since taken him to be one who puts stock into the distinction between 'our kind' and everyone else."

Hermione sipped her grenadine, wiping off the sweaty glass on the hem of her skirt. "That's funny, because I'm sure they see themselves as a different kind than the rest of us."

"Apples and trees', or however the saying goes," Mr. Pacek said, nodding sagely. "I do not agree with many of our dear friend Gellert's ideas, but I believe he is correct in the notion that what we are
is borne in the blood— and some people may find that it is further up the line for them than it is in others. But perhaps it will do Mr. Riddle some good to accept that there are few, if any, inherent differences between us and them."

Further introductions were made when the guests were led to table, seated in the formal dining pattern of alternating male-and-female, which had only been done in the Granger's house once or twice over the course of Hermione's entire life. Having been accustomed to one knife and fork per person, she was surprised to see that her family even owned this many sets of tableware.

"I'm given to understand that you are Hermione's private tutor?" said Mrs. Riddle to Mr. Pacek, her tone shying just an inch short of sounding overly intrusive. It was her genteel, ladylike presence that did it, turning prying questions into a matter of well-meaning concern.

"I am," Mr. Pacek confirmed, brow arched and returning her question with an equal amount of frosty politeness.


"Languages."

"Hmph," said Mrs. Riddle, with a disdainful toss of her head. "Children these days are not getting as much of a comprehensive education as they used to. I had a French governess as a girl, and my son had an Austrian piano master when he was a boy. But nowadays you can hardly find proper help—the ones these days have the gall to interview you, instead of the other way around!" Mrs. Tindall put in a polite chuckle at that, and Mrs. Riddle continued, "Though I do admit that finding service was a much easier task back then; during the last war, so many of us had to resort to foreigners, which was still better than it is now—so long as one didn't mind the unintelligible Continental accents. Of course, I do compliment you on your English skills, sir; they are very good for what you are."

Mr. Pacek put on a pained smile, while Hermione winced internally.

Her tutor was fluent in at least five languages, having being taught Czech and German from birth, the latter of which had various dialects he'd also learned, as the Viennese-style German he spoke was disfavoured by his Durmstrang professors, who preferred the Saxon and Prussian ways of speaking. He was expert in a dozen written alphabets as well, but these he didn't speak as they were historical languages and all the original speakers were dead. And here Mrs. Riddle was, blustering on and on about her French governess!

As for Tom, if Orion Black's notion of a 'Killing Face' was a real thing, then it would apply to the expression which was slowly creeping over his features. Hermione didn't think that Tom cared about someone else being complimented so back-handedly, but rather that it was his own relatives doing so, and in such a low and common manner. For someone of Tom's level of self-regard, he must have considered it unnecessary to verbally demean other people to establish one's own state of superiority; instead, that superiority should be made obvious by the manner and authority in one's very presence. It was not one's place to remind other people of their own inferiority, but other people's place to acknowledge it in themselves.

(It had taken her years to understand Tom's distorted approach of looking at the world, and even Hermione, being the one person that he was closest to, struggled to comprehend it. It was like immersing herself in a strange sideways, upside-down universe; she likened it to moving to rural Australia, a locale where she knew the meanings of each individually spoken word but couldn't
discern their meanings put together, because their version of spoken English was a subspecies of the
King's English she was used to.)

Roger Tindall, who had hitherto remained silent, ventured a question to deflect the growing
awkwardness: "Whatever happened to your son? I heard that he went to Harrow as a boy, but I
don't recall him seeing on the registers at Sandhurst or any other finishing college."

That shut Mrs. Riddle up immediately.

"He's retired to the countryside and sees to estate business," said Mr. Riddle, speaking up for once.
"We've never been one for city living, never have been. The smoke and noxious airs are the least of
the things we object to about the city. The war's made things dangerous; these past few years have
been troubling indeed for Britain and her cities: all those German bombs, and then the hordes of
refugees from who-knows-where. I'm not sure how any of you have managed to put a foot out of
doors without fearing for your lives."

"Of course," added Mrs. Riddle, her words dripping with lofty pomposity, "danger or not, we'd
brave them all for our darling Tommy, wouldn't we?"

"Of course, dearest."

The flowers on the sideboard wilted under the force of Tom's glaring.

Mum and Mrs. Tindall exchanged meaningful glances several times during the course of the dinner,
neither of them impressed by the Riddles' opinions; both of their families had been living in London
for the last few years of the war, including the Blitz—and they'd each done volunteer work during
the worst of it. It was clear that the Riddles hadn't lifted a finger to help, not even going to the effort
it took to observe simple rationing courtesies. Mr. Riddle carelessly slathering his bread roll when
the butter dish came around proved that point, as everyone else had taken a small scrape, even the
Grangers, who got butter from the wizarding grocer and had no need to conserve it, but did so
anyway to be diplomatic about the short portions everyone else in the city was getting.

Roger Tindall kept his eyes trained on his plate to stop himself from laughing, while Tom's
expression grew blanker and blanker, as if he was retreating into the depths of his own imagination
as a means to escape the vacuous mediocrity that had become his current reality.

Afterwards, when dinner was finished and the adults had retired to the formal parlour, with the
children heading to the family sitting room, Roger clapped his hands and said, "Top show, Riddle!
Absolutely smashing! I've never had dinnertime entertainment quite like that before—though my
own grandfather has cut it close after a bottle or two of the good sherry. I'm certain I'll remember this
night for the rest of my life."

"Roger!" cried Hermione, glancing at Tom and hoping he wouldn't take the phrase 'rest of my life' at
face value.

But Tom didn't seem to have noticed or taken offense. "They were lying," he said slowly. "He's in
the countryside, but he's not had anything to do with estate business. Now why would they lie about
that?"

"Your father, do you mean?" Roger asked, finding a vacant armchair and propping up his feet on the
nearest ottoman. "Rumour has it that he's an invalid. The Riddles must be trying to hush it up like a
Mad Bertha."
"They made you an equal beneficiary," said Hermione. "It's nice that they would ensure a trust for you directly, instead of following tradition and giving it all to your father, but they haven't struck me as people who'd care about being... nice."

"No," Tom said, "the quality they've displayed best was how very ordinary they are." His tone indicated that ordinary was the worst possible insult anyone could receive.

"They're certainly not the highlight of anyone's social calendar," Roger agreed. "I'd offer my congratulations on finding your long-lost family, Riddle, but it'd be off-colour in these circumstances—you can have my sympathies instead. Rather you than me, it goes without saying."

"You ought to save your sympathies for Hermione," said Tom, his dark eyes turning to look at her. "She'll be suffering through Christmas in Yorkshire with me."

"Oh?" said Roger, leaning forward in his armchair. "Is that true?"

Tom and Roger gazed at her expectantly. Tom had one eyebrow cocked in anticipation of her response.

Hermione couldn't stop a red flush from blossoming over her cheeks. She held her hands up to cover them, feeling the heat through her fingers, though she couldn't properly articulate why she was feeling this way. These were people she knew, had known for years, so why did she suddenly feel as if she were standing in front of the wizarding examiners at the O.W.L. practical demonstrations?

Perhaps it was because she was as tongue-tied for a reply as she had been back then. The Defence examiner sitting in the centre seat of the judging panel was Mr. Arsenius Jigger, Professor Slughorn's old business partner and author of The Essential Defence Against the Dark Arts. She'd felt a sudden shyness strike her when she'd asked him to autograph her textbook, and this—whatever this was—was the exact same thing.

"It's not important news, nothing of the sort," said Hermione, her tone guarded, swallowing her self-consciousness because right now such a sentiment was both useless and unwanted. "But Tom's lived in London his entire life, and now he's moving away, so I thought there should be one familiar face with all these new changes. The Riddles might not be the most pleasant people, but they own a big house in the country with hundreds of acres; surely with that much space, it won't be too difficult a job to run and hide whenever we see one of them coming down the hall."

"Huh," said Roger, "well, many happy returns in advance, then. If you'd rather spend Christmas in London, I can arrange passage for you on one of the military trains. Civilian tickets are hard to get these days, and it'll be worse by the holidays—but I'm an officer cadet and that ought to count for something." He met her eyes and added, "But that's if you get tired of the Riddles, obviously."

Tom made a noise of disapproval, and his mouth opened to speak, but before he could, Hermione elbowed him in the side and said, "That's a very generous offer, but I'm afraid I've already promised Tom that I'd come. I can't possibly imagine it would be that bad."

"One never knows," Roger replied tactfully and left it at that.

Tom quietened after she'd set down a firm refusal to Roger's offer, but he didn't leave her side for the rest of the evening.
She engaged Roger in a discussion of technological miniaturisation, and how the war had restricted resources in the civilian markets, funnelling them off into military research and production. It appeared that many new inventions were being kept top secret in the name of the war effort, but once the war was over—which Roger hoped was far enough away that he could graduate and apply for a spot on one of the cutting-edge research teams, but not so far that he’d be pressed into the service for the rest of his life—there would be a veritable rush of inventions ready to revolutionise the average British family's standard of living. An affordable television set in every home, imagine that!

Hermione clasped her hands together in clear enthusiasm at the idea, while Tom just snorted to himself, patently unimpressed by what he no doubt deemed 'Muggle ingenuity', an oxymoron of the highest degree.

Later that night, after the Tindalls had gone home, and Dad had driven the Riddles back to their hotel on Hyde Park, Tom came down to the cellar while Hermione was picking through her book collection to decide which ones would earn a spot in her Hogwart's trunk for the upcoming school year. They were going back for the new term in a week, so she was already halfway through her packing, a task that she undertook each year with the utmost gravity.

Tom had elected to stay in his old bed in the Grangers' cellar that night, instead of sharing the motorcar with his grandparents. Hermione's dad had firmly declared that he wasn't going to take two round trips to central London and back just because Tom couldn't stand to be alone with them.

She'd kicked off her shoes and peeled off her stockings, while Tom had his jacket unbuttoned and his necktie off, all new things that Mrs. Riddle had bought him. Every visit, she brought Tom expensive presents: a shaving kit with a folding blade and several bars of fine Castile soap, a wristwatch in a polished silver case that had his initials engraved on the back, and boxes of clothes that were more 'befitting of his station', which was not only an excessive gift due to the current clothing rationing, but made worse by the fact that Tom would likely outgrow them in a year or two.

Tom had accepted these gifts with a look of resignation on his face, and although he didn't contradict his grandmother's high-handed estimation of his 'station', it was clear that he neither appreciated her taste in gifts nor her coddling. Over all the birthdays and Christmases they'd shared, Hermione knew that Tom preferred books and magical appliances over anything bought in the Muggle world. She'd noticed that he still used the lunchbox that she had given him for Christmas of Second Year, the one with a permanent stasis enchantment.

"Your mother likes Roger Tindall," said Tom, flopping onto his bed and throwing the neatly stacked pillows into disarray.

"He's a very likeable young man," Hermione's response was distracted, as she'd drawn her wand to Summon her hairbrush from the bathroom. Magic came in useful in so many ways; she never had to poke through five different drawers for a lost hairpin, not when a simple Accio would fetch it for her. "He's an officer and gentleman, and not one of the silly ones who'd send a cavalry brigade against entrenched artillery. Those are rarer than you'd think."

"Do you like him?" asked Tom, his tone of voice strangely lacking of any inflection.

Hermione shrugged. "I don't have any reason to dislike him."

"But he's a Muggle."

"What has that got to do with anything?"
"He's not our kind," Tom insisted. "We're bending the Statute by fraternising with outsiders. In America, they outright ban non-family interactions—and even here, you know it's highly discouraged."

Hermione let out a huff of disapproval. "I'm not the one drawing my wand during morning tea, unlike someone else whose name I've conveniently forgotten. And anyway, if you're going to quote the rules at me, then you must already know that they allow certain exceptions."

"Yes, I know," said Tom impatiently, scowling darkly at her. "But you're not going to marry him."

"Who says I'm not?"

"I do!"

Hermione tossed a pillow at him, which he deflected with a non-verbal Shield Charm and Banished back to her with a flick of his wand. "This is just like your silly childbearing license idea again, isn't it? 'Anyone who can't multiply four-digit integers need not apply', et cetera. I told you then that you can't go around giving people 'lifestyle advice' like that. Not that they'd ever listen to you."

"They already listen to my 'lifestyle advice',' Tom grumbled under his breath. After a few seconds of silence, he propped his chin up on the heel of his palm and asked, "You've already thought about being married?"

"A bit," said Hermione. "Not much. I don't know—it seems so far off in the future right now. I'd rather concentrate on finishing school first, because marriage is only a possibility, while the exams are a certainty." She sighed and pointed her wand at the silencing screen between their beds. "I'm tired and going to sleep. If you've any more questions, ask me in the morning."

The screen unfolded itself and slid across the floor, separating Hermione's area from Tom's. The lights on her side dimmed to nothing.

When she rolled over, she could see the faint glow around the edges of the screen where Tom still had his lights on, but after she pulled the blanket over her head, complete darkness enfolded her.

On the First of September, Hermione met Tom on Platform Nine and Three-Quarters.

He was dressed in his uniform already, tie in a perfect knot and Prefect badge pinned to his lapel, having come through the Floo via the public fireplace at the Leaky Cauldron. What stood out the most to Hermione was how polished he looked compared to the press of harried parents chasing after their half-dressed children, who had on Muggle coats to cover the House emblems on their uniform jumpers, or wore their Hogwarts robes over the loose smocks and breeches that made up wizarding children's casual clothing.
Tom had always taken care with his appearance, so this wasn't unusual. But today, his turnout was flawless to the extent that the crowd left a bit of space around him instead of pushing through as they did for every other bystander. It was something about his indefinite air of self-assured authority, his uniform as well-cut as the ones in the display windows of Diagon Alley, or the way his eyes searched through the masses of wizards, witches, caged pets, uncaged pets running free, and levitating stacks of luggage, his attention directed to something beyond the ken of the common man.

*Or something like that, Hermione guessed. Tom always did like putting forth a perfect first impression.*

"Tom!" cried Hermione, and his head snapped around to look for her.

She elbowed her way to him, dragging her trunk behind her, and threw her arms around him in an enthusiastic hug.

It seemed that hugging Tom had also changed from what she remembered of it from years past, and she was a little sad about it; everything about today was so different from the first time she’d arrived to the station with her parents in tow and the train ticket clutched tightly in her hands, looking around for Tom, not finding him anywhere on the platform, and realising that she was going to have to ride the train to Hogwarts alone.

Where Tom had been thin, almost bony, in First Year, he had filled out through years of better eating than what the orphanage provided—though he still remained lean of build with sharp, angular features, neither of which would ever disappear with age. Upon hugging him now, she couldn't tell each rib apart from the next; he wore uniform robes over jumper over shirt, but beneath all the fabric she could feel a firm layer of flesh, something she had never paid attention to before but couldn't keep herself from thinking about now. A tinge of nervousness crept into her thoughts, and would have induced her to let go of Tom if he wasn't hugging her back and in no rush to let her go. Yet another change on the ever-growing list.

Tom must have felt the shift in mood, because he looked down, a small crease forming between his brows. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm just..." Hermione stammered, "just a bit sad. We'll only have one more 'First Day of School' before we're done with Hogwarts for good. It's been so fast that it hardly seems real sometimes." She sniffled. "It's just a touch of melancholy; I'll get over it by the time we find a compartment."

She definitely wasn't going to tell him that she was thinking about their hugs and his recent habit of reciprocation thereof. Ever since the day of the Veterans' Charity Gala, he no longer stood still and let her 'do all the work', so to speak. It was as if the act of hugging had crossed some sort of internal line from *endurance* to *enjoyment*, and now that he'd decided that it wasn't unpleasant—having taken him years to get there—he was free to return the physical demonstrations of her affection. It was strange, and rather startling at first, but it *was* nice, and despite Tom not being a soft person in either form or demeanour, she could admit that she enjoyed it too.

She felt Tom's hand smooth down the creases of her blouse, an unexpectedly comforting gesture. His open palm lingered on the small of her back. "No slight against you, Hermione, but I don't believe your imagination could come up with someone like me. Nor, for that matter, could mine create you. That means this has to be real—or at least *we* have to be."

"That encouragement was... something," said Hermione, giving one last squeeze before she untangled her arms from his robes. "But thank you anyway."
On the train, a number of their fellow students stopped them during their Prefect patrol to congratulate them on their O.W.L. scores.

"Eleven Outstanding O.W.L.s," Siobhan Kilmuir exclaimed. "And ten Outstandings for Hermione! The examiners wrote an editorial in The Prophet saying that Hogwarts hasn't had such a promising cohort in years!"

"Is that how everyone knows about our marks?" asked Hermione, who had received her sheet of exam scores with the Hogwarts supply list in the second week of August. "They published them in The Prophet?"

She hadn't expected they'd be made public—not that she was ashamed of how she'd done—but she didn't subscribe to any wizarding publications and had no access to them when she was away from the Ravenclaw Common Room for the summer.

"They only post which students got Outstandings for the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s in each subject," said Siobhan, turning around to dig in her bookbag for a rolled newspaper. "It would be embarrassing to name who failed which subjects, especially if it was a student whose family might send daily Howlers to the editor, so it's only the top students, ranked by the points they scored in the exam."

She offered a battered-looking newspaper to Hermione, who flipped it around and tried to read around the creases. Tom, giving a small sigh, reached around her and tapped the paper with his wand, which caused the folds to flatten themselves out.

"Hermione J. Granger: one hundred and three percent in History of Magic, highest O.W.L. score for the subject in the last fifteen years,'" she read aloud. "That's interesting—the score card in our Hogwarts letters only gave us our letter mark, with no numbered grade. No past exam rankings either."

Looking over to the next page, she was gratified to see that the Outstanding mark Tom had gotten for the class he hadn't attended, Muggle Studies, wasn't a perfect O of one hundred percent. It was still an O, a score of ninety percent or higher, which was what most people cared about, but it did support her personal belief that listening to the class lessons—actually going to class—was just as important as reading the assigned textbooks from cover to cover.

Tom leaned over her shoulder. "Tom M. Riddle: one hundred and ten percent in Charms, highest O.W.L. score in forty-six years. Acquired all possible points in the written portion, and all extra credit in the practical component."

"Forty-six years seems oddly specific," remarked Hermione, eyes darting over to Tom.

Tom's eyes narrowed, as if he'd come to the same realisation as she had. "It doesn't matter anyway, since O.W.L. marks only determine which N.E.W.T. subjects the teachers will let you sign up for."

He pocketed his wand, then stalked off down the aisle, younger students shuffling out of his path without his having to say a word to them.

Siobhan gave Hermione a sideways glance. "Maybe he needs another hug."

Hermione let out a deep breath, folding the newspaper up and handing it back. "Is everything that
either of us does going to invite commentary from now on?"

"You two were on the platform, and it didn't look like you were trying to hide anything," said Siobhan, giving a careless shrug. "So don't be surprised to get more than one type of congratulations."

"It's not even like that!" Hermione said tetchily, but as the words left her mouth, she found herself wondering what exactly that was, and if it came to it, would it necessarily be bad if that was a thing?

Hermione had until now forgotten the conversation she'd had with Tom a week ago, the night of the dinner party. She'd gone to bed, and Tom hadn't asked any other questions in the morning, so she hadn't thought further on the topic he'd brought up: the future, or the part of it that was unrelated to her career prospects.

Had she thought about being married and having a family of her own one day in the future?

Truthfully, it was a distant concept to her, as far removed from tangible reality as the end of the war. It was a concept that one appreciated from afar; it was as laudable a goal as it was vague, because she had no earthly idea how to get from her current state to such a far-flung situation. It was understood that if she met a special someone, and if they came to a mutual understanding, the next step was filing an application for a marriage license—or an elopement to Gretna Green to have it finished overnight. She knew the technicalities of such arrangements, but the finer details—how they pertained to her specifically—remained ambiguous.

The other girls in her year had discussed the subject in Potions, waiting for the liquid in their cauldrons to come to a boil. They spoke of it in the back of the classroom, in the few minutes of free time they got after finishing the assigned classwork. Hermione herself spent this time on her homework, because starting on it now meant that she wouldn't have to do it later. There weren't many Ravenclaws who participated in these conversations; it was mostly Slytherins, as they were the ones whose futures were arranged for them by their parents. Marriage to them was an inevitability just like the final exams, as they had their husbands picked for them, or else picked their husbands from a selection offered to them at a summer garden party.

It was an archaic tradition, but she kept those thoughts to herself. It wasn't so long ago that a King had been forced to abdicate because the general public—the citizens of Muggle Britain—had refused to let the twin crimes of divorce and Americanism taint the Royal Establishment.

The details might be vague, but from Hermione's own perspective on matrimonial unions, she was sure about some things: if she married, it would be out of love and choice. She might love someone and welcome a family one day, but it wasn't something she could contemplate sacrificing her career ambitions for. Someone who loved her and supported her goals without asking for—demanding—a sacrifice...

That was an ideal she favoured.

But there was a reason why this future was kept at a distance for now. The minutiae of it seemed too complicated for her current situation, being as it involved finding some other person to stand the rôle of her 'better half', or so it was called. She knew she wasn't the most popular student in her year. She liked things done a particular way, whether it was books organised on a shelf, potion ingredients prepared in a certain order, or group projects completed by a specific date (which was always weeks before the final deadline). She'd earned herself a certain reputation, one that put her as someone far from making the most affable company. She took it as a mark of merit, because she, out of all the
other girls in her House, wore a Prefect badge as the proof of her diligence.

Few people understood what the badge meant to her. Yes, she was aware that some of her fellow students respected neither the office of Prefect nor the badge as a symbol. And there weren't many—outside of Ravenclaw House—who would have liked to be known as a human encyclopaedia, or a friend of one. She also knew that the badge was inconsequential in the grander scope of things, when every year two people of each House were picked for the job, even if they fit the description of being the least offensive in their year, rather than being a truly excellent student.

When she thought about it, it seemed like the only person who could understand the personal significance was Tom Riddle.

It made an intriguing prospect to envision Tom as the other relevant party, as he was one of the few people who liked her without reservation, without adding on stipulations that she brush her hair, keep her mouth shut, or listen to her betters. But that vision was also highly unrealistic; the first letters he'd written to her had showed his disdain for conventional institutions like marriage and family—and religion and government too, but that was a debate for another time—and now that he had a family of his own, he had not shown himself to be very pleased about it or willing to change his mind about it. She couldn't imagine that he would change his mind about the Riddles anytime soon, and thus she couldn't expect him to reverse his opinion on one day founding a family of his own, which, for most people, had the prerequisite of a legal marriage.

Tom was very stubborn in that regard. It was one of his defining quirks, and was immensely irritating when it was directed at her.

That reminded her: when Tom was done having his little tiff, he'd be in the Heads' compartment with the other Prefects for their annual induction meeting.

Later on, she saw that Siobhan's assumption was correct; there were other people who'd observed her and Tom from the windows of their train compartments. And judging by Clarence Fitzpatrick's dispirited expression when the Prefects met up with this year's Heads, he was one of them.

But that might just be due to Hermione giving away the seat he'd been saving for her to the newest Ravenclaw female Prefect. Or perhaps it was Hermione informing Fitzpatrick that she could no longer be his Potions partner, now that she was taking her N.E.W.T.s. At this level, it was a mixed class that included all four Houses, not the Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff split they'd had since First Year. She didn't tell him that his own Outstanding mark in the Potions exam, as reported by the *Daily Prophet*, was largely due to sharing her notes with him the previous school year, as his written essays had a tendency to meander—in sharp contrast to his competent practical brewing. For N.E.W.T. Potions, Hermione needed a partner who could pull their weight in both theory and practical, and there was only one person who met that standard.

(There was only one person, observing Hermione break the news to Clarence Fitzpatrick from his side of the train compartment, who could exude that much smugness without opening his mouth.)

The Heads' meeting followed the same format as the previous year's, with a different pair leading them this time: Ashley Bledisloe of Gryffindor for Head Boy, and Lucretia Black of Slytherin for Head Girl, which must have been yet another feather in Slughorn's pointy hat, as last year's Head Girl was also a Slytherin. Slughorn must be counting on a hat trick for next year, Hermione suspected, as the recent O.W.L. results put Tom ahead of all the boys in their year.

After dinner, Hermione helped the two new Prefects escort the Ravenclaws up the corkscrewing
stairway to the door of the Common Room, where the eagle-shaped door knocker asked a word puzzle and they had to stand there for five minutes, waiting for one of the new First Years to come up with the answer. She was glad that this year she wasn't required to walk the new students back and from the Owlery and all their classrooms the day before lessons began, as this was an official duty of the Fifth Year Prefects. She did, however, have to help them choose what electives to take for Third Year, but the sign-up slips were only due to be handed out in May of next year.

When she finally got up to bed, she spread her study planners out on the quilted silk bedcovers and eyed each of them in turn.

The first was her original planner, battered around the corners, the pages wrinkled where she'd knocked a cup of tea over it during breakfast last year. She'd applied a Hot Air Charm to dry it off, but the last two dozen pages had soaked for too long; drying it had only warped the pages and left them stained. The tea stains had been transferred to the second planner, the linked duplicate she'd made in case the original was lost or destroyed. She found it interesting how the physical signs of use had not been copied from one planner to its linked pair, only the stains and written ink, so that the second planner looked almost as clean and new as it had when she'd bought from the stationery shop.

The third and fourth were her study planners for the 1943-1944 school year, crisp and empty apart from where she'd copied her class timetable into the front pages.

In having the four books before her, Hermione realised that the convenience of the linked book system would diminish within a handful of years. At that point, she'd have to carry a dozen journals around, as she'd copied important passages from supplementary textbooks and referred to them regularly after the original books had been returned to the library. And whenever she tore out a page to keep someone else in contact, she'd have to hold onto the corresponding book to check for new messages.

It was already unwieldy, since the four books she'd packed in her trunk this year meant four books she couldn't bring from her private library at home.

She thought of Roger Tindall, and his interest in innovative technologies. In the past, semaphore and telegraph had been the primary mechanisms of communication; they were both methods of relay transference, and relied on an unbroken chain to ensure the person waiting at the end of the line got their message. The most common tool of mass communication today was the wireless, a method of information transfer that involved a central broadcaster sending out to a number of recipients, and it didn't matter if one person turned off their set that day, because hundreds of other people would have heard the message.

There were advantages in both types of communication, but she saw the disadvantages, too. The technology allowing for multiple-way communication, in which listeners could respond to the central broadcaster and each other, was so complex as to be beyond her level of knowledge, even though she'd kept up with her Muggle school textbooks and took Arithmancy at Hogwarts. (Numerology was an important subset of Arithmancy, but she couldn't take it as entirely scientific, even though it was much less wishy-washy than Charms. Because how on Earth had Wenlock decided that seven was the most magical number? With other counting systems, she could prove two, three, or ten to be just as powerful.)

It was something Roger was interested in, with how much he talked of setting the new tabulating machines to solve iterative functions that a human mathematician would have taken weeks to complete. Hermione was an instant convert; this was a subject beyond the level of wizards: the Floo
Network, the most advanced magical example of Muggle communications technology she could think of, was limited to linking only two people or locations at any given time.

She sighed, then looked down at her study planners. The second pair she'd made for this year were cleaner looking than the old pair, no messy glue and crooked seams, the interior runework she'd refined during the summer at the same time she'd worked on enchanting the fuel tank and chassis of her family's motorcar.

Perhaps it would be possible to further refine her enchantments so she could fit in more features in the same amount of space. The redirection effect was good, and so was the disguising enchantment, although that one was a little rough—any sheet torn out retained a link to its matching pair, but could no longer switch from an innocuous datebook page and back.

She remembered that she'd torn out a page last year and given it to Nott not long after Christmas break. She'd barely thought about him during the summer, being too busy with her own projects, then dealing with the intricacies of Tom's complicated personal life...

She hadn't written to the owling address he'd given her; he must be tearing out his hair right about now, having seen her from across the Great Hall during the Welcoming Feast.

With a snort, she opened the duplicate of last year's study planner, flipping to the page whose pair she'd given to him.

It was covered with variations of the word "Granger".

Granger?

Granger!

GRANGER! ! !

GrAngER!!!!!!!

She flipped over to the other side, on which Nott's incoherent rambling continued.

Summoning a pencil from her nightstand, she wrote, What do you want? down at the bottom, where there was still some empty space.

Not long after, words appeared, black ink with blotted cross-strokes, crooked letters hastily scrawled.

Something's different about Riddle. He's much too smarmy about himself. It's unnatural...

Please tell me that you and he didn't—

Before he finished his sentence, Hermione wrote, NO! in big letters.

You have to know something about it.

Pure speculation, she wrote back.

They don't call you a know-it-all for nothing, Granger. Unless you're really a know-nothing-at-
all. But if that's so, I can help you. I've a book on Occlumency memory retention exercises that has your name on it.

Argumentum ad hominem? Did you think that would be convincing rhetoric, Nott? Good night.

GRANGER!!!
— When I wrote the first half of this chapter, it somehow turned into a Austen-style comedy of manners. To be honest, when there's a period fiction piece with upper class British characters, it's inevitable that you get mild social commentary. If anyone is a fan of Jane Austen or Downton Abbey, Tom Riddle Senior in canon is described as the "squire's son" which means the Riddles have the rank of landed gentry like the Bennets and Darcy, but are several steps down from peers like the Crawleys of Downton. The Riddles are still of the true upper class, not having or needing proper jobs, unlike the Grangers, the Tindalls, or the Dursleys of HP canon who are all comfortably upper middle class. (Vernon Dursley was the Director of Grunnings and went to Smeltings, a fancy private school. The Dursleys had money, and both Petunia and Lily married up from their working class Cokeworth origins.)

— To give some historical context, the two World Wars ruined many upper class families when many sons were killed, and no one could afford the huge houses and staff of fifty servants. After that, the distinctions between classes became much less rigid. This is why Mrs. Riddle is willing to socialise with the Grangers and pander to Hermione, when it would have been unthinkable in Lizzie and Darcy’s era. Also her standards for future daughters-in-law are considerably lower now than they would have been 20 years ago. Thanks, Merope.

— I feel like an evil tease wringing out the slow burn. In the meantime, you may admire Hermione's teeny tiny feet.
Living Death

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1943

Libatius Borage described *Living Death* as a powerful enchantment in which the affected would descend into a state of suspended animation, no longer reliant on the necessities of life—air, water, sustenance—and yet at the same time, be unable to perish. In a potion brewed with ingredients of the highest calibre and efficacy, the Draught of the Living Death would halt ageing, and as long as the body of the affected was kept safe and secure, grant a form of immortality.

Borage's last footnote warned readers that brewing the potion for self-consumption would produce an 'eternity without attainment, and a life without living'.

Tom thought *Living Death* was an accurate synopsis of his summers outside Hogwarts.

That summer, he'd made arrangements to stay in Diagon Alley, funded by his writing job and the profit that came of selling Acromantula venom to some shady patrons at The Hog’s Head—which was less than he'd wanted, as the price had been bartered down after his buyers had found out that the 'donor specimen' was only a few months old. Nevertheless, during the time he'd spent in the Leaky Cauldron, he had no adults standing over his shoulder telling him when to go to bed or when to get up. And best of all, he had access to magic without the encumbrance of the Trace, and that was a vast improvement to what would have been his regular place of residence: Wool's Orphanage.

Wool's Orphanage was now no longer his place of residence, official or *de facto* or anything else.

He was still conflicted about it, because he was perfectly aware that the Tom Riddle of years ago would have been exultant about his change of circumstances. For many of the early years of his life, it would have been one of his greatest desires: freedom from the shackles of poverty and orphanhood, absolved of the stain of illegitimacy; he would never have to walk through the creaking iron gates up to a tiny cell of a room whose far walls he could brush with his fingers if he spread his arms to their fullest extent.

The Tom Riddle of years past spent his days with his nose pressed against the grimy, painted-shut window of his third floor bedroom, watching motorcars rumble their way through the maze of London's streets. That Tom dreamt of his eighteenth birthday, of unlimited independence and future glory, vivid images of his What-Will-Be painted behind his eyelids in gold leaf and Tyrian purple.

That Tom had only known himself to be different, and called himself *Special*.

But the Tom of the Here-and-Now was not just Special, but *magical*. He had not slept on his orphanage room's thin mattress on its narrow iron bedstead since the age of twelve. No longer did he care about poverty, for its official definition (those who survived off less than a hundred pounds sterling per year) had no bearing on his current life, when everything he saw in the shop windows of Tottenham Court Road could be his with the application of the right spell.

*This* Tom could buy anything he wanted, even if he didn't know the right spell, because he had a doting old granny who thought that money could buy his compliance, and *a lot* of money could buy
his affection.

The Riddles.

Their very mention set him on edge.

Once he had had the time to speak to them and see them and know them, and now that he was away from them until Christmas, he felt qualified to make his judgement on them.

His judgement: he hated the Riddles. It didn't matter who they were, or that they weren't his parents by blood, or that he hadn't even met his real father and would never meet the fortune-hunting village tart who had whelped him in a London orphanage. The idea of them was enough. He hated the abstract idea of their very existence, and the part of him that had once stopped to listen to the street corner Socialist agitators hated them for what they stood for. In reality, disassociated from sentiment, Thomas and Mary Riddle were nothing but a pair of inconsequential Muggles. Just like Mrs. Cole had been, legal guardians or no. But despite how carefully he maintained his indifference around them, nothing could change the fact that they shared his name—or that he shared theirs.

His family...

Those two words rang discordant across his thoughts whenever he remembered them, brought to mind whenever he overheard the drawling articulation of their speech in the echo of a passing conversation, or witnessed their mannerisms reflected in the tilt of a head or the insouciant gesture of a hand on the other end of the House dining table.

He hated them for what they were, in equal proportion to what they weren't. He resented the things they gave him, because their generosity was inseparable from their selfishness, and when they offered him their wealth, it was not so much a guarantee of independence as it was a reminder of obligation.

He saw the metaphorical aspects of the Living Death reflected in his summer holidays. He had been given a glimpse of a life that was his entitlement by right of name and birth, served up on a silver platter... but consuming it was the slow and leisurely death of dignity, doled out on a silver spoon.

The literal aspects of the Living Death, however, applied quite well to the Acromantula's relatively uneventful summer.

On the last day before the holidays, Tom had cast an Imperio on the spider, before he'd forced it to ingest the Draught from a bowl. When it had gone still, he'd stuffed it into its trunk and secured the lid with a number of locking and anti-intruder charms.

When he'd finished with his Prefect duties after the Welcoming Feast, a tin full of leftovers in his bookbag, he had gone straight for the abandoned classroom in the depths of the dungeons, his wand already moving to unlock the door and light the sconces.

The lid of the trunk creaked open and nestled within, safe and sound, was the Acromantula.

Tom took a moment to appreciate the sight. His Draught of the Living Death—N.E.W.T. textbook standard, perfect in colour, sheen, and viscosity to Borage's description—had worked as expected. The Acromantula, as now revealed, was still a juvenile, not having aged in the ten weeks of summer holiday; its limbs were pliable, the joints flexing when he prodded them with the end of his wand. If the potion failed and the spider had died while locked in the trunk, the limbs would have gone stiff,
curled up under the thorax in *rigor mortis*.

The antidote took twenty minutes to produce an effect, and while he waited, Tom enlarged the trunk and reinforced the layers of locking charms. If he'd enchanted the trunk, the permanent charmwork would render it unnecessary to check the spells every time he visited. But enchantment was a magical discipline that Tom had never thought worth the effort for the effect it produced; he'd rather learn a number of Stinging Hexes to keep the spider in line than create an unbreakable container. Besides, once an enchantment was laid, he'd no longer be able to alter the size of the trunk without de-stabilising the runework and having to go through the trouble enchanting it again.

Enchanting was Hermione's personal interest, he'd observed during the summer. She had the patience to actually enjoy what he found a chore, a time-consuming task that would have him consulting multiple reference tables scattered through half a dozen textbooks to determine the most "resonant" places to carve runes, with respect to the sympathetic alignments to the time of year, and the natural properties of the wood from which the trunk had been built. Hermione had spent days dithering over enchanting her family motorcar's fuel tank, its "rounded corners!" upsetting her calculations when she'd gotten around to unbolting a few panels and seen the motor's interior with her own eyes.

He'd humoured her, proofreading her Arithmancy work while she edited the rough drafts of his articles, but he couldn't understand her hobby himself. There was no market in enchanted Muggle motorcars, as most adult wizards could Apparate and all of them could operate a Floo. There was no novelty value to it either, since any wealthy wizard with the money and time to collect trinkets would be dismissive toward most Muggle nonsense—with the exceptions of Muggle fine art and Muggle alcohol, which shared enough pre-Statute tradition with the wizarding world to make them universally understood and enjoyed.

He found his own areas of interest to be of more practical value than Hermione's, and he was proved right when the Acromantula began stirring in its trunk, hairy joints raking against the interior in an arrhythmic chorus of muted scrapes.

"I'm hungry," it said. Its voice had deepened as it had grown, still retaining a reedy, whistling quality—but now it had a greater resonance and peculiar echoing timbre, each word it spoke issuing from deep within the chitinous shell of its exoskeleton.

The Imperius he'd cast before the holidays, when he'd forced the spider to drink from the bowl of potion, had faded during his weeks away. That was interesting to know, as the Auror handbook had said that the Imperius was the longest lasting of the three Unforgivables, not requiring line of sight like the Killing Curse or sustained concentration like the Cruciatus. The commands set by the caster of the Imperius would remain in effect once the subject left their presence, but it appeared that regular reinforcement was required over the long term to maintain the spell.

Tom brought out a box of leftovers from the feast: slices from a side of mutton, roast pork, carved chicken, and a handful of baked chipolatas, still warm and shiny with grease.

He Summoned the spider's regular food bowl, cleaned out the dust with his dependable Super Steamer spell, then dumped the food in. He floated it over to the spider, which had used its hooked claws to drag its ponderous front half out of the ragged-looking trunk.

It made Tom wonder if the trunk had been Hagrid's, and if so, what Hagrid had used to carry his things home for the summer. The replacement trunk he'd Transfigured had been a quick job, and would eventually have reverted to being a dustpan after a few weeks or so. That must have come as
a surprise to the oaf, though Tom didn't feel sorry about it; when he was in Third Year, he would have been able to perform and reverse such a Transfiguration without breaking a sweat.

The spider slurped its meal while Tom watched, his wand held loosely between his fingers.

How thin the line was between Beast and Being, and how arbitrary and yet immutable.

(Had Tom been more soft-headed or philosophical, he would have contemplated the line between Man and Beast. But he wasn't one for reflecting on the allegorical potential, as he already knew the answer: Man was not Beast. He was as certain about it as he was about the fact that Magic was Might, and those that had it were superior to those that didn't.)

He'd seen Merfolk from his dorm room window, cutting leaves from the kelp beds that littered the floor of the Black Lake. They sang to each other, brushed one another's hair, netted fish and gathered shellfish, without a single care for the lives and problems of wizards. In the early mornings when he attended practical lessons for Care of Magical Creatures, he sometimes glimpsed centaurs at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. They were lighter on their feet—or hooves—than one would expect, and left distinctive footprints in the snow around the greenhouses and the groundskeeper's cottage.

They were classed as Beings by the Ministry of Magic, and the Department of Magical Creatures had an official liaison office with an appointed wizard representative. Wizards didn't respect non-human creatures, not even the ones that had human faces and spoke human languages. But they did respect civilisation, or at least the trappings of it that came in the form of mercantilism, as evidenced by the various goblin treaties that Professor Binns did so like to drone on about. Wizard liaisons were more often tasked to exchange magical trinkets for rare plant cuttings and animal parts, than actually uphold non-human legal rights to the Wizengamot.

It was funny—and convenient—how none of that, as limited as it was, applied to Acromantulas. They fell squarely into the 'Beasts' category, with no one endorsing their re-classification anytime soon. Perhaps it was due to their lack of thumbs. Everything else in the 'Beings' category had thumbs.

Or maybe it was the clicking, finger-long mandibles that leaked a flesh-disintegrating venom.

The spider looked up from its bowl of liquid meat. "The stones that were warm before my hibernation are now growing cool."

"Yes," said Tom.

"How long was I asleep?"

"Ten weeks, give or take a few days."

Its hairy limbs twitched in agitation. "Hagrid brought me outside two times before I grew too big for his pocket. I wish to see the sky again."

"No," said Tom.

"I will be obedient." It emitted a high, keening hiss, claws scratching against the flagstone floor. "I will return to the box afterwards. Just let me see the sky once more."
"That's still a 'No'," Tom repeated, lifting his wand up. "If you've finished eating, get back into the box."

The spider twitched its forelegs, picking up its head so the points of its mandibles faced Tom, oozing with venom.

"You are fearful," it said, black eyes fixed on him. "I can sense it. What is it? What makes you shy away, Master?"

Tom's eyes narrowed; he tapped his wand impatiently against his thigh. "I'm not afraid."

"I sense..." said the spider, voice rising an octave in its eagerness, "that you deny me in fear of being snared by a greater menace. Is it true, Master? Does Master have a master of his own?"

"No," Tom replied, who was growing tired of the stupid spider's antics. Did it think it could manipulate him? "Dinner's over; time for bed."

"Who is it?" the spider continued heedlessly. "Hagrid spoke of a man who invited him to learn, and paid for his wand and his shell coverings. He called him 'A Great Man'. Ah, I feel it! Your blood grows warm beneath your flesh; you recognise the name—"

"I might," said Tom, raising his wand. "But Hagrid lied to you: he isn't very great at all."

"He is, he is!" it chirped. "One day he will come for me, I know it! And then he will come for you!"

"De ripiendo!"

Tom had never cast this particular spell on an animate object. Beyond its Healing applications, he'd discovered that the Debridement Spell could pare vegetables and cut the crusts off bread, because for some inexplicable reason, there existed some people who thought that crusts had a different, worse, taste compared to the rest of the loaf.

He had no idea what would happen when the spell was cast on something that didn't have any skin, but he wasn't surprised to see a long, peeling strip of exoskeleton sheared off one of the spider's legs, which was followed by a dribble of clear, blue-tinted liquid.

The leg went limp; the spider listed to the side like a ship in rough water.

He quickly shot a Body-Bind at the spider, and when it had gone still, he rammed through to its inner mind, rifling through a succession of dark, blurry images of the inside of the storage cupboard; the array of images was soon followed by the very unsettling sensation of being caressed by large, hairy-knuckled hands, filling Tom with the urge to vomit. He pushed those memories aside and re-doubled his concentration.

An animal's imprint memory was part physiological, so an Obliviation spell that exclusively targeted the mind would never be of perfect effectiveness. He couldn't wipe out the spider's earliest memories of Hagrid, not unless he physically attacked the brain, which he was reluctant to do: a single mistake could blind the spider or cripple one or more of its legs, or damage it to the point that it lost its sentient mind—and then it would be no better than a regular spider.

So, bearing down with the force of his mind, his wand gripped tightly in his right hand, he
rummaged through the spider's memories, detaching sensation from association from recollection, shattering the links between the visual and the tactile, the connection of each image to its sensory echo. From there, he proceeded to attach impressions of Hagrid's face and clumsy hands to the darkness of the closed trunk, the loud slam of its lid, the blast of red light from the tip of a wand, the nerve-searing pain and writhing convulsions on a cold stone floor.

He tore the spider's memories apart, isolating scenes from their context; he then spliced them together out of their original order, muting the sensory impressions of some scenes and exaggerating them in others. Like mental celluloid these memories were, so conveniently arranged in a chronological sequence, laid out from the first rupture formed on the surface of its egg, all the way to the present point in time. Tom knew just where to start his re-organisation, which memories to excise, and the ones he deemed the least important he left unattached, strewn loose on the cutting room floor of the spider's mind.

This level of organisation was what separated this sentient creature from the simple minds of Peanut or Old Ab's milch goats.

It was much easier to break the memories into pieces than to put them back together, Tom found, a bead of sweat trickling down his hairline and soaking into his collar. He had done this before, a few times, minor memory alterations to see if he could, and how the spider would react to it, but he'd never had a reason to go this far until tonight. He discovered that not all memories fit together well, and those that were too incompatible had a tendency to drift apart when he turned his attention away to focus on another section. He also saw that minds, especially those of a juvenile creature like this, possessed some measure of natural resilience and could heal themselves over time; the few memories of Hagrid he had altered back in the early days of spring must have re-formed in the passing months, as the spider grew in size and its intelligence grew with it.

His necktie felt too tight, suffocating, but he ignored it and kept his hand on his wand and his eyes fixed on the spider's eyes until the job was done and the trunk was locked for the night.

'A great man'. How absurd a declaration.

He expected that once the spider regained its faculties of speech, it would never say such a thing again.

When Tom returned to the Slytherin living quarters, it was with a dull throb of a headache building pressure within his skull. The hour was late, and the sofas around the fireplaces were empty apart from a handful of upper year students putting the last touches to their summer homework. The boys in his year were in the process of getting ready for bed, their pyjamas and sleeping robes laid out over their beds, along with a messy scatter of loose socks, extra neckties, monogrammed handkerchiefs.

Tom's own trunk lay at the end of his bed, his dorm mates giving it a wide berth due to the anti-theft jinxes he had a habit of applying to all his belongings. Their avoidance was also due to his trunk looking significantly more impressive this year. It was a new one, bought by his grandmother—his fingers itched for his wand whenever he thought about their family connection—a sturdy construction of wood and tacked leather with polished brass bands and hinges. It had his initials tooled into the leather surface and foiled in gold, an ostentatious feature which did little to improve the overall aesthetics, or so Tom thought. All the other boys in his year had their luggage done this way, so it was difficult to discern the owner of each trunk, unless one put in the effort to learn each person's first, middle, and last name... and Tom hardly saw the value in that.
Travers greeted him at the door with a mumbled, "Riddle", and the rest acknowledged his presence with a polite nod, except for Nott, who had turned around to pour himself a glass of water from the ewer on his nightstand.

Tom ignored the unspoken snub and jabbed his wand at his trunk, snapping open the latches and raising the lid. Wordlessly, he levitated the various bits of his school uniform out of the trunk, slicing off the string and paper wrappings in which Thomas Riddle's Savile Row tailor had packaged his shirts. A non-verbal spell steamed the wrinkles out, then sent them flying into his wardrobe, followed by his socks, underclothes, and ties into the lower drawers of his bureau. Non-verbal magic was considered N.E.W.T. level by the school textbooks, and the fluency with which he levitated multiple objects, without any of them going off track and flopping to the floor, showed a level of control similar to that of a qualified adult wizard with years of training.

It was amusing how easy it was to impress others with such simple household magic, especially his dorm mates, who had no idea how simple it really was, because their mothers or servants cleaned their bedrooms for them. It wasn't so amusing to remember that he himself had been impressed by Dumbledore performing this same spell with a tea tray back in First Year—but then again, once he examined those memories of First Year again, he was displeased to remember that his eleven-year-old self had been a nearsighted boy who was far from truly comprehending the value of having a Foil of his very own.

A Foil.

His Foil.

There were many things he hated about the end of the Hogwarts term and the beginning of each summer, when he was forced out of the wizarding world to mingle with Muggles. But spending time with Hermione was not one of them, and this year had been an uncommonly good one. There had been one afternoon when he'd invited her to lunch at the Leaky Cauldron, and then she'd come up to see the room he'd hired for the holidays. He'd shown her his collection of glossy, animated magazines with his pseudonym credited on the front covers—the name she'd given him—and they'd read the articles together on the bed, laughing at the asinine questions he'd answered in his reader advice column. She'd spent the next few hours helping him pen responses to his fan mail, and when she left for home, his pillows were left smelling of her hair.

A glorious summer indeed.

It almost made up for the annoyance that was his 'family'.

"So..." ventured Rosier, buttoning up his nightshirt, "did everyone have a good summer?"

"No," grunted Travers. "Worked as a Junior Dispatch Clerk every day of the hols, now I'm knackered. 'Night, fellas." He slipped into his bed and yanked the curtains shut.

"I got my new broom. Comet One-Eighty, with professional-grade braking charms," Lestrange said. "Mother was happy about my O.W.L.s, so thanks for that, Riddle."

"And you, Riddle?" asked Rosier. "You look more... chipper than usual."

Nott stifled a snort from the bed next to Tom's, but when Tom shot him a sharp look, he just turned away and shut his four-poster drapes.
"I got eleven Outstandings, as everyone knows," said Tom.

The boys murmured their congratulations.

"But is that all?" Rosier inquired. "You always get Outstandings, and they never make you smile like that."

Tom's expression hardened. "I wasn't smiling."

"Alright," said Rosier warily, glancing at Lestrange, then Avery, neither of whom seemed eager to proffer a comment in support or contradiction. Rosier's throat bobbed, then he gave a sheepish cough. "Of course you weren't."

The other boys fell silent while Tom gathered his pyjamas and headed for the bathroom to wash up and brush his teeth, and when he went to close the door behind him, Rosier had already changed the subject to an analysis on the current state of the Slytherin House Quidditch team, now that Abraxas Malfoy had been chosen as its Captain.

Tom wondered if he had been smiling. There weren't many things in his life that consistently brought him to high spirits.

Confirmation of his power or influence was one of them, shown in the deference given him by the other Slytherins, or the adulation in each and every bit of fan mail he was sent. He had opened up a post box at the owl mail office in Diagon Alley, because there was no way he was going to have owls mobbing him at the breakfast table, hanging around and leaving droppings over the sausage platters until he'd written out a reply to their impatient owners.

Mastering a difficult piece of magic was another, made even better when other people saw proof of this expertise.

Then there was one, which he had trouble fitting into the same category as the others, that was his singular connection with Hermione Granger. She had confirmed that he was different the second time she'd met him; she'd known from the start how Special he was, and unlike every other person within his limited circle of acquaintance back then, that opinion had meant something to him.

If he had been smiling, it was none of the other boys' business why that was. Especially if it had been for the third reason, which was private and personal, and not for the grubby minds of teenage boys who would have misconstrued it for something that it wasn't. They'd have tarnished it with their tawdry speculation—as if it was on equal standing to a crude broomshed rendezvous with a third-cousin-once-removed when Mum and Dad weren't looking—and that was something Tom wouldn't allow. He had never been one for religion, and so he had no difficulty in labelling that special attachment he shared—along with all his thoughts and feelings about her and it—with the word sacred.

Yes, sacred.

The more he thought about it, the more it fit.

He had long ago, when living among the sticky-fingered orphans of Wool's, deemed his own person as sacrosanct. It was only natural that his most prized possessions—his magic, his innate brilliance, his earned accolades, his special bond—be classed as sacred.
It made perfect sense.

After he finished changing into his pyjamas and got into bed, the smile was still there.

The first Saturday of the term, an owl dropped a letter onto Tom's crumpet, smearing butter on one side of the envelope and over the purple wax seal stamped with the Hogwarts crest in relief.

After wiping off his hands, Tom cracked the seal with his butter knife and tipped its contents out onto the breakfast table. Avery and Lestrange, sitting on either side of him, had gone silent upon observing a sheet of parchment covered in swirly handwriting in a matching purple ink, which they recognised as the same writing that had marked up their essays. Professor Dumbledore, for some reason, preferred annotating student essays in purple ink when the other teachers used red.

"You're not in trouble or anything, are you?" asked Lestrange. "Do you need someone to say they saw you in the Common Room yesterday evening?"

Tom picked up the letter and skimmed through Dumbledore's message. "Unnecessary, but I might take you up on that offer another day. It's just an invitation to tea with the Deputy Headmaster."

"Well," said Lestrange, going back to his fried eggs on toast, "you'd have more to talk about than I would. Good luck with that, Riddle."

The letter was forgotten to all but Tom for the rest of the day. Instead of moodily counting down the hours, he found a book and a seat by the Common Room fire; it was an earnest attempt on his account to practice some restraint, and had he been more lacking of control, he could see himself pacing in circles and hexing any student who spoke louder than a low whisper.

After insinuating himself into their confidences from Third Year, and making himself privy to their personal opinions, Tom hadn't been surprised to hear that the majority of Slytherin House held no great fondness for their Transfiguration professor. They respected his skill and power, as his academic awards and numerous publications couldn't go overlooked, but that was the only thing about him that they could respect. The rest of Albus Dumbledore, the public image he presented of himself, was far from impressive: the endless collection of spangled robes and whimsical habits were one thing, the disloyal position he took towards the magical nation of Britain was another.

Dumbledore was known for professing support of Muggles, while being neglectful of his support of Magical Britain's safety, shirking all the summons to action that the general public, the newspapers, and the Wizengamot had been sending him for years.

Dumbledore had described himself as 'Just a humble schoolteacher', and therein lay the crux of Slytherin's disapproval: the man, although he ranked as one of the most learned and powerful wizards in the British Isles, was completely lacking in ambition. He remained a schoolteacher, publishing yet another interesting household application of distilled dragon blood in his spare time, while his true magical potential went wasted.
It also didn’t help that while Dumbledore was fair on subtracting points from all Houses, whenever he noticed spontaneous performances of good deeds and rewarded them with points, it was usually to the students of Gryffindor.

Inevitably, the hour of the appointment came upon him. Tom made his farewells to his yearmates, then left the Common Room to take the long walk out of the dungeons and up to the Transfiguration corridor on the First Floor.

When he arrived, Dumbledore had a tea tray on his desk, containing a matched set of pot and cups, and a cake stand with a regular assortment of the professor’s favourite teatime treats: lemon shortbread, sandwich creams, and jam dodgers.

The lamp on his desk had been activated, emitting a circle of yellow light over a few sheets of paper; as soon as Tom entered the office, Dumbledore turned it off and adjusted his spectacles, pushing the paper to the side to make room for a pair of teacups and matching saucers.

"I’m sure you have surmised why I asked you to tea today, Tom," said Dumbledore, smiling at him from the other side of the desk.

Tom took a seat and returned the smile with one of his own, biting his tongue the whole time.

The papers Dumbledore had been reading were actually made of paper—pulped and processed wood chips—not the magically manufactured wizarding parchment, which was sturdier than Muggle paper, came in long rolls that students cut themselves to fit the essay length requirements assigned by their teachers, and had a semi-translucent quality when held up to direct light.

The size of the paper was another clue to its origins. There was a difference in dimensions between the paper in his lined primary school composition books and stationery paper, which Hermione had used in her correspondence when they were children, made in a size that matched standard postage envelopes. The paper on Dumbledore’s desk was of the second sort, covered with well-formed, well-spaced handwriting, with room left on the top for what appeared to be an elaborate letterhead design.

"I couldn't begin to guess," Tom replied. "Has it anything to do with my O.W.L. results? I believe we scored the same number of marks for Charms, or so The Daily Prophet tells me. They say it's quite an accomplishment."

"That is indeed an accomplishment. Madam Marchbanks compliments you on your lively casting—there have been too few students who can take the textbook lessons and turn out a show with that much personal flair. A natural hand at Charms, commendably done; your performance has caught the interest of the Examinations Board." Dumbledore gazed calmly at him from over the frames of his spectacles. "However, I had looked forward to discussing what I consider a success of greater significance. Namely, this delightful letter I received this summer from your grandmother. I must admit that I was rather bewildered at first to have received mail addressed to a 'Professor Albert Dumberton', but after opening it, the surprises just kept coming."

Dumbledore beamed at Tom over the loaded tea tray.

"Pleasant surprises, I hope?" asked Tom, his gaze darting to the papers on Dumbledore's desk, then back to his professor.

"Oh, absolutely wonderful," replied Dumbledore. He began to pour the tea, sending a cup and
saucer sliding over to Tom without slopping tea over the edge. The sugar bowl and creamer followed, Dumbledore watching Tom serve himself with a bright twinkle in his eyes.

"We've updated your records, so in future, your school supply lists will be owled to—" he paused to turn over a sheet of paper on his desk, "—Ah, let's see. 'North Corner Room Two, the Riddle House, Hangleton, Yorkshire'. The owls will be instructed to deliver to this room in particular, instead of wherever you happen to be in the house, as most of our Muggleborn students prefer—and as preferred by the Ministry, in adherence to their standards for wizarding secrecy, of course."

Tom gritted his teeth, concealing the movement behind the rim of his teacup. He could read between the lines and discern what Dumbledore really meant. This was no helpful intervention to keep bird droppings off the dining table, or Muggle neighbours wondering why nocturnal animals were swooping around in broad daylight. It was a way to ensure that Tom remained in his room during the holidays, even past the age of legal adulthood, because there would be no other way to get his letter if he left for London or Hogsmeade. No way to get his justly earned Head Boy badge, too.

(Tom was counting on Sluggy to procure the nomination to Head on his behalf; unlike Dumbledore, that man knew the meaning of the word 'helpful'.)

"Thank you, sir."

"Not a problem, Tom!" said Dumbledore, with a genial chuckle. "There is another matter I wished to discuss, with relation to that topic. You must have noticed that your latest school supply list lacked the usual pouch of coins from the Hogwarts Student Relief Fund. I'm afraid that from now on, you'll no longer be eligible to receive this disbursement. That won't be a problem, will it? By the state of your uniform, I assume that you were able to purchase better than second-hand this year, which the Relief Fund sadly limits its recipients to."

He had noticed it. Not on the day of his letter's delivery, but a few days later when he was doing his shopping in Diagon Alley. At the time, it hadn't bothered him as he had more than enough of his own money to buy his supplies, half of which he already owned. He'd gotten the Advanced Defence and Advanced Charms textbooks the previous summer, when he was living at The Hog's Head.

He hadn't noticed that the envelope was lighter than usual when the owl had arrived, because it wasn't—it had contained his O.W.L. results, with an extra card containing the examiners' feedback for each subject that had a practical wandwork component. His, unlike the ones of his dorm mates, had commentary on the back of the cards, detailing the extra points he'd been awarded for performing the spells non-verbally, or with interesting non-textbook variations.

"It's not been an inconvenience," said Tom. "I got everything on the list, and there won't be much to buy next year, since the N.E.W.T. curriculum textbooks are the same for both Sixth and Seventh Year."

"I am glad to hear it," said Dumbledore. "Your family are looking forward to having you for Christmas. How are you settling in with them? The staff every year try our best to make Christmas at Hogwarts a happy occasion for the students who choose to stay, but for all that we try, nothing comes close to spending the holidays with family. I'm overjoyed to see that you have found yours, Tom—family is a precious gift that ought not to be squandered or taken for granted."

Dumbledore gazed mournfully at Tom, and, as if in sympathy, the phoenix perched on the golden stand behind the desk let out a soft croon, like a single, silvery note blown from a flute. For an
instant, Tom thought he had burned himself with his tea; his chest and throat felt constricted all of a sudden, too hot, as if he’d swallowed too large a gulp at once. He felt it strongly, but somehow it wasn't painful; it was an internal pins-and-needles sensation that made him vaguely uncomfortable, but not so uncomfortable that he let it show on his face. He wouldn’t let it, not with Dumbledore sitting across the table from him.

"Wizards live such extended lives that it's easy to lose track of those whose don't," continued Dumbledore. "We so easily forget those who matter most to us—or rather, those who should."

"I suppose I'm still getting used to the idea of having proper guardians," said Tom, trying to finagle his way around telling the entirety of the truth. From the age of eleven, he'd been aware that Dumbledore knew more about mind control and mind magic than he was willing to share, and if Tom at that age could tell when he was being lied to, it only made sense that such an ability was within Dumbledore's reach as well.

"We hardly know each other, and you might say that it's an issue with a simple solution: spend more time with them, since it seems I won't be offered the choice to stay at Hogwarts over the holidays." Tom made an effort to keep any hint of his bitterness about this decision from showing in his voice or demeanour. "But, sir, there are other—incompatible—differences between us that can't be so simply overcome, no matter how often we entertain one another's company. And to be frank, I find it unrealistic to expect people to get along in spite of them."

One of the many enchanted gadgets on the shelf in the back of the office let off a buzzing sound, but Dumbledore paid it no attention. He steepled his hands over his half-drunk tea and asked, "What makes you think that? Am I wrong to assume that these differences are due to their being Muggles?"

"I hope you aren't implying that I hold Muggles as lesser beings because they lack magic, sir," returned Tom, who did not believe that Muggles were equal to wizards, but had ensured that his phrasing had made no assertion of his personal beliefs.

"And do you, Tom?"

"Our differences have less to do with them not having any magic," said Tom. "And more to do with me being a wizard."

"I am afraid I don't understand," Dumbledore said, dipping a piece of shortbread into his tea with one hand, while he stroked his beard thoughtfully with the other. "Could you explain what you mean by that?"

"I know that magic is inherent, and there's nothing I can do about their not being wizards, as much as I can't help being a wizard myself," Tom said. "So the only option I see there is to accept our differences in that regard. But then there are other differences between us that aren't so inherent, residing in personality as opposed to identity. They're ones that can be changed, but no one is particularly eager to do so—and with these, I can't see us getting past them and getting on, not for the long term, at least."

He refrained from saying, But it won't really matter in the end because, as a wizard, I'm likely to outlive them all.

Dumbledore's mouth tilted into a thoughtful frown; he brushed soggy biscuit crumbs off his beard, and when he was done, he said, "It isn't common knowledge, but my mother was Muggleborn, and my father pureblood. They disagreed on things, as all couples do, and one of those things was on the
subject of dealing with Muggles; even to their last days together they had reached no resolution on
the matter. From this, I can observe that it is not unusual to have differences of opinion amongst
individuals, but that is far from saying the people involved are utterly incompatible."

"There are instances where opinions can be incompatible," said Tom, giving an earnest attempt not
to stare at Dumbledore's biscuity beard. He knew that beards were a proper wizardly tradition, like
long hair and pointy hats, but he had never seen the appeal himself. The modern wizard, as he'd
decided to be, shouldn't have to rely on the traditional wizarding uniform to demonstrate that he was
powerful. Merlin could have performed the same magical feats in his royal regalia as his nightshirt
and slippers.

(Besides that, he found robe sleeves cumbersome during meals. He had learned in First Year how to
keep his sleeves out of his food, but not all of his fellow Slytherins had. It quite put him off his
dinner when he reached out to ladle himself some scalloped potatoes and saw that some other
student's potion-stained sleeve had already been dragged through the communal platter, leaving a
forlorn trail of cheesy lumps smeared over the table.)

"I recall being told years ago," Tom went on, "that wizards have no formal religion, but believe in an
immortal magical soul of some sort that goes on adventures upon a wizard's death. My family—my
Muggle family—are members of the Church of England, and believe in immortality by salvation.
Those two beliefs are hardly concurrent. Surely if there's anything that can divide a family beyond
repair, it's a matter of this nature."

"I see it as your choice to make an issue of contention of it," said Dumbledore in a maddeningly kind
voice. "I support the peaceful co-existence of all beings, including wizards and Muggles, but that is
an ideal entirely based on personal initiative."

"Isn't it also one's personal initiative to believe whatever they want?" Tom asked.

"Of course. And it is my own to believe that the love of one's family is beyond price."

"There aren't enough galleons in the world to buy it, sir," spoke Tom confidently, knowing that he
would never love Mary Riddle regardless of how many coal-seamed acres she and her husband
bequeathed him.

"In that, we are in agreement," said Dumbledore, nodding in approval.

For a minute, they sipped their tea, Dumbledore refreshing his cup from the pot and levitating a
biscuit over to his pet bird. With interest, Tom noted how the phoenix had the flexibility of a parrot,
able to grip a biscuit with its claws and lift it up to its beak, whereupon it devoured it in a spray of
crumbs. Unlike Dumbledore, who used his beard to catch his crumbs, the phoenix had a tray under
its stand which was filled with a mix of fragrant wood shavings, bird droppings, and a layer of fine
ash that glittered like gold dust. Tom was almost tempted to take some, as phoenix dust was a rare
and expensive potions ingredient, but he was put off by the thought of putting his hands in poo, even
if it was magical poo.

Returning his cup to his saucer, Dumbledore asked, "Do you still practice meditation, Tom?"

"Every other night before bed, sir," said Tom, lifting an eyebrow in question. "I've found that
meditating over the day's lessons is a good way to revise for the next day's."

"And are you able to organise your thoughts?"
"I suppose so, Professor." Tom looked askance at Dumbledore. "If you asked me at this moment to characterise sequential Transfigurations, then determine how suitable it is for a given situation versus, say, modular Transfigurations... I believe I'd be capable of it."

"That is well and good, Tom, but not quite what I was after. If I asked if you could clear your thoughts, would you be capable of that?"

"Clear my thoughts?" Tom cocked his head. "I'm not certain what you mean. Think of nothing?"

"Exactly!"

"I expect I could," said Tom, who had never in his life liked admitting that he couldn't do something—at least, not aloud.

Dumbledore wriggled his bony fingers at Tom. "Go on then, Tom."

"Sir?"

Dumbledore's brows undulated on his forehead like a pair of red furry caterpillars.

Tom took a deep breath and closed his eyes. This was ridiculous, but this was also Dumbledore. Nothing about the infuriating old man had to make any sense to anyone but himself. But there was also something incredibly galling about being incapable of performing an action that Dumbledore spoke of in such unceremonious terms, as if it was a simple and commonplace feat for him. Tom saw himself as no one's lesser, especially not Dumbledore's, so of course he'd try it and see if he could do it too; it definitely hadn't anything to do with wanting to indulge Dumbledore's mysterious objectives.

*Clearing my thoughts? How does that work?* Tom mused, behind the red-tinged darkness of his closed eyelids. He adjusted his breathing, relaxed his shoulders, and set his hands in his lap, palms up.

It must have something to do with visualisation, he decided. There was a good chance that Dumbledore was going to show him an interesting magical trick, and most things about magic were intuitive to Tom. And he'd known, from his years of experimenting, that visualisation and imagination were essential ingredients in successful magical casting.

A vision of the night sky, aglow with wheeling constellations, formed in the back of his mind—the same glorious sky he'd denied to the tiresome Acromantula locked in the trunk. A million stars, scattered across a void of blue-black velvet, glinting like snowflakes fallen on his winter cloak.

*Clear them away.* Tom breathed out. *Think of nothing.*

The snowflakes melted into the black wool. The flickering stars, one by one by one, were snuffed out, leaving behind an empty velvet void. There was a yawning chasm opening up before him; it swallowed him whole and left nothing behind—no flesh, no weight, no senses—not even the sound of his own pulse thrumming through his ears, the quiet whisper of each breath passing through his nostrils, tinged with the aroma of herbal bergamot tea, or the soft gurgle of his stomach digesting the masticated remnants of lemon shortbread.

The chasm widened, growing endlessly wider. It was endless, giving him no sense of dimension, no
indication of how far it extended; it was at once a featureless blankness and immeasurably infinite. Neither time nor mass nor distance mattered, nothing mattered, not in this empty space in between thinking and dreaming.

*Nothing.*

Tom opened his eyes.

"What is this meant to achieve, sir?" he asked.

"It's a practical lesson," said Dumbledore, peering at him intently. "A rather unique educational exercise."

"Is something supposed to happen?"

"Continue as you were, Tom. Try not to lose your concentration."

"Professor?"

Tom waited for Dumbledore to answer, but the man just gazed in his direction, twiddling his thumbs aimlessly, a pleasant smile on his face.

*This is a waste of time,* thought Tom. *I could be doing so many other, more productive things, right now.*

It was a Saturday afternoon, early on in the term, when the threat of looming exams had not yet crossed the horizon in the minds of the average student. His yearmates would be outside enjoying the last warm days of autumn. Tom could find better things to do; the N.E.W.T. curriculum wasn't *that* hard, but the homework had begun to shift away from what he was long accustomed to. What had once been essays that could be written by summarising the textbook had turned into large projects involving the practical demonstration of all the skills and spells taught over the term. Again, not difficult—but terribly time consuming when he had other projects to work on.

He had a half-completed draft of his next article, which he'd tentatively titled, 'Course Correct: Temperature Charms for Perfect Mealtime Service'. It would be accompanied by a set of wand movement diagrams, instructing readers on how to charm their servingware so hot meals were kept hot, with a reversed spell that kept drinks and desserts chilled. He could see it being useful for wealthy witches who wanted their main courses to remain hot even if their guests lingered over the *apéritifs,* and for the working housewives who needed dinner ready for hungry husbands returning from their evening shifts.

It was an idea he and Hermione had come up with in his room at the Leaky Cauldron, after she'd remarked on how he still used the enchanted lunchbox she'd gifted him years ago. It had turned into a debate on the merits of enchanting versus spellcasting: enchanting was harder to learn and teach, and this had a significant influence on the number and value of enchanted objects; spellcasting, Tom argued, was more flexible, simpler to teach, and here was the most important part—it had a certain populist appeal. After all, few wizarding families could afford a full set of enchanted dinnerware, and although many families had one or two pieces in the dining room china hutch, they were usually wedding gifts or inherited heirlooms rather than enchanted by hand. However, most wizards *could* learn to cast a temperature charm on their food and drink.

If he hadn't been invited for tea and tiddlywinks with Dumbledore, he and Hermione would probably
be working on spell diagrams, or another one of their class projects. Weekends were their main opportunity to see each other outside of class, now that the summer holidays had ended. He dared to entertain the idea that he missed her; unlike everyone else in their year—everyone else he knew in general—Hermione's presence didn't grate on him after a few hours. He enjoyed collaborating with her on magical projects, and even things that had nothing to do with magic or schoolwork were still enjoyable in her company.

And when she was gone...

During the summer he'd consoled himself, in her absence, with the interesting books and periodicals she'd brought for him, including an article on the proper notation of magical instructional diagrams, or a history on the Roman and Anglo-Saxon occupations of Yorkshire. There was also the reassuring scent of her that remained in his room after she left, a subtle combination of shampoo, bath soap, laundry flakes, and the natural fragrance of her body, which in the summertime was not as nonexistent as he supposed most girls wished it to be, but to him it was far from unappealing.

She'd be mortified if he mentioned it, so he didn't. Nor did he mention that he liked it, that once or twice during the night, he'd pressed his nose to the pillow she'd reclined on during her visit. In doing so, something had pressed rather insistently against the placket of his pyjama pants, and then he had had to press his hand against himself to relieve the pressure; it was a filthy habit whose filthiness his rational mind took no notice of during times like this...

"Tom!" Dumbledore's voice interrupted the meander of his thoughts. "You've lost your concentration."

Tom blinked.

"My apologies, sir," he said automatically—and then his attention returned to the original context of their conversation. His eyes narrowed. "Concentration, Professor? How—how did you know—you knew what I was—"

He cut himself off, feeling heat rise up his neck and bloom across his cheeks.

_Dumbledore had been listening to his thoughts._

It was disgusting on both sides—that Dumbledore knew the direction that his thoughts had taken—that Tom had been thinking those thoughts in the first place—that he'd allowed himself to be out-manoeuvred by an interfering old man.

The teacups rattled in their saucers; silver and porcelain tinkled on the tea tray, and behind the desk, the phoenix squawked loudly and buffeted its feathers.

"Tom!"

Tom bit his tongue. The rattling ceased.

"Sir," said Tom, swallowing the words that he'd really wanted to say, "what was that?"

"A basic introduction to Occlumency, of course," Dumbledore answered, giving no sign that he had been disturbed by the display of accidental magic, or by the theme of Tom's personal musings.
"Occlumency is an uncommon magical discipline whose function is to allow wizards and witches to fortify their conscious minds and protect the privacy of their thoughts. It is a difficult bit of magic,
even to the adult wizard, and requires a consistent, applied focus that few children are capable of. And it was for that very reason, years ago, that I recommended you practice meditative techniques. I came to the decision today that you were ready to be taught. Do you think you're ready, Tom?"

"Yes, sir," said Tom. "I'm ready to learn. But... Sir, you can read minds?"

"I have learned to dabble in this and that over the years," Dumbledore said evasively, before he waved his hands over the tea tray and made it disappear with a Pop! "I believe we have the time to try once or twice more, before I send you off to clean yourself up before dinner. Remember, Tom—clear your thoughts."

For the next half hour, Tom forced his thoughts to remain on the blank, black sky in his mind, noticing that each time he began to drift away to thoughts of other things, it was accompanied by a faint tugging sensation that seeped its way into his consciousness. It was strange—foreign—a pressure so subtle that it wasn't much different from the brief touch of a fly alighting on his skin. His awareness of it was minimal unless he concentrated on following the feeling to its source, in the same way he'd learned to interpret each sensory signal of the Acromantula's tactile 'vision'.

Every time he traced that feeling to wherever it came from, he could feel the growing throb in his temples of an imminent headache, but Tom didn't allow his concentration to waver. Once or twice, he thought he saw Dumbledore showing signs of his own headache, though he spoke not a word on his personal discomfort.

Dumbledore's piercing gaze didn't relent, and to his relief, the professor made no more reprovals for the rest of the session.

(Dumbledore didn't comment on what he'd gleaned from Tom's private thoughts, either. But Tom was still too put out to feel thankful for it.)
— Tom-centric chapter, because his character needed some time to internalise the last couple of major plot events. He has a family now, and that needs to sink into his patented Tom Logic™. This chapter also covers Tom's independent adventures and character development. Next chapter will cover Hermione's independent adventures, and continue her storyline with Nott (Yes, it is going somewhere, please hold onto your pants.) I know some people want to see Tom and Hermione interact all chapter, every chapter, but that's impossible if they're to develop individual personalities, strengths, and motivations.

— Tom and Dumbledore have a weird miscommunication thing going on where each person lacks crucial insight on the other, but they have next to no awareness of it. For example, the concept of "Family" to Dumbledore versus how Tom sees it. It's not helped by the fact that, due to each of them knowing Legilimency, they assume the other can't lie to them... but that's not the same as being 100% honest. So even if they aren't constantly at each other's throats like Canon Dumbledore and Canon Tom, this version of them will never be friends on equal terms.
Amortentia

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1943

*Amortentia*, as described by Hector Dagworth-Granger, was a potent mood-affecting compulsion that manifested itself in the following symptoms: lowered inhibitions, impaired judgement, increased libido, and an obsessive fixation on a single target; long-term exposure and withdrawal was purported to result in chronic mood instability. Amortentia was as dangerous a potion as it was difficult to prepare, but that didn't diminish its reputation among wizarding consciousness. For all the troubling implications around its use, Amortentia maintained an air of mystery and romance—the latter of which Hermione found remarkably literal.

*Air of romance*, indeed, thought Hermione, in her first N.E.W.T. level Potions practical lesson, where Professor Slughorn revisited the fundamentals and moved on to advanced techniques with ingredients from his "special cupboard", which were too valuable to be stocked amongst the other ingredients of the student communal cupboard.

Slughorn demonstrated the grinding process of moonstone into a fine dust, tilting the mortar for all the students to peer inside and observe the texture and consistency of the powder. After the moonstone, he showed how to clean a mortar to avoid cross-contamination with the next ingredient, freshwater pearls.

"...And this was how I learned to do it back in my old apprenticeship days, when my primary job was cleaning the master's cauldrons and grinding his knives. As a professional, one must keep their tools in tip-top shape, naturally; the first lesson any brewer learns is that good tools and good ingredients is what makes a good potion. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise, as I was told, *hoho!* Feels like just yesterday, let me tell you..." said Professor Slughorn, rambling on nostalgically. He kept his lessons informal, encouraging student participation; it gave his lectures a conversational feeling, albeit a conversation that was rather one-sided and contained so many extraneous anecdotes that Hermione had years ago stopped taking notes on them.

Hermione glanced to the side, where Tom wasn't taking any notes at all. He had his chin propped in the heel of one hand, his eyes half-lidded, looking oddly meditative. Looking around, she observed that most of the class had glazed expressions on their faces, more than usual for a lecture where Slughorn had strayed off-topic; where he'd started on his talk about preparing the day's potion, he'd ended up in a diatribe on the rising price of Ashwinder eggs, and the nerve of any suppliers who'd dare to mislabel inferior specimens as premium ingredients.

*It's the potion fumes*, Hermione realised.

She'd identified the contents of Professor Slughorn's sample cauldron at the start of the day's lecture, earning points for Ravenclaw. By now, the fumes had dispersed across the classroom, although she and Slughorn—and possibly Tom, who looked distant and bored in most classes where he already knew the subject matter back to front—seemed to be the only people who weren't swooning over their desks.

For her, it was a combination of a library and a stationery shop: new parchment, leather-bound
covers, bottled ink, and the fragrant lemon oil wood-polish that she associated with bookshelves and study nooks in the Hogwarts library. More subdued notes she could also discern: she smelled the tea she liked to drink during late night studying, a nice treat any other time of the day, and then the fresh scent of some sort of soap. It wasn't her own, which was more floral than herbal, and she couldn't recall if it matched the brand of laundry powder her Mum bought back home, or any of the cakes of soap her dorm mates used in their shared bathroom.

She found her lack of response to the Amortentia—the dazedness, the loss of mental clarity—to be somewhat unusual. Of course she'd noticed the allure that the textbook described as the potion's *Air of Romance*, but it wasn't *that* compelling to her; it was something that could be analysed in a specific state of mind, while the rest of her mind remained perfectly lucid. When she did it, directing all her attention to a single element of the scent, in the same way it was possible to concentrate on one particular flavour from an open spice rack, it was easier to overlook the Amortentia's unnatural appeal.

This was a meditative technique that Mr. Pacek had told her about years ago, and one she'd seen mentioned in the book she'd borrowed from Nott. A minor technique, as the book described, that was a prelude to training oneself to completely emptying the mind of conscious thought—the mark of a trained Occlumens. She would have considered it an impossible task if not for the book confirming that it could be done, though not without much effort and practice.

The ideal: to narrow the the focus of the mind, withdraw conscious thought from bodily perception, create separations—*compartments*—between each mental function so that a trained Occlumens in desperate need could choke down raw whalemeat without wincing at the taste, or tourniquet and cauterise their own limbs in a life-or-death emergency.

Hermione found those examples extreme, but she could see their utility: this was about learning to ignore impulses, whether it was a natural, internal reaction to pain, or an external compulsion produced by magic.

Legilimency, as she'd read, was only one of many ways to sway the direction of human thought. Other things could affect the mind: Compulsion charms, the Confundus, the Imperius, the innate abilities of certain magical species such as Veelas, Sirens, Dementors, and Phoenixes. Potions, *this* potion in particular, and its fumes could do it, although there was very little the mental art of Occlumency could help with if Amortentia was ingested into the body rather than merely inhaled. It made sense that a Potions Master like Professor Slughorn had learned to immunise himself against the side effects, though it was interesting, very interesting, that Tom appeared to be just as composed as she was.

Tom's chest rose and fell as he breathed deeply of the fumes, as everyone else was doing, but his eyes hadn't glazed over. It seemed as if Tom was enjoying the smell without falling under its allure. Hermione enjoyed it too, but it wasn't her fault; Amortentia was brewed for the purpose of beguiling the unwary.

When class ended, Hermione asked Tom about his thoughts on the lesson.

"I haven't seen anyone worried about Amortentia, and how dangerous it is," Hermione remarked, on their way to the Great Hall for lunch. "I saw that half the class were drooling over their desks! The textbook has a list of warnings in the footnotes, but no one reads them, and instead of going over it, Slughorn spent more time explaining how to substitute cultured pearls for a budget brew. As if any of us were ever going to brew Amortentia ourselves."
"Some people might do," said Tom, "if they buy into the belief that the smell of Amortentia is an indication of who they'll marry in the future... But since they're the same people who trust horoscopes so much that they'd stay up three nights without sleeping to chart the rise of Venus, their judgement is probably not to be trusted. I'm not certain how that works, anyway; the textbook says that food smells are quite common. Surely even the oldest of old maids out there would hesitate about marrying a kidney pie."

"Did you get a food smell?" asked Hermione. She'd gotten a drink, but that was close enough to count.

"Among other things," Tom said nonchalantly.

"Oh?"

"What did you get?"

"Books and parchment. The good kind, you know, the heavyweight ivory parchment that Scrivenshaft's sells by the inch," Hermione said, picking the scent that she had identified first, the one she knew without a doubt what it was, unlike the last one she was still puzzling over.

She was referring to the expensive rolls of premium parchment at the back of Hogsmeade's one stationery shop, which required the assistance of a clerk to cut sections off upon request. Students restocked their supply with the cheaper parchment from racks at the front, but it was that expensive parchment which Hermione lingered over at every visit. It was so thick and weighty that the ends didn't curl up as soon as she turned around; the standard quality stuff needed inkwells and paperweights to keep it from scrolling up in the corners. This was the paper that Hermione couldn't justify buying for everyday use, only for her final term papers for her favourite classes, Arithmancy and Runes. And it was the paper used in the most valuable books in the Restricted Section, the antique grimoires written by hand and quill, instead of being mass-produced like their school textbooks.

"I got that too," said Tom, sounding very pleased with himself.

"There was something else..." Hermione spoke uncertainly, pausing for a moment to allow a group of Hufflepuff First Years to overtake them. They were holding hands to keep from getting lost in the maze of corridors that led out of the dungeons, a sight that made Tom scoff quietly under his breath.

"...I couldn't tell what it was, but it smelled familiar," continued Hermione. "Like some sort of soap, or cologne. I still don't know what it is. I think I'll have to go up to my dormitory before dinner to see what the other girls are using."

Tom's eyes narrowed. "You've actually thought the potion smelled like one of those Ravenclaw girls? What a preposterous idea—who on Earth would it be? Gutteridge? Shelton? It had better not be Ellerby; she's a twit."

"Don't tell me you believe in Amortentia Divinations," said Hermione, with a trace of reproof. "I fail to see how everyone thinks it's romantic; Professor Slughorn skimmed over the dangers, but he was very clear that nothing about it had anything to do with real love."

She didn't believe in the mystical powers of Divination, especially if the predictions came from any of her classmates who claimed to have the Sight, just because they had a nightmare about doing poorly on an assignment and it came true.
Hermione was also aware that, in spite of whatever her personal thoughts on the subject might be, the Muggle world would never have permitted the marriage of two *inverts*, as it was called in the journals of psychology she'd found in her father's study at home. A *mental condition*, she'd read—and it was only in writing that she'd learned about it, because it was not a subject trotted out in casual conversation, not in primary school or the family dinner table. She wasn't even sure that Magical Britain allowed it by law, but from what her dorm mates had told her about Jasper Hastings and his 'deviant inclinations', certain things were tolerated so long as the people involved (for a given value of 'people', as she was almost convinced the Sorting Hat was sentient) didn't make a public spectacle of themselves.

(And if they performed their duties first, if that was required of them by their families. That was something that went unspoken, but was nonetheless understood.)

Either way—and if Divination by Amortentia was a real thing, which she highly doubted—she couldn't imagine herself living with one of her dorm mates for the rest of her life. Though they might clean up after themselves in the communal facilities, and had the courtesy to Silence their curtains if they snored, they weren't more than token friends, and distantly at that. She couldn't remember the last personal conversation she'd had with any of them; she was the only Muggleborn out of the group, and wasn't particularly invested in Wizarding culture to the extent that she followed the news to the day, or recognised specific names dropped in gossip.

'Friends' and study partners she and the other Ravenclaws might be, but that was a far cry from being a true friend or a partner for life.

"I don't believe in them," said Tom quickly. He glanced around to ensure that the hallway was clear, before his voice lowered to a whisper. "I think you could do better than that. You're meant for greater things—greater than some trite, romantic nonsense that came out of a cauldron, at least."

Hermione sniffed. "Just because I don't like the idea of artificial romance doesn't mean that there's something wrong with romance in general."

While she could admit to enjoying the melodramatic idea of romance, the fictional portrayal of it that involved balcony serenades and the obligatory Act Three double suicide, it wasn't anything she actively sought to incorporate into her own life. That sentimentalised version was all fine to read about or see performed on a stage, as a form of entertainment where she was safely installed behind the Fourth Wall. Romance as a concept, however, which encompassed everything from courtship, reciprocated affection, closeness and constancy into the far distant future... well, that was something her parents had, and that realistic version of romance—which didn't come without its faults and setbacks—she wouldn't mind knowing on her own terms.

Logical reasoning was an intrinsic part of Hermione's nature. There was no excuse for why romance, of all things, couldn't be approached with realistic, reasonable expectations. Doing it this way would avoid all those sticky endings that star-crossed romantics found themselves stuck in. Death by heartbreak was a fate she intended to avoid; it was something that wouldn't do her future aspirations any favours.

"Is that something you want? Romance?" Tom's mouth twisted into a scowl. "Love?"

"Doesn't everyone?" she answered.

Tom said nothing to that.
Hermione sighed and stepped closer, taking his hands and lacing their fingers together. "Just because you might think of yourself as different to everyone else, doesn't mean you can't want what I want—what everyone else wants. It's not beneath you, or beneath anyone to value that. You can consider romance trite and common if you want, but it's not the same thing as love, and one day I hope you'll see that."

"You know," said Tom, "you sound an awful lot like Dumbledore when you say things like that."

"Well, I think he's right about some things," said Hermione. "Love is the most powerful magic of all."

"Wrong, actually." Tom shook his head solemnly. "Magic is the most powerful magic of all."

Hermione laughed at the graveness of his expression, and after a few seconds of trying to maintain his serious manner, Tom gave up and smiled with her.

On the walk to lunch, Hermione debated Tom on what other natural and conceptual phenomena could pass as magic, if wizards counted Love as magical. Gravity? Luck? Entropy or Time?

Dumbledore had mentioned before that Music was a great magic, but Hermione was dubious about it, having never seen it quoted in a textbook. But for once in his life, Tom agreed with Professor Dumbledore on that count, as music was a conscious amalgamation of imagination and intent, just as spoken or written language were, as used in magical incantations or runic enchantment. And intent was a basic principle of magic.

However, Tom did acknowledge certain exceptions to the rule: he held that there was nothing remotely magical or even likeable about Muggle dance hall rags or the singing minstrel variety hour broadcasted on the wireless. And in that, Hermione agreed with him.

She was so engrossed in the debate that she didn't notice they'd reached the Great Hall until Tom straightened his tie and fixed his expression to one of thoughtful severity, as befitted his status as Prefect and overall top student.

He glanced down at their connected hands and loosened his grip; she felt the edge of his nails drag briefly down the flesh of her wrist before he removed his hand from hers. He strode purposefully into the Hall and over to the Slytherin House table, but before he sat down, he turned to look over his shoulder at an empty seat at the Ravenclaw table, which was situated so that they'd be able to look at one another during lunch.

Hermione's long-awaited seventeenth birthday came and went, and instead of celebrating it with Firewhisky, cake, and a pack of Gambol's Colour-Changing Sparklers, she spent it in the library.

There was plenty to research on the subject of her rights and obligations as an adult citizen of
Magical Britain, and it would be remiss of her to waste valuable research hours, particularly at this
time of year, when she didn't have to fight for a seat that wasn't squeezed between a Fifth Year
preparing for their O.W.L.s and a Seventh Year their N.E.W.T.s. This early on in the term, all the
books in the card catalogue were available to be read, without her having to sign her name on a
waiting list at the librarian's desk.

The by-laws of the Ministry of Magic were a bureaucratic labyrinth to navigate, but it was a task
Hermione had been bracing herself for, having in the summer acquired forms from Gringotts so she
could owl them in after her birthday. This would allow her access to wizarding currency without
having to visit a teller in person, and with that, she could transfer the administrative charges
associated with having her family's house in London properly registered as a wizarding residence.

It was all very tedious to go through, as the Grangers owned a Muggle house in a Muggle
neighbourhood, and there was a long checklist consisting of multiple sections and sub-sections that
the Ministry required for the application process.

17.5.c: Magical organisms (non-wizard). Include species and number of all live pets,
pests, flora, beings, beasts, and all non-living ghosts, poltergeists, or non-beings on
property. Proceed to form 17.6.d if any organisms exceed MoM Department of
Magical Creatures rating of XXX or higher. (Please refer to Appendix G12 for rating
schema.)

It was tempting to ignore the reams of paperwork and continue on as she had been doing; for years,
she'd been eschewing the Ministry altogether, hiring a third-party to ward and inspect her house,
without the authorities ever knowing about or looking into it.

She was browsing the wizarding law section of the library for more information when she heard a
voice on the opposite side of the bookshelf.

"Psst!"

Hefting Volumes One and Two of The Wizarding Patents Registry of Experimental Hybridisation
from the shelf, then setting them on the floor to create a gap, Hermione bent her head down and
peeked through to the aisle on the other side.

A pair of blue-grey eyes stared back at her.

"Nott," she said, "what are you doing?"

Nott's eyes darted left and right, checking for anyone approaching his section, before his attention
returned to her. He hissed through the gap, "You've been avoiding me, Granger!"

"No, I haven't!"

"Yes, you have!" he snapped. "You never wrote back during the summer, and whenever I try to talk
to you in class, you pretend you're busy."

"That's because I am busy!"
"Busy hiding something, I'd say," Nott insisted. "What did you find? And I know you have something; you've got that same face you make when someone else gets their hand up in the air before you do."

Hermione wasn't aware she made any sort of face when the teacher awarded points to another student in class. Tom had never made mention of it before.

(Tom was the only other student whom she counted as academic competition in any of her subjects, but he usually waited for other students to have a go first before he modestly volunteered his own answer to win points for Slytherin. He enjoyed beating her when the question was a complicated one, as answering it first would further cement his reputation as a model student in the eyes of the professors and the rest of the class.)

"First, I don't make a face!" said Hermione waspishly. "And second, I don't even know why you're looking at me in the first place."

"One can learn a lot through looking," said Nott in a cold voice; through the gap in the shelf, Hermione saw his nostrils flare with poorly contained impatience. "For instance, I've noticed that you've been hovering about in the section between *Wizarding Patent Law* and *Prosecution Transcripts of the Eighteen-Nineties*. The only books there are on property law. And I've seen you with parchments stamped with the Ministry's seal. What are you doing there, Granger? Buying a magical property?"

"That's none of your concern," Hermione retorted.

"It could be," said Nott. "I don't know if you know this, but those hundred page applications don't matter at all. When you owl them in, the clerks at the Ministry never even read them—they only flip to the last page, and then they either stamp their approval right away, or it gets lost in the system and you never hear back until you show up in person... That's when they claim you never sent anything in. What *really* matters is the last page on the form, the statutory declaration."

"I was going to get my Head of House to sign as witness," Hermione bit out.

The Statutory Declaration form, which confirmed her identity as an of-age adult and legitimate registrant, wasn't just for property purchases—what Nott thought she was applying to the Ministry for. It was a sheet of parchment imbued with Anti-Forgery charms, a variant of the spell that the professors used on Hogsmeade permission slips when any Third Year brought one in with the signature looking like it was done in a child's handwriting.

"Beery?" Nott snickered. "He's a joke. That's the fastest way to get your form floating around someone's In-Tray for the next six months."

Hermione frowned. "How does anyone put up with this level of inefficiency?"

"Ah, that's the thing," said Nott, his tone annoyingly insouciant. "Not everyone puts up with it. My family certainly doesn't."

Her frown deepened. "Don't tell me it's due to your connections."

"Five points to Ravenclaw," Nott said with a smirk. "I wouldn't mind sharing my connections, if you'd like, Granger. All I ask is for you to share something in return..."
He trailed off meaningfully.

Hermione chewed her lip, tempted as much as she was conflicted.

At this point in the term, she might be an adult, but she was still a student, and she couldn't go haring off to the Ministry in London, be bounced between administrative departments, all to finally get to the one office that had the approval stamp for her specific application.

It was best to get her family's home registered as a wizarding residence as quickly as possible, which would ensure her parents could have the Floo installed by Christmas, and the whole house protected with a full set of anti-munitions wards instead of just the cellar. With that, her parents' safety would be assured in every room of the house, in case the house were to be bombed during the day when Mum and Dad weren't sleeping underground. With wards over the entire house, she'd be able to use magic in the kitchen, sleep in her childhood bedroom again, and even practice Apparition indoors. Doing it inside a registered house was permitted by the Ministry, as an alternative to finding a deserted alley to Apparate.

(Alleys were nonexistent in the suburbs outside of central London, and the textbook she'd read to prepare herself for the official lessons next term said that beginners were often very noisy with their Apparitions. Hermione wasn't eager to practice Apparition outdoors if the gunshot sound, created by the air displacement, would have her neighbours ringing the police every time.)

She also knew that Nott had no spirit of generosity; he was not a kind-hearted soul who yearned to help the disadvantaged and less fortunate. He always wanted something in return, and though he had never cheated her out of any exchange so far—which was limited to all of one time—he was not above exploiting her, her ignorance and inexperience, if it suited him.

On one side of the scale, there was information on Tom's family, which she'd learned from Major Tindall and Roger, and if it had been a secret, it wasn't now. Mrs. Riddle and her husband had had to acknowledge Tom's parentage in public, because an affluent selection of London society had got wind of it and taken an interest in a young man who'd been poorly neglected by his blood family. In the aftermath, a scandal two decades old had been revived, one which the Riddles thought had run its course and gotten buried in the passage of years.

On the other side, there was Hermione's family, whose lives had been much improved by Hermione's gift of magic. They were doing much better than other families still living in London, enough that they could afford to send the surplus of their larder and table to those of lesser means, because they had access to the wizarding markets. Hermione wanted to increase that access—secure it permanently—by bringing magic in and making their home magical, so even if Hermione moved elsewhere in Britain, or if she was away visiting Yorkshire, she could guarantee that her parents would always be close by and within easy reach. Safe.

There was a choice she was being offered, and when she looked at and weighed up the worst possible outcomes, she would choose Tom ignoring her for a handful of weeks, or a few months if he was going to be obstinate about it, as he'd done that last time he'd assumed she told Dumbledore about him. (If he tried to go without speaking to her, he would have a jolly time of it now, as their N.E.W.T. subjects had consolidated classes without regard for separation by House.)

Having Tom ignore her was better than Mum or Dad being injured or—it was difficult to contemplate such a ghastly prospect—killed in a completely preventable situation.
What use was being a witch if she couldn't protect her own family?

Unlike some other people she could name, she had a family whose presence she appreciated, *valued*, rather than suffered.

*Tom didn't care about his family.*

So why should *she* care? As long as she limited any information she shared from being detrimental to Tom himself, then it wouldn't matter, would it?

"How can I trust you?" asked Hermione. "You talk of connections, but I know you wouldn't be allowed to visit London to chat up whatever cousin's cousin you've got working at the Ministry."

"I'll write out a letter to my father's solicitor in front of you. You can read it over my shoulder," said Nott. "Make a copy of the forms, owl it with my letter—you can choose a school owl and watch me send it off—and he'll sign your declaration slip and hand-deliver to the right Ministry office."

"The forms have my personal information on them!" Hermione protested.

"Solicitors are contracted to client privacy," Nott countered. "And our community is only so large that a prominent family denouncing a person's reputation would ruin them for years, if not for life."

Hermione considered the offer for a minute or so. "Write the letter out first."

"And then you'll tell me what you know?"

"I'll tell you what I found out this summer," said Hermione, choosing her words carefully. There were plenty of things she knew about Tom that she'd learned years ago, and while she didn't know if Nott could tell whether or not she told him the truth, she *did* know that there existed magical means to ensure honesty. It was better not to risk it; it was better to tell selective truths than outright lies.

"You have a deal, Granger," Nott said. He glanced over his shoulder, then his face disappeared from the gap between the shelves. He reappeared once more an instant later, holding a stack of books, which he shoved back onto the shelf, closing off the connection.

Hermione returned the patent registry books on her side of the shelf. She leaned against the wooden frame and drew in a shaking breath.

*Unimportant information only, preferably if it was also accessible to the public.*

It would further reaffirm her honesty; in the event it ever came into question, she could point him to look it up, if he ever deigned to go rummaging into the dusty depths of Muggle bureaucracy, where his family connections would be of no help. Public information meant that it was as far from confidential information as the Wizarding Law section was from Astrodivination.

She'd decided that she wasn't going to tell Nott anything that Tom had told her personally; that would be betraying his confidence as a friend. Even when she'd asked Dumbledore about Tom's Legilimency, she'd never used his letters as proof against him—she'd only told the professor about her personal experience with his mind magic. So there it was: anything she'd gleaned through her own investigations or experience, or had been apprised of by other parties: she found *that* morally acceptable to share.
Nott came around the corner of the shelves, dumping his bookbag on the nearest table. His wand flicked, and a roll of parchment flew out, followed by a bottle of ink sealed with a wired cork stopper, the label on the front identifying it as 

*Scribbulus' Best Indelible Formula #16.*

The parchment was unrolled, corners pinned into place with a textbook, and then Nott picked up a quill and began to write.

*To A. McLaird of Slant and Associates, 84/C Diagon Alley, London:*

*As pertaining to the extant retainment contract, authorised and renewed in 1933 by C. H. Nott of the House of Nott, your legal and administrative services are hereby requested. Immediate assistance is required in lodging the following applications on behalf of one H. J. Granger...*

Hermione read the letter over Nott's shoulder, noting that his writing was not as beautiful as Tom's—Tom always finished his Y's and J's with elegant looping tails—but it was extraordinarily clean. Nott handled the quill with the ease of someone who'd been trained from childhood to use one, his right hand working over the parchment, his left hand keeping the page from rumpling, smoothly reaching out to dab the blotter at the end of each line at the same time he began a new one. When he went to refresh his ink, he didn't violently jab the quill nib into the inkwell as she'd seen younger students do; with care, he wiped off the excess before he continued writing, so that there were no splatters or blobby ink drops on the first stroke he made, and each line, each word, was consistent and uniform to every other.

Despite her own feelings on Nott's personality, Hermione appreciated the efficiency. She herself had never mastered this level of proficiency, having several years ago saved up her birthday money and bought an enchanted No-Blotting nib that she could swap around on her collection of quill feathers.

Another thing she had to appreciate was how he could draft a legal letter *in situ*—a skill that wasn't taught in any class at Hogwarts—with the correct modes of address, the concise yet formal passive voice, and references to specific clauses to the Notts' contract ensuring that any details Mr. T. E. Nott shared with the family solicitor would not somehow wind up on the desk of Mr. C. H. Nott when the quarterly billing form arrived.

She felt a pang when she realised that she could have learned this skill herself, had she gone to Donwell Prep and taken the secretarial course that had been offered there. Magical Theoretica was an interesting subject to pursue, but it was a sobering thought to realise that delving into the purely academic side of her magical studies came at the cost of picking up useful life skills.

It was another sobering thought to acknowledge that she might have surpassed all the pureblooded students in her year with her O.W.L. scores, but there were other areas in which they were her superiors in knowledge and expertise.

Nott blotted the final sentence, drying the ink, and slid the parchment over to Hermione. When she indicated that it met her approval, he drew out a stick of green wax from his quill case, then slid the ring off the third finger of his right hand to create the seal. He melted the end of the wax stick with his wand and dribbled the melted wax by his signature. When he removed his ring from the cooling
wax, Hermione observed that his family's coat of arms was of a shield held between two crossed oak boughs in leaf.

"How many wizarding families have arms?" Hermione asked curiously, inspecting the seal. The wax was green, but the surface had a pearly silver sheen.

Nott shrugged. "Sixty or thereabouts. Some houses are gone in the male line, some are gone altogether, and some don't use them anymore because they want to be—" he scoffed, "—modern."

"That's funny," Hermione said, "aren't there only twenty-eight families on your father's official list?"

"Twenty-eight worthy families," corrected Nott. "That distinction is important."

"Whatever you say," replied Hermione, who thought sorting groups by worthiness to be a ridiculous, arbitrary task, with the end result bearing no objective weight. Anyone might decide that raspberries were the most worthy fruit, and relegate strawberries and gooseberries to be the "Devil's Berries", as if such a classification meant anything.

"It's your turn now, Granger," Nott prompted, cocking his head and suddenly looking quite eager, his hands gripping the edge of the library table with white knuckles. "What do you know?"

Hermione pursed her lips, taking a few seconds to review the facts and select the ones she deemed safest to share.

"'Riddle' is a Muggle name," she admitted. "You were right about that."

"I knew it!" cried Nott, eyes glittering in triumph. His mouth twisted into a cruel smile, baring a flash of white teeth. "I knew Riddle was Muggle riff-raff from the start. You know, his first day in the dormitory, he smashed the mirror in the bathroom because it talked to him. What kind of savage doesn't know that enchanted mirrors give grooming advice?"

"He's not riff-raff," Hermione said defensively, glaring at Nott. "His family are actually wealthy land-owners in Yorkshire. Not too far from where you live, actually."

"That doesn't change the fact that they're still Muggles," said Nott.

"It changes nothing about Tom," Hermione said. "To gloat over this because you have nothing else to gloat over... that's just pathetic."

"Oh, whatever you say," Nott said in a mocking voice, echoing what she'd said a few minutes ago. "I assume his mother is a filthy Muggle as well? Shall we make it two for two?"

"I don't know for certain," Hermione confessed. "There isn't much known about her."

She wasn't going to mention the few things she knew about Tom's late mother, which weren't flattering in the least. There was no way to make the descriptions of 'village tramp' or 'fortune-hunting tart' sound anything better than belittling, and she felt uncomfortable repeating such disparaging language aloud. Seeing as these descriptions had been used by the likes of Mrs. Riddle, she had her doubts that they were an objective fact; Hermione was more inclined to believe that after twenty years, Mrs. Riddle was still offended that her highborn son had been stolen away by a woman of the working class.
"Well?"

"Um," said Hermione. "All I know is that her name was 'Merope Gaunt Riddle'. I assume that 'Merope Gaunt' was her maiden name—'Gaunt' doesn't sound like a middle name to me."

Nott's gleeful smile froze; a muscle twitched under his eye. "Did you say 'Gaunt'? Spelt 'G-A-U-N-T'?"

"I believe so," said Hermione, who'd never seen the name in writing. "Are there any other ways to spell it?"

"Fuck," muttered Nott. Then louder, he repeated himself, "Fuck!"

"Shhh!" Hermione hissed at him, glancing around for any sign of the librarian. "You can't swear here! This is a library!"

"'Gaunt' is a wizarding name," Nott spat between clenched teeth. "A proper family name, on the list of worthy families."

"It could be a coincidence," Hermione suggested. "'Black' is a pureblood name, but there are plenty of people with it who are Muggles."

"It's not a coincidence."

"You told me that 'Marvolo' was his middle name, and now that I know which surname it's connected to, it all makes sense! There was a 'Marvolo Gaunt' listed in Father's Pureblood Directory—died in Twenty-Seven, but they've got to be related. There are too many connections for it to be coincidence. Riddle is a Legilimens. The Gaunt family are rumoured to bear that particular trait... and another, more famous one. If he has one, then why not the other?" He leaned in, voice lowered. "Tell me, Granger, have you ever seen Riddle talk to snakes?"

Hermione blinked. "What? Why—why would he do that? Snakes can't talk!"

"They can, and they do—but not to just anyone," said Nott very mysteriously, eyes narrowed in calculation. "I have a theory... The Sorting Hat decided Riddle was worthy of Slytherin. It knew something, didn't it? It had to know—he spent minutes under there back in First Year; he was almost a Hatstall. I always thought it was debating dumping him in Hufflepuff, or another one of the lesser Houses—offense intended, Granger—but now I think that it had to have known something... and Riddle must have been hiding it the whole time, the sneak..."

"The whole time he was a half-blood," said Hermione, who was trying to pluck the facts out of Nott's half-mumbled rambling. "Is that what you mean? He's not a Muggleborn, if his mother had a wizarding name. She... she must have been a witch!"

This was a theory she had discussed with Tom years ago when they'd learned they were magical, and that magic had a tendency to run in families. Back then, Tom hadn't known his mother or his father, believing himself to be an orphan, and Hermione had assumed that there was a chance that either or both parents could have been wizards. Tom had dismissed the idea of his mother being a witch; what he knew of her was limited to the information he'd been given by the orphanage authorities: that his mother had stumbled into Wool's in mid-winter and had him right there in the foyer, then died a few minutes after naming him.

What pregnant witch would choose a Muggle orphanage as the perfect place to drop a baby? Why
wouldn't she go to St. Mungo's? It was dangerous for a witch to Apparate in labour, but there was the Floo Network, and plenty of places in London had public Floo connections. Furthermore, the hospital was run off the donations of wealthy families who liked to see their names engraved on plaques hanging by the front doors. Medical care was free for those in need, and an imminent birth counted as an emergency.

For years, Tom had been under the assumption that it was his father who had been the wizard, the man who was the source of his unique ability, and it was only this summer that he'd met the Riddles of North Riding in person. Hermione suspected that, at this point in time, Tom no longer cared about his parentage—that he'd dismissed both sides of his family tree as useless outside of the material advantages they offered. (Which for now was limited to Mrs. Riddle's indulgent promenade of expensive trinkets and clothing.)

Being a Muggleborn herself, she whole-heartedly supported this reversal of opinion, even though she didn't care much for the callous way Tom spoke of the Riddles, as if he was just waiting for them to expire of old age so he could collect his inheritance and spend it all on rare spellbooks. (If Hermione had come into a large amount of money at once, that was what she'd have spent it on; she and Tom differed in a number of ways, but not in this.) It was somewhat disturbing to know that Tom had looked up average British life expectancies, and had been pleased to discover that the census of 1940 reported that British men were expected to live to an average age of sixty-five. Mr. Thomas Riddle, current owner of the Riddle estate, had turned sixty-three this year.

Mr. Riddle liked wine with lunch and dinner, brandy and cigars for afters, and plenty of meat and butter with every meal. Hermione was the daughter of a doctor, and despite having no medical qualifications—or any training in the magical art of Divination—she found it safe to predict that he wouldn't live past his eighth decade, and even seven would be a stretch. But she still felt a touch of nervousness knowing that Tom wasn't one for patience, that he had always been greedier than was good for him... Surely he wouldn't try to rush things, would he?

(When Tom joked about his inheritance, was he really joking?)

Nott made a face. "She was a pureblooded witch. Distinguished lineage, perfect unmixed blood, and a sacred surname—that is, until she went and threw herself away on a Muggle."

"Unmixed blood," said Hermione in a flat voice. "Does that mean she was inbred?"

Nott brushed the insult off with an indifferent wave of his hand. "All purebloods intermarry if they want to stay pure; don't get your lowly Muggle sensibilities wound up about it." He grimaced. "Urgh, I'm sure that makes Riddle my sixth cousin or something. I swear there was a Corvinus Gaunt who married an Injeborg Rowle in the Seventeen-Eighties, and a Rowle of that generation who married Celandine Nott."

"Well, if the connection is by marriage, that puts at least one remove between you and him," Hermione pointed out.

"Haha, Granger," Nott grumbled. "Very droll. I'll have to investigate this—this is the best lead I've got; assuming it isn't a hoax, then this information is much too promising to pass up."

He pushed himself up from the table, shovelling his quills and ink into his quill case, clearing up his space of books and parchments and chucking them all into his bookbag. It must have been enchanted with an Expansion Charm, because Hermione heard them rattling around inside until Nott closed the flap and buckled it shut.
Nott ran a trembling hand through his hair, mumbling to himself.

"Hey!" said Hermione, hurriedly picking up her own books and parchment, "What about the letter? We still have to go to the Owlery to send it off!"

"Fine," Nott grunted. He jerked his head in the direction of the library doors. "Let's go, then. Hurry up; I've got things to do."

On the walk up to the Owlery, Hermione peppered Nott with questions on the Gaunt family, which turned out to be a minor and relatively obscure house on the official list. She'd never read The Pureblood Directory, having been aware of the Muggle equivalents which were nothing more than regularly updated lists of British Peers. She'd not been impressed by the conspicuous self-aggrandisement that underpinned these books' entire existence, and if her lack of enthusiasm toward the concept of the Directory had been evident in her tone, she didn't bother to correct herself, not even to spare Nott or his father's feelings.

She learned that the Gaunts were secretive and extremely conservative, even more than the average pureblood, to the extent that they'd secluded themselves from wizarding society. They chose homeschool over allowing their children to go to Hogwarts via the awful Muggle contraption that was the Hogwarts Express; last century, when Minister Ottaline Gambol had stolen the Express from the Muggle builders, she'd put out an ultimatum that all school enrollees had to ride the train to Scotland or forgo their Hogwarts education, and apparently the Gaunts had been one of the few families who had put their foot down in a refusal to expose their children to such Muggle degeneracy.

The Gaunts' heraldic animal was the serpent, and they alleged descent from many notable historical figures—but as it was through the female line only, even professional genealogists like Cantankerous Nott had found no solid, undeniable proof in support of their claim. However, the purity of their blood was unquestioned.

"They're not pure anymore, unfortunately," Nott remarked, when they'd reached the high tower that was the Hogwarts owlery. There were several hundred steps to reach the top, and Nott sounded winded by the time they'd reached their destination, which had bird droppings smeared all over the floor and walls, and niches carved out for owls to roost when they weren't hunting or out delivering letters. "Not if a Muggle man got a son on Merope Gaunt. What a shame: another good family struck off the list. This'll have to go in the next edition, of course."

"Tom still has magical blood, whatever surname he bears," said Hermione. "He's a Legilimens; you'd be a fool if you discount his ability due to the 'purity' of his blood."

Nott's jaw tensed. "Trust me, that's the last thing I'll forget. Now hurry up and pick an owl."

Gilles fluttered over to Hermione's shoulder, when Hermione cast about looking for an owl to take the letter. He butted his head up against her hair, sharp talons pricking through the wool of her school robes. Hermione patted his head soothingly, explaining that they needed an anonymous owl to make a delivery, while Nott tapped his foot in irritation, toes crunching on straw stalks and desiccated owl pellets.

They tied Nott's letter to the leg of a barn owl, with Hermione's application tied to the other. The owl, one that belonged to the school, hooted at them while it tested the unbalanced distribution of weight between its two legs. But soon it flung itself out of one of the tower's large windows and
winged away into the late afternoon sunset.

"Are you going to tell Tom?" Hermione asked when it was done.

Nott gave her a disgusted look. "I'm not stupid, Granger. I know better than to go and do that."

"Well, now you know better than to call Tom names for his blood status," said Hermione starchily. "Since you're probably cousins."

"Half my House are distant cousins; it doesn't mean anything." Nott rolled his eyes. "There are plenty of other names, unrelated to Riddle's blood, that I could think of to call him."

"But you won't," said Hermione, tilting her head. "You're afraid to even think too loud around him."

"You're a fool for not being afraid of him."

"I've nothing to be afraid of."

Ever since the evening of the Gala, Tom had been more affectionate around her than he'd ever been before. He didn't hesitate to return the small physical demonstrations of their friendship, and now he initiated such contact on his own. It was nice—Tom was nice—and however unexpected it was, she valued the changes that she'd seen in him. Was it perhaps the harsher edges of his personality mellowing out as he transitioned into adulthood? Was it due to finding his family, and now that he knew he wasn't an orphan, he no longer had to act like one, no longer had to cling onto the anger and distrust that had formed in the years of orphanage deprivation?

Whatever the reason for the change, she liked this version of Tom. She didn't think he'd ever become altruistic and all-loving; that was too far a stretch. At present, Tom was more thoughtful around her, more attentive to her feelings, instead of the other way around where Hermione had had to take special measures when in his presence. In the past, mentioning a specific topic could have him going silent and brooding for hours at a time. After the first summer that Tom had lived in her house, discussing the state of the war or the German air raids was enough to send him into a day-long sulk.

"You're too trusting, Granger," said Nott, shaking his head in disappointment. "Riddle is a Slytherin, and that means trust lasts only as long as it's convenient. And convenience won't last forever."

Hermione couldn't bring herself to contradict him; in a debate on trust and trustworthiness, she didn't think she was prepared to vindicate her own position. So she held her tongue as they made their way back down the circular staircase of the Owlery tower.

"One of these days, Riddle is going to stop pretending to be everyone's favourite Prefect," Nott went on, taking Hermione's silence as tacit agreement. "The two of us know better than everyone else what he's like—what he's capable of. When he decides to make it known, he won't be needing any infantile attachments." Nott's gaze flicked over to her, before continued with, "He's clever enough to know how useless they are in the grand scheme of things, compared to how useful it is to court the establishment, as it were. If it's known that Riddle has the proper blood, if not the proper name, doors will open for him once he learns the right way to turn the handle..."

Hermione let him blather on, having decided that Nott was a prat whose opinions were nothing more than self-important hot air. Nott might be able to score Outstandings in his class subjects without relying on the right group partners or the best student tutors, but that was as much a measure of his
individual academic aptitude as his astounding lack of charisma. He had dozens of distant cousins, but she couldn't name anyone in their year who could pass as a genuine friend of his. He had some sort of grudge—grudging obsession, more like—against Tom Riddle, and made derogatory remarks about Tom with every other breath... but he still loitered around the edge of Tom's group, because there weren't any other people with the patience to put up with him.

Nott was a rather pitiable person, the more she thought about it. She wasn't the most charismatic person either, but at least she could hold a conversation with the other girls in her dormitory, and even if she didn't share the same priorities or personal beliefs as they did, she didn't go out of her way to insinuate they were morally or intellectually deficient for it. It was discomfiting to contemplate that in Nott's imaginary Anti-Riddle Society, he would have counted her as a founding member, because there was no one else he was on 'friendly' terms with, or, really, on any terms at all...

Upon turning the last curve of the spiral-shaped stairwell, she and Nott bumped into Edmond Lestrange going the other way, a sealed envelope clutched in his fist.

"Nott," said Lestrange in greeting, giving the other boy a polite nod of the head. Then he noticed Hermione, who was standing too close to Nott for the two of them to pass it off as a random encounter during a routine mail run. "What are you doing with Granger?"

Hermione sent Nott an apprehensive look, before she said, "Sending a letter. Why? What did you think we were doing?"

Lestrange gazed at Nott, who seemed as pale and twitchy as he usually was, then he turned to Hermione. He studied her face intently.

Hermione felt her cheeks heating up under his intense scrutiny.

"You shouldn't be chumming it up with her, Nott," said Lestrange. "You'll be giving people the wrong idea."

"Excuse me!" Hermione interjected. "I can 'chum it up' with anyone I like."

"And what's it to you?" Nott scowled. "Mind your own business."

"It's nothing to me," said Lestrange, shrugging his meaty shoulders. "But maybe Riddle would have something to say about it."

"And you're going to tell him, are you?" asked Nott contemptuously.

"He'll be interested to know," Lestrange said, a dark glint of malicious glee flashing in his eyes. "Maybe he'll remind you of that day you sicked up in the bathroom. What did you even do to him to earn it? Y'know, we never found out what happened—but if you've been pawing over Granger, maybe there'll be a public encore and Riddle will give us all front row seats."

He let out a nasty laugh.

"Shut the fuck up," Nott snarled, drawing his wand. "You have no idea what you're on about."

Lestrange drew his own, and for several seconds the two boys eyed each other from where they stood on the staircase of the Owlery tower.
Hermione reached into her robe pocket—

"Furnunculus!"

"Melofors!"

Two flashes of light erupted from the ends of their wands, yellow from Nott's, and orange from Lestrange's.

Hermione cast a silent *Protego*, bouncing Lestrange's spell right back at him, and the combination of that and Nott's own spell flung him down a half-dozen steps and against the wall of the tower, where he crumpled into a dazed heap on the floor.

"Duelling in the hallways is grounds for detention," said Hermione, casting a reproachful look at Nott for a brief second, before she rushed over to Lestrange, dropping to her knees on the floor at the base of the staircase. She checked the pulse at his wrist and throat, examined his breathing, then began on the counter-curse for the first of the two jinxes, which had raised a series of swollen pustules across his skin. "But since assigning you detention means you'll have to serve it with Tom... Just try not to do that again."

"You aren't going to change your mind on that?" Nott asked, making his way down the stairs.

Hermione shook her head, busy thinking back to her Defense textbooks' counterspell diagrams. Nott's jinx had been cast with a demicircle in between two vertical strokes, hadn't it? What was Lestrange's? There'd been two jabs; how did the textbook explain the reversal for those...

"Good," said Nott. "Obliviate!"

"What was that for!" Hermione cried, her head twisting over her shoulder; behind her, Nott had his wand trained at Lestrange's face.

"If he tells Riddle," Nott said, "then that's the end of our arrangement. And I can't let that happen."

His brows knitted in concentration as he purged the last few minutes of Lestrange's recent memories—which made Hermione wonder how and where he'd learned Obliviation, as it wasn't taught on the Hogwarts curriculum. Hermione had understood the reason for it: the book on Legilimency had said that most magics related to the mind required thorough training in mental discipline to cast. That Nott knew how to do it was an implicit statement of how much benefit there was in having been born into an influential wizarding family.

Hermione wasn't jealous about it. She tried not to be, at least. The theory of Obliviation and memory modification had been discussed in the Legilimency textbook she'd borrowed, and she expected she could cast the spell based on the written instructions. She hadn't made an attempt; finding a test subject was a risky prospect, not that she wanted one, of course. Nott, however, appeared ambivalent about the risk of causing permanent damage.

Nott gave a quick turn of his wrist, murmured "*Colovaria*", and inspected his handiwork as Lestrange's hair became a vibrant, eye-watering crimson, with his eyebrows and eyelashes turning a shade of cornsilk yellow so pale they all but disappeared into his skin.

Hermione sucked in a slow, measured breath, her fingers tightening over her wand. She could see Nott was trying to frame this as an "accident", and while she wasn't entirely pleased about it, she
couldn't think of anything better. Bringing Lestrange to the Hospital Wing, perhaps—but the Mediwitch on duty would ask her too many questions. Hermione had already countered the effects of the jinxes, so Lestrange wasn't in dire need of medical attention.

When she'd finally composed herself enough to speak, she said, "I don't understand why anyone would want to be Sorted into Slytherin."

"People don't want to be in Slytherin," said Nott matter-of-factly, slipping his wand up his sleeve. "They either are Slytherins, or they're not."
Chapter End Notes

— Note that Tom never answered what his Amortentia smelled like.

— The history of the Hogwarts Express is on Pottermore, if you want to read more about it. The references to it made in earlier are "canon" if you consider JKR's supplementary information as legit.

— This chapter is the first time an f-bomb has been dropped in the story. It feels like a milestone, but maybe that's just me.

— Repeating the disclaimer from Chapter 1, character opinions are accurate to the culture and time period, and do not necessarily represent my own beliefs.
As the days of Sixth Year rolled by, everyone but Tom looked forward to Christmas as a reprieve from their studies.

For the first decade or so of his life, he had been ambivalent about Christmas, both the secular and religious interpretations of it. Christmas was a hollow experience to Tom, who had nothing to celebrate—not that the orphanage could have afforded much of a celebration. Christmas; his birthday; winter in general: to most people, including Tom, these things had an emotional significance. In Tom's particular case, the so-called *Season of Merriment* was associated with privation and resentment, and a miserable, biting cold that burrowed so deep into his joints that it hurt to sit up and get out of bed in the mornings.

Until Hogwarts, he had never known what everyone else saw in Christmas, and even now, it was still unknown to him. Nevertheless, the season had formed its own significance over the years. Christmas to Tom wasn't about conjured tinsel on charmed trees or endless slabs of fruitcake; it was a taste of adult independence, no classes or teachers or minders, all the books he wanted to read, and all the magic he wanted to study in a Common Room he had to himself.

He'd spent Christmas at Hogwarts for every one of the past five years, and a Hogwarts Christmas had become the status quo, his personal ideal of what Christmases ought to be. It was a special occasion worth celebrating, in his own way of doing it.

And now Dumbledore and Mary Riddle were upending Christmas for their own selfish schemes, while at the same time assuring him that it was all for his own good.

Tom counted the passing weeks with growing disquiet, each sign of winter's arrival a reminder of how long he had left to live his life as a wizard. The first morning frost in October coating the fallen leaves, crisp under the soles of his shoes when he marched out to the greenhouses for Herbology; the darkening of the water under the Lake which made it necessary to keep the fireplaces in the Slytherin Common Room lit throughout the day; the mealtime offerings in the Great Hall changing from sweet ices and fresh fruit jellies to hearty roasts and baked puddings...

Hermione didn't understand his feelings about the Riddles—not really.

She found the Riddles to be disagreeable, but not irredeemable. They were set in their ways as much as Tom was, but were willing to accommodate him, and she thought it was only fair that Tom do the same. Despite not being able to undo the years of his life in which he'd resigned himself to being an orphan, the Riddles were making an attempt to rectify it, giving him all he was entitled to as a member of their family.

"I never asked for it," Tom had said, in response to Hermione's presenting her views on the matter. "Surely I have the right to refuse it!"

"No one ever asked to be born, let alone given a choice of how and what they're born with,"
Hermione pointed out, "but we do the best we can with our circumstances."

"I can do better on my own," said Tom. "But they're... they're forcing me to be one of them."

The last word was followed by a grimace; Tom maintained an internal separation between me and them, the latter of which encompassed all the distaste he felt for the Riddles' mediocrity and ordinariness. The only thing remarkable about them was their wealth, which they had through no effort of their own; Mary Riddle had married into it, and Thomas Riddle had inherited it from his forebears.

"It's only for a few weeks out of the whole year," replied Hermione, who, rather annoyingly, wasn't as sympathetic about Tom's state of affairs as he wanted her to be. "It's not that bad. Young women were, and still are, forced into much worse situations than yours all the time—and not just for Christmas, but for the rest of their lives. So I can't see any way to say it better than this: you're just going to have to close your eyes and think of England."

This made Tom grumble a bit, until he remembered that Hermione had volunteered to spend the holidays with him. If England was going to be thought of this Christmas, he was pleased to know he wouldn't be thinking alone.

On the day the Hogwarts Express was due to leave Hogsmeade Station, the Slytherin boys packed their trunks—lacking the forethought to begin packing earlier—and dropped Tom's Christmas presents on his bed.

His Second Year, Lestrange and Avery bought him token Christmas gifts. From Fourth Year, every single boy in his dormitory gave him something, and that number had only grown to include Slytherins from other years, as well as some non-Slytherins he shared his classes with. Most of it was useless trinkets. Tom had no use for glittery handmade cards; he couldn't eat that many sweets—or would he risk touching anything that looked obviously homemade or tampered with. The glow-in-the-dark enchanted bookmarks, chess sets, and gilt inkstands he didn't need doubles of, so he pawned them off at the Hogsmeade odds-and-ends shop, pocketing the money to buy the things he actually wanted.

(It seemed like Hermione was the only person who knew his tastes and gave him things worth keeping.)

Tom sent the wrapped gifts flying into his trunk, Summoning his scarf and cloak from his bureau.

"You're not staying at school?" asked Lestrange, whose hair had only just returned to its original colour a fortnight ago. He had been anxious about going home with his hair charmed Gryffindor red, the result of some sort of harmless inter-House pranking when he'd turned his back on the wrong person.

"I've been offered a place to spend the holidays," said Tom, "and I've accepted."

"If you were taking invitations, I'd have offered," Travers groused, digging through the top drawer of his nightstand for his enchanted earmuffs, imbued with a permanent Silencing Charm.

He wore them to sleep whenever the other boys stayed up late playing cards or passing around a dog-eared book that Lestrange had turfed up in a dusty corner of his father's library. Tom had glanced at the book when it was passed his way: Le Jardin Parfumé, a title printed and sold last century by a magical bookseller in Wizarding Paris. He'd not been surprised to open up a random
page and get more of an eyeful than he'd expected—or even wanted—to see. The book itself was rather harmless, an anthology of short stories written in French that he could decipher with his passable grasp of Latin, but he assumed that the boys didn't care about that. It was the animated lithographs on every other page they were interested in: sultry, doe-eyed odalisques lounging on divans and feeding each other grapes, swathed in shimmering veils that left very little to the imagination.

(In the charmed illustrations, the girls batted their eyelashes, and their silken veils fluttered about in a beguiling manner; overall, it was suggestive and encroached on—without intruding into—the truly obscene. Tom had shoved the book away in disgust. They were pictures, mere illusions, and the way the other boys wrestled with one another for their turn to look was nothing more than pathetic.)

"Father likes meeting the top Defence students each year," continued Travers. "Usually sends someone to Sluggy's dinner dos, but with the Dark Lord and his people running amok, the department can't afford to spare active-duty Aurors on going around the social circuit."

"If you offer an invitation this summer, I might accept," said Tom noncommittally. "I'll have my Apparition license by then."

"Are you joining the Auror Trainees?" Rosier said. "Slughorn's been dropping hints left and right that the Ministry would take you in a shot—is that what he meant?"

"I've looked into it," Tom answered. He wrapped his scarf around his throat and cast a silent Featherweight Charm on his trunk. "But signing up for the training means three years before they let you see any action, and I can't see the sense in that. For other people, yes, but for me? I think I'd die of boredom before I'd even met a single dark wizard."

Rosier laughed; Nott scoffed.

"You think you can take on a dark wizard, Riddle?" Nott asked. "An Outstanding on the DADA practical only means you know your textbook jinxes. Real dark wizards have got a bit more bite to them."

"The average dark wizard has a three spell répertoire. A 'bite' is hardly impressive when everyone who takes them on knows how to counter them."

"Everyone knows the Unforgivables can't be countered," said Nott.

"They can't be blocked by standard Shield Charms," corrected Tom, "which isn't the same as being countered. And anyone can counter an Unforgivable if they're fast enough at Conjuration."

"And you are?"

Tom studied Nott with interest. Ever since the Bathroom Incident of a year ago, Nott had avoided making conversation with him at meals and at the weekly homework club meetings. He preferred to sit alone in class in lieu of joining the members of Tom's group, who'd gained a reputation as an élite fraternity of top students: all the members who had taken their O.W.L.s the previous year scored Outstandings in Defence, and were the highest ranked members of the Hogwarts Duelling Club.

(With the exception of Hermione, who hadn't joined the Duelling Club. She was something of an auxiliary member to Tom's group in that she was friends with Tom, but not with the other boys, and sat with her own Ravenclaw classmates table during meals.)
"I've gotten quite decent at non-verbal casting," said Tom. "If you'd like to have a go, I'm sure we can arrange a friendly duel sometime after the holidays."

Nott shifted from foot to foot, preventing Tom from making eye contact. A sheen of sweat glistened on Nott's upper lip, while one hand smoothed distractedly over his robes, as if he was feeling for the presence of his wand. The other boys watched their exchange with undisguised interest, as it had been years since anyone had challenged Tom on his duelling skills. The last had been, what, Abraxas Malfoy, two years ago? Malfoy, the petty loser he was, had quit the Duelling Club wholesale with the excuse that he wanted to concentrate on Quidditch and his exams, leaving Tom as the undisputed first.

He hadn't thought Nott would be the one to pluck up the courage to challenge him. But in the magical world, if pigs could be made to fly with some creative Transfiguration, few things should be counted as genuinely surprising. Nott wanting to be made an example of in an exhibition duel was nothing; he ought to save his astonishment for the day Nott announced his engagement to a Muggleborn.

"No," muttered Nott after a few seconds of internal debate, shaking his head. "No, that won't prove anything. An Unforgivable Curse cast by a student would only be mild at best, anyway."

Saying that, he grabbed the handle of his trunk and elbowed his way out of the dormitory, leaving Tom and the rest of the Slytherin boys to finish packing.

Avery spoke up when Nott was gone. "Do you know how to cast Unforgivables?"

Tom's gaze flicked to Travers, who had been trying and failing to pretend he was incurious about the conversations going around the dormitory. Travers' father was a Ministry official, so it would be foolish to make a public admission where it could be repeated unwittingly to outside ears.

"Anyone who reads the right book can know how they're cast."

It would also be ridiculous for Tom to admit that he couldn't do something.

The journey down to the station was subdued. Tom was busy immersing himself in his own thoughts, and something of it must have shown on his face. He was left to walk alone until Hermione joined him, peeling off a group of twittering Ravenclaws to bounce along beside him, her school trunk bobbing in the air in front of her upraised wand.

"It's eight hours from here to London, and then we'll have to transfer at King's Cross for the express from London to York—that's four hours—and from York to, what was it..." Hermione fumbled through the contents of her bookbag until she'd retrieved her datebook, flicking to the page marked with a length of ribbon. "Great Hangleton, that's it! Then there's another six miles to Little Hangleton. We'd be lucky to get there before midnight; I do hope they've made arrangements to collect us at the Hangleton station—I can't imagine a town of that size would have hackneys for hire..."

Nott, the first to have left the dormitory, had reserved a compartment for the rest of the group, chasing off any other students who saw one person sitting alone as an excuse to take over.

On the last two journeys to Hogwarts, Tom and Hermione sat with the other Prefects in the Heads' compartment. On the ride back to London for the summer, it was tradition for them to secure a
compartment for themselves; for their first few years, that was the last time they'd be guaranteed to see each other in person before the start of the new school year. Tom hadn't liked the thought of being separated from Hermione, and was pleased to see that she thought the same thing, as she'd tucked herself in the corner of the compartment closest to the window, levitating her trunk into the overhead rack.

Nott sat on the opposite window seat, a book on the Hogwarts Founders open on his lap, showing coloured cross-sections of each Founder's wand and wood source. He ignored the juvenile antics of the rest of the boys as they tossed their bags into the rack, peeled off their robes and ties, and rummaged around in pockets and coin purses for snack money.

Tom had long wondered why Nott bothered to remain a member of the homework club, when he rarely participated in the usual Slytherin camaraderie that the other boys shared. Nott was wary and guarded around Tom, and had not shown any particular fondness toward Hermione. The only other reason he could see was Nott not wanting to fall behind in class, as the months of tutoring had set this year's Slytherin cohort ranks above the rest of the school, with Tom, naturally, taking his place at the very top.

Nott could dislike Tom all he wished, but it was far too dangerous to underestimate him. That, Tom surmised, must be the explanation for Nott's continued association with the group.

*Greatness inspires envy; envy engenders spite.*

That was a quote that Tom had come up with one dull morning in Charms class, and he'd liked it so much that he'd inscribed it on the first page of his diary. He'd seen Sidonie Hipworth and some of her friends write inspirational quotes with colour-changing ink on the covers of their revision notebooks, or a few lines of poetry on the importance of dreams and love. Tom found his own version to be vastly superior—of course it was; there was no competition between a quote he'd coined himself versus a snippet of sentimental folderol taken out of its original context.

There was an empty spot next to Hermione that Tom immediately took over, satisfied that his dorm mates had been trained to remember his personal seating preferences. There'd been a bit of a mix-up on the first day of N.E.W.T. Potions where he'd had to correct Lestrange's assumptions; the boy had showed up thinking that he and Tom would be partners as they had been back when the class was split with the Gryffindors.

As Hermione had gotten rid of Fitzpatrick, her previous partner, Tom had been obliged to do the same to Lestrange. He hadn't noticed either of them feeling an ounce of remorse about the decision.

The train journey was quiet, with Hermione busy scribbling away in her datebook, and Tom reading a treatise on Latin-based spellcrafting. Lestrange, Avery, Rosier, and Travers had broken out a pack of cards, their playing stakes in the form of wrapped sweets piled in the centre seat. Occasionally, other students would knock on the compartment door to arrange holiday invitations with one of the occupants, often on behalf of their parents, but as Tom's family were Muggles, he himself received no invitations, and offered none of his own.

While Tom had never been keen on deferring to anyone's rules, he understood the reasoning behind wizarding secrecy. He'd learned as a child how tedious it was to be put under psychological examination by people who thought that being Special was just another name for being mad. And it wasn't as if his family would appreciate the marvels of the magical world. They were the type who'd choose village cricket over the windy heights of the spectator stands during a championship Quidditch match; they'd go to see a moralistic Christmas pantomime over a W.A.D.A. production of
(Not that Tom personally found much entertainment in Arthurian myths, but everyone revered Merlin as one of the greatest wizards of British history, and Tom wouldn't mind seeing some of his most famous feats replicated on stage, with magical effects. It would be an opportunity to learn how to replicate them with his own techniques.

They said imitation was the sincerest form of flattery, but wasn't one man's flattery another man's plagiarism? Tom believed he could do better than that; where other people imitated, there Tom could innovate, and then one day those same people would be flattering him.)

Those agreeable daydreams helped him pass several peaceful hours, and he was only interrupted by a strange voice from beneath the upholstered bench seat of the compartment. It was a very strange voice, indeed: Tom didn't recognise it as anyone he knew, and of those he knew, none of them spoke in a soft, sibilant whisper that was imperceptible to everyone but him.

He glanced around the train compartment, noting that the door was closed and locked. Travers had gone to sleep, his earmuffs on and a newspaper draped over his face to block the light. Avery and Lestrange were sorting through several boxes of jellybeans, picking out the greenish looking ones—those were either vomit, bogeys, or grass, which even people with low standards in life had apparently learned to avoid. Hermione had started her holiday homework, curled up in the corner of the seat; Nott, seated opposite, had his attention fixed firmly on his book, his jaw clenched. No doubt he was struggling to keep his opinions about his co-commuters to himself.

In the months since Tom had had to explain his standards of acceptable conduct, as was expected of a Prefect and student leader, Nott hadn't said another word about Hermione. Nott went out of his way not to speak to her, even when directly addressed, and this habit applied to Tom as well. Perhaps Tom's actions had not won over Nott's esteem, as he had for every other student in Slytherin, but he had the boy's deference, his complaisance, and in most instances, that was just as useful.

"...What is this place?" said the voice, faint and whispery. "I smell fresh food. Big food. Hssss. Plenty of big food!"

A snake.

"Warm things, very slow moving things, yes, yes, which one to start with..."

There was a bloody snake on the train.

There was a bloody snake right under their seats.

"Hermione," said Tom, taking care not to make any sudden movements.

Hermione's fountain pen juddered to a stop over her page. "Yes?"

"Do you mind moving your legs this way?"

She looked at him blankly. "Whatever for?"

Tom grasped for the best excuse he could contrive, one which wouldn't send her into a panic. "You have interesting knees."
A pink flush bloomed on her cheeks, causing her to look away and down at her lap. "I can't tell whether or not you're trying to make a joke, but it's not funny!"

"Do I look like I'm having fun?" said Tom, his expression grave.

"Er," Hermione hesitated. "No?" With clear reluctance, she said, "A-Alright. I still don't know if you're having a go at me, but this had better not be a joke."

Holding the hem of her skirt down for modesty, she swung her legs over to the aisle space in front of his seat.

Tom grabbed hold of her ankle and pulled her closer, until the backs of her knees were hooked over his lap.

Hermione yelped, her arms flying out and scrambling to keep the edge of her skirt from flipping up. "Tom!"

"Hermione," Tom sighed, slipping an arm around her waist and pulling her close. "Please don't panic."

"This seems so... so unnecessary!"

"There's a good reason for all this."

"If you wanted a hug, I would have given it, you know," Hermione said reproachfully, placing a tentative hand on his shoulder for balance, her legs dangling over his lap in a way that would have looked undignified—if it had been anyone else but him in such a position.

Tom took a slow breath, savouring Hermione's familiar scent, the real version, which was indistinguishable from the forgery produced in a cauldron. This real version was much better, being not just scent alone; it had a solid weight to it—touch and texture—that made it all the more satisfying than any illusory attempt at replication. His free hand rose up and cupped her knee, palm curving over her grey woollen stockings; he could feel each twitch of muscle as she shrank back in reflex, but in the end she didn't pull away from him.

She had such small knees, such delicate ankles, her physical proportions built on a smaller scale than his, but with so many shared, congruent points between the two of them. There was a joint of bone protruding at the ankle, the end of the fibula, and Tom's fingers traced down from her knee, down her calf, to that gentle swelling shape covered up by her prim uniform stockings.

He didn't know if she liked his knees, but in that moment, Tom knew that he liked hers. And there was more than her knees he rather liked...

"Tom!"

"Hmm?"

"What are you doing?"

"Oh, just looking."
"It seems to be a lot more than 'just looking'!"

"Should I stop, then?"

Hermione's face scrunched up. "Yes—I don't like it when other people are looking at us."

Tom tore his attention from Hermione's knees, and realised that his explorations had drawn curious glances from the other occupants of their compartment. They didn't quite dare to meet his gaze, but he saw how their eyes darted over to where Hermione was half-sprawled over his lap.

He drew his wand.

Magazines were suddenly brandished, cards shuffled with great aplomb, and chocolate bars unwrapped in studious silence.

A swirl of his wand, a silently cast Hover Charm, and Tom had the snake out from under the seat.

The snake undulated in the air, a few inches past two feet long, as thick around as Hermione's wrist. It had brown scales, patterned with a dark line of conjoined diamonds down its back, and a narrow, triangular wedge of a head from which gleamed a pair of red eyes. It didn't appear to enjoy the experience of being levitated in mid-air.

"What is this? What is this!" it hissed, its head swaying from side to side, trying to discern the cause of its unexpected translocation. "Too bright, my eyes, hssss!"

"Tom?" said Hermione, her hand tightening on his shoulder. "Was... was that under our seat?"

"Yes," Tom confirmed, keeping his wand pointed at the snake. "How do you think it got there?"

"Well, it wasn't me," she said. She reached for her own wand. "Look at the pattern, the eye colour. That's a common European adder—it's venomous! And it's December, so it should be in hibernation at this time of year. It must be someone trying a silly prank..." She let out a huff of indignation. "Someone could've gotten hurt! We're hours from London and Hogwarts, and even if the Heads have their Apparition licenses, it's impossible to do it from a moving train. If I find out who did it, they'll be getting detention for a month."

"Forget detention," Nott interrupted, leaning away from the hovering snake, "what are you going to do about that damn snake?!"

Tom flicked his wand, and the snake flipped around and swung towards Nott.

Nott squawked and fell back against his seat, his arm upraised to protect his face.

"Hssssss!"

The snake's jaw fell open, revealing the soft, white flesh of its mouth. From the upper jaw, there protruded two needle-sharp fangs, glistening with a clear venom. The snake jolted to a stop, one scaled coil passing within a whole foot of Nott; it didn't touch him, but that didn't stop him from making a scene and screaming loudly.

"Tom!" cried Hermione, fingernails digging into the meat of his shoulder, which wasn't that unpleasant when he considered it. He basked in the sensation, clutching her closer around the waist.
"What the fuck are you playing at, Riddle!" Nott shouted, fumbling for his wand. "Granger just said it's venomous!"

"Riddle," Rosier ventured nervously, looking around at the other boys, who didn't seem eager to put in their own opinions, "we don't mind the show, but, um, if you want to settle something with Nott, you might... you might want to maybe do it outside mixed company?" He sent a pointed look at Hermione. "Witches are sensitive about these kinds of things."

He was right; Hermione didn't look happy that he was playing around with a venomous snake, which he didn't consider particularly dangerous—he was certain that his reflexes were good enough to hit it with a *Petrificus* before it sunk its teeth into anyone.

And he was careful enough to adjust the Hover Charm so its head was always kept facing away from himself and Hermione, so if anyone was at risk of being bitten and dying—a tiny chance with a snake of this size—it wasn't anyone he'd miss.

"Fine," Tom said, rolling his eyes. "Finite!"

The snake didn't disappear.

"Oh," he observed, "it's not Conjured. That's interesting."

"Someone must have Summoned it," said Hermione, "if it's a real snake. We're moving too quickly for Summoning to work, unless whoever did it wanted to rip their hands off trying to grab something from outside the train window. That means someone put that snake here before we got on the train."

"'Murder on the Hogwarts Express,'" Tom said in a thoughtful voice, looking at each of his fellow occupants in turn. "And so the plot thickens."

No one else seemed to get it, apart from Hermione, who sighed heavily into the crook of his neck.

Tom raised his wand, concentrated, and cast the spell: *Evanesco!*

The snake disappeared, vanishing into nothingness, and with that went the visible tenseness on clear display in bearing and countenance—with the exclusion of himself, naturally. He sensed the slow shift in atmosphere, the near-panic simmering down to a low-level unease which fluctuated whenever he held eye contact for more than a few seconds at a time. To his disappointment, Tom found no traces of guilt or deception in the minds of anyone he studied with a touch of applied willpower.

Things went back to normal, or as normal as things ever got when Tom Riddle was present and involved. However, the conversation, when it returned, was not as spirited as it had been before, the card games and betting stakes lacking in liveliness and enthusiasm. Tom didn't mind it, as he had more interesting things to focus on. There was the mystery of the snake, which he hadn't found an answer for—skimming through his dorm mates' surface thoughts a few more times hadn't given him any conclusive proof that one of them had done it.

So he couldn't name any one person as his culprit. For now.

Then there was the mystery of the feminine form, which he hadn't thought a mystery when the relevant information could be had from any anatomy textbook, or from Lestrange's illustrated novel,
if he was that way inclined.

When it came to the feminine form as it related to Hermione Granger... well, that was a mystery that wasn't written down in any book, or published in any manual. And Tom, who had a curious nature and a vigorous appetite for knowledge, was eager to learn more about it, textbook or no.

With all the mysteries floating about, by the time the Express had arrived in London, he'd managed to piece together one bit of substantiated fact: knees had a power that not even the greatest of wizards should ever underestimate.

The Hogwarts Express reached London at a quarter to seven, which gave Tom and Hermione twenty minutes to grab their luggage, buy a hot pie and a bottle of milk each from the station tuck shop, then transfer to the platform where the London to York train was due to arrive in a matter of minutes.

By the end of the day, Tom would be at his grandparents' estate in Yorkshire. He'd seen photographs of it, enclosed in the letters written to him by Mary Riddle. The estate consisted of a sleepy country town with the largest buildings, a church and a post office, erected around a village green, with side streets branching off, filled with rows of terrace houses and small cottages let out to various tenants. And overlooking the town was a house on a hill, 'the Big House', as the villagers called it, occupied by a Family of Quality—as his grandmother called it.

Tom didn't know what that meant exactly, but from context, he assumed it was his grandmother attempting to dissociate the Riddles' social ranking from the likes of the villagers. The villagers might work for the Riddles, and the Riddles might depend on the villagers' labour, but that was to be the extent of the relationship; Riddles and villagers certainly didn't entertain one another's company, except after church services and at formal functions—Empire Day, Royal Jubilees, and other commemorations. Riddles certainly did not make advances upon them. (By the way Mary Riddle's pen had blotched up the page and created indents visible through the other side of the paper, it appeared that she hadn't gotten over her son's great 'betrayal'.)

This place, this town, the Big House—this was to be his new home. He couldn't tear his thoughts away from that word, Home, as he boarded the First Class carriage with Hermione at his heels, their tickets in hand for the conductor's inspection. Once inspected and approved, they were shown to a compartment, and their luggage stowed for them by a porter, whom they were obliged to tip a few pence for the service.

"This isn't much different from the Hogwarts Express," Hermione observed, looking around the interior of the compartment. "Padded seats, curtained windows, sliding doors—not as much space as in the Express, but I'm sure that has some Extension Charms built into the frame; I can't see how Slughorn could invite a dozen people into his compartment otherwise, even if we were all squeezed in together by the end. Did you know that the Third Class carriages only have wooden benches? They don't have any compartments, porters, or ashtrays."
Tom made a face. "The ashtrays make the upholstery smell like old cigarettes."

"Oh! I can fix that!" said Hermione brightly, shutting the compartment door and drawing the curtains closed, before she pulled her wand out of her pocket and cast a few cleaning and freshening charms on the seats. "I'd almost forgotten I can use magic now that I've had my birthday. It makes things so much simpler!" She paused for a moment, then added in an uncertain voice, "I ought to have put a Featherweight Charm on my trunk before the porter took it. I couldn't decide which books to bring, so I brought all of them, and the charm I used in the morning must have worn off. I think he almost put his back out trying to lift it..."

"Forget about him," said Tom, who hadn't even wanted to tip the Muggle porter when he knew he could have done the job himself with a silent Wingardium. "There are more important things to think about. For instance, will the Trace activate when magic is cast in a moving vehicle, or in the presence of an adult witch outside a wizarding residence?"

"Interesting questions," Hermione said, putting her wand away and plopping down into the seat. "I've been researching Ministry of Magic policy in the library, and the books I've read said that the Ministry detects and records all magical anomalies, but doesn't follow up on them unless it involves Muggle witnesses, students practising underage magic, or anything else that's blatantly illegal. If they weren't selective about who they pursued, they'd be sending owls around the country every hour of the day and night."

"Is it worth testing out?"

"Of course not!" Hermione exclaimed, glaring at him fiercely for even thinking about breaking the law.

"I've two strikes to spend before my birthday," said Tom, taking an opportunity to fully appreciate Magical Britain's tradition of excessive lenience. The rule of strikes was tantamount to every underage wizard being granted permission to break the law at whim, at the time and place of their choosing. The exemptions handed out by the negligent Ministry showed that they clearly didn't believe underage wizards were capable of anything greater than harmless joke jinxes.

(Tom could think of more than a few ways a well-placed Accio could cause major havoc in the right situation. Summon a sharp knife at the right speed, and the end result would be written off as an unfortunate accident and a case of Children Being Children.)

"You can't 'spend' them, Tom!" gasped Hermione, scandalised by his lack of concern. "They're official warnings, not... currency!"

"It seems a shame to have saved my strikes for an emergency, and not end up using them," Tom said. "It'd be an awful waste if it was all for nothing."

"A clean record isn't nothing," Hermione pointed out. "You might not be interested in applying for a Ministry job one day, but that doesn't mean your records disappear for good when you turn seventeen." She shook her head. "Can't you keep from doing magic until your birthday? It's less than two weeks away."

"You get to do magic and finish your homework," Tom said, "while I have to humour a bunch of Muggles. Mary Riddle keeps forwarding me letters through Dumbledore; I can tell she won't leave me alone as long as I'm living there."
"I think it's sweet," said Hermione stubbornly. "I'm sure you'll see that they're nicer people than you give them credit for—Mrs. Riddle invited me to stay for the holidays, after all."

"One day you'll admit that they're worse than you thought they were," said Tom. "And then I'll be the one to say, 'I told you so'."

"Well, I don't think that day will be today."

Tom could allow her those delusions for the time being. They were harmless delusions, so in the end, they were tolerable.

Hermione had always been persistent about her beliefs, and her (misplaced) sense of common decency had long been a barrier to acknowledging that sometimes people were worthless lumps of matter. This courtesy extended to people Hermione didn't even like, people that nobody liked. Leaving the Hogwarts Express, she'd given her farewells to the other boys—including Nott—while Tom hadn't bothered with it himself. But her politeness was different from making friends with them; greetings and farewells and How Do You Do's were not on the same level as wasting her time mucking about on the Quidditch pitch, or ogling painted harem girls with a group of lechers disguised as art appraisers.

He called them lechers, based on how the tone of casual dormitory conversation had devolved in the last year or so. The boys, purebloods all of them, were of the age where their parents were beginning to arrange matches for them, and being unhappy with their parents' tastes in future partners, they sought to indulge their own tastes in the limited means available to them. This meant late-night games of ranking all the girls in their year in order of their physical attributes, then debating which of the aforementioned attributes was the most attractive.

(No mention was made of intellect or magical aptitude, so it was easy for Tom to discount the tastes of his dorm mates as thoroughly plebeian. If this was the way the average wizard selected his spouse—when not placed under an artificial limitation of witches with suitable blood and fortune—it explained why the population of Magical Britain as a whole was so gullible and inept.)

Miles of farmland sped by as the train chugged northwards. The light, dimmed by the soggy clouds of winter, had bled out of the sky hours ago, leaving the view outside the windows as an impenetrable black void. While Hermione passed the hours writing in her datebook, and the conductor went around the First Class compartments inquiring if any passengers needed hot water bottles or lap blankets, Tom meditated. He catalogued his own feelings and practised the art of Occlumency, as Dumbledore had taught him. It gave him a measure of control over his emotions, the ability to subdue the raw edges of the anger and outrage that itched at his skin when his thoughts turned toward his family; it would let him interact with them without wanting to hold them at the point of his wand; it would let him be the Good Boy that they expected him to be.

What Hermione expected him to be.

He could be a Good Boy, if he wanted to be.

He could be anything he wanted to be.

As midnight approached, the night grew colder, and the inside of the train windows misted from the warmth of the carriage. He and Hermione brought out their Muggle coats when they reached the station in York, and were glad for it upon transferring to Great Hangleton, which was a minor country stop with two platforms. It was desolate, the station master's office the only light they could
The platform itself icy and slick under their feet. It was colder than London; colder than Hogwarts too, where every morning he cast a warming charm on his uniform robes and winter cloak to last the whole day of classes.

"They were supposed to pick us up," said Hermione worriedly, turning back and forth as if she was expecting the Riddles to pop out from the nearest dustbin. "Do you see a motorcar?"

"If they don't show, we should go back to London," Tom suggested. "How much Muggle money do you have?"

"I'm sure they haven't forgotten," Hermione said, laying her trunk onto the concrete paving slabs then standing on top of it for an extra foot of height. She drew her wand from her pocket and cast a *Lumos*, lighting a bright circle around the two of them.

The honk of a horn shattered the frozen silence of a winter night; it was followed by the rattling growl of an approaching motorcar, which was preceded by a pair of yellow headlamps that cast a wide yellow arc of light on the black streets. Whitewalled tyres churned through patches of slush, throwing up a spray of icy pellets when the motorcar was brought to a stop right in front of the station entrance.

The headlamps dimmed and flickered, but remained on.

The driver's side door opened; a man stepped out onto the footpath, his arm reaching inside the motorcar for something on the front bench.

"Evenin'," he said, his walking stick tapping on the kerb. "I'm lookin' for a Master Riddle and Miss Granger."

"About time," Tom muttered.

"Good evening, sir," Hermione spoke over him, hopping off her trunk. "I'm Hermione Granger, and this is Tom. Have you been sent by the Riddles?"

"Frank Bryce," said the man, offering his hand to Hermione. Hermione shook it, and then he went to pick up her trunk with one hand, while his other hand continued to lean on his stick. "The Riddles' driver, groundskeeper, and man-of-all-work."

"Oh," said Hermione, bending over to help him, one hand behind her back still holding onto her wand, "let me get that!"

Frank Bryce was a young man in his twenties, and on top of that he was a servant; surely he didn't need any help doing the job he was paid to do: sort out their luggage and put it in the boot. The man looked perfectly fine, dressed in a rugged shooting coat over a thick knitted jumper and shirtsleeves, trousers tucked into a pair of wellies, and on his head was the standard flatcap that appeared to be an indispensable part of the Yorkshire working man's uniform. He didn't look like an invalid, and he hadn't asked for help. Tom thought it patronising of Hermione to volunteer her assistance, which came with the implicit suggestion that Bryce was incapable of doing the job the Riddles had hired him for, just because he had a gimp leg, or whatever it was that was wrong with him. Perhaps the Riddles had had to let their standards go due to the shortage of young men, most of whom would rather be soldiers than estate servants.

In the shadow of the headlamps, Bryce didn't notice Hermione tapping her wand against her trunk,
then Tom's, applying a silent charm to reduce the weight. He hoped that Hermione had been careful enough not to charm the trunks to be weightless; there was bending rules when it was convenient, and then there was flouting the Statute, which was not far from giving up the game and ruining it for everyone else.

When their trunks were strapped to the boot, he and Hermione got into the passenger bench of the motorcar, and Frank returned to his seat behind the steering wheel.

"You'll tell me off for my permanent record," Tom whispered in Hermione's ear. "But you're the one doing the—" he took a second to think of an appropriate euphemism, "—the m-word in front of a You-Know-What!"

Hermione looked both ways before she returned, "Did you see his leg? A man his age—he's got to be a veteran, discharged for injury. The least I could do is help!"

"Yes, well," said Tom in a voice pitched too low to be overheard, "he didn't ask for help. Let him have some dignity."

"He wasn't going to ask for help." Hermione's jaw was set in stubbornness.

"You don't know that."

"I know men rarely ask for help," said Hermione, giving him a pointed look. "For some reason, they think their 'dignity' matters more."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," Tom replied, his expression one of curious incomprehension. "Are you still talking about him, or someone else?"

Hermione snorted, but she didn't argue the point.

By then, the motorcar had begun turning up the long, winding drive to the top of a broad slope, upon which was situated the great square lump of masonry and gabled roofs that was the Riddle House. The house was three storeys tall with an attic, the tallest structure for miles, and it dominated the local skyline, which Tom supposed was the purpose of his long-dead ancestors having chosen the site to build their house. As the motorcar crawled to the top of the hill, he could see the lights of the town a half-mile away; from the top floor window of the Riddle House, he expected he'd be able to see Great Hangleton, and on a clear day, perhaps the city of York in the distance as well—or at least the blur of smoke produced from thousands of households and dozens of factory furnaces.

Not long after, Bryce unloaded their luggage on the front steps of the house, before he got back into the driver's seat and circled the motor around the back of the house. Tom glanced at Hermione, fidgeting nervously next to him on the top step, then he lifted his finger to the doorbell and pressed the button.

A minute later, one half of the double-leafed front door swung open, revealing the face of a young woman in a sombre black dress and a lace-trimmed apron.

She studied Tom's features for a few seconds, the intrigued tilt to her head soon shifting to something that suggested she was well pleased with what she found.

"Oh," she said, her hand rising up to her mouth, twin patches of red emerging on her round, pockmarked cheeks when she appeared to have remembered her manners. "Oh! Mister Tom's son
has come home at last!” She dipped down into a low and clumsy curtsy, which had obviously seen little practice.

"Leave your luggage there—Frank'll bring it in once he's locked up the motor for the night. I'm to show you to your room. Mr. and Mrs. Riddle had the North Wing done up for you special; they've already gone up, but you'll see them at breakfast in the mornin'. We serve the meals like so—" she babbled in a breathless voice, with nary a pause for breath. "Breakfast at nine, luncheon at one, afternoon tea at four, and supper at half-seven. You'll be expected to dress for it, o' course, but the rest of the meals are more casual-like.” She appeared to notice Hermione's presence for the first time. "Err... And I s'pose that goes for you too, Miss—?"

"Granger," said Hermione, giving the woman a polite, if slightly frosty smile. "Hermione Granger, pleasure."

"Frances Crewe, senior housemaid," the maid answered, bobbing her head with much less deference than she'd given Tom. "Though we don't make a big to-do about titles on account of there's only me and Becky who work as maids here, and Sara thrice a week to help with the launderin'."

The maid showed them the way to the North Wing, explaining the layout of the house, which was built on a central line of symmetry as had been the fashion back then, and had two main mirrored wings around a square-shaped courtyard. The North Wing was where Tom's suite and Hermione's guest room were situated; the South Wing had the Riddles' living quarters, including Mr. and Mrs. Riddle's formal master suite and private sitting room, but they were off-limits. If assistance was required, he had a bell pull in his room which would summon a maid. She was eager to explain that the maids started at six in the morning and finished at ten at night, but if Tom needed anything, anything at all, then he just had to ring and someone would come over to help him.

Hermione scowled as the maid ingratiated herself to him, standing much too close to him for comfort. And then, to Tom's revulsion, she kept throwing hopeful glances in his direction, ignoring Hermione entirely, before Hermione was, without further ceremony, pointed to the room set aside for her. In plain contrast, the maid opened Tom's bedroom door and took the time to demonstrate the use of the fixtures in the attached bathroom, then the fully stocked writing desk, the fireplace, and the brand new wireless set over the mantle.

Tom's disturbance was magnified when the bookshelf by the desk contained all the Muggle books he'd kept in his wardrobe at Wool's: *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, Chemical Warfare Tactics of Ypres, 1812: La Campagne de Russie, The Principles of Political Philosophy, Skirmishes of the Second Boer War.*

Mary Riddle had been inside his room at Wool's.

Not his room anymore—no doubt they had assigned it to some other orphan when they'd taken his things out of it—but it had been his for as long as he'd lived there, his when he'd had very little else he could say belonged solely to him. She'd have seen it, the creaky bedstead, the dingy window and the cracked paint, the collection of faded uniforms with frayed elbows and too-short hems. Was she disgusted by it? The display of poverty that had been his entire life up until he'd gone to Hogwarts; he himself was disgusted at the very thought of it—of his shabby, mean existence at the hands of Mrs. Cole, who called him a foundling, when he was in actuality no better than the commonest beggar...

Then, on the lowest shelf, sat a battered shoebox with dinged corners and peeling paper labels on the lid.
"I'm sorry, can this wait another day?" Tom said, cutting off the maid in the midst of her speech about special meal requirements to send to the cook. "I've been on trains all day, or transferring between trains, and I'm rather tired right now. And since it's past ten, you must be tired, too—I think you really ought to be putting up your feet, instead of attending to me. I wouldn't want to take advantage of your kindness, not when we've only just met."

He gave her a sincere smile, lowering his eyelids and softening the line of his brow to convey his exhaustion, and that was all it took.

The maid stammered something unimportant, and Tom didn't pay attention to it; he was glad to see the back of her when she shuffled off back to whichever cupboard or dusty pantry the Riddles used to store their servants when not in use.

He closed the door with a satisfying click of the latch... and then he lunged for the shoebox.

Under the various bits and bobs of orphanage detritus—a yo-yo, a thimble, a handful of grotty ha'pence, a commemorative coin that schoolchildren Britain-wide had been given at the coronation of George VI, a few scattered fountain pen parts—was a thick stack of letters he'd collected in the first few years of his mutual arrangement with Hermione Granger.

Peeling open the envelopes, he saw that the letters were there, inside and intact. Untouched. Still sorted by date, the paper still bearing a slight scent, the lines of her handwriting not as neat or refined as the way she wrote now, but it was recognisably hers. The address written on the front of each envelope was out-of-date, but her voice—Hermione's charmingly deluded opinions, her intractable arguments, her ridiculous visions of social progress—they were just as familiar, just as perfect, as he remembered them to be.

He read them over while lying in his new bed, and when he'd gone through half of them, he felt content enough to fall asleep in the midst of all this unfamiliar luxury.

That tentative illusion of peace lasted until breakfast the next morning, whereupon it was shattered for good, and his Christmas holiday, which Tom had not thought could get any worse, did.

That morning, Tom met his father for the first time.

It wasn't something that Tom thought the Riddles had planned. They were just as surprised and discomfited about it as he was, and some inner part of himself enjoyed gloating over their being forced to swallow a taste of their own medicine, in the dining room of their own house, no less. They must have known that the family reunion was an inevitability, but perhaps Mary and Thomas Riddle had wanted it to be a formal introduction, befitting of the standards to which they held their family. As much as it was possible to uphold these standards with Britain's present state as a war economy, as well as the collapse in standards surrounding the circumstances of Tom's birth.

That morning, he and Hermione had come downstairs to see place settings at the dining table, with silverware, crisp napkins, and a soft-boiled egg in a cup by each plate. Thomas Riddle sat at the head of the table, a tweed Norfolk jacket worn over starched tattersall and silk necktie. He perused the morning edition of the Yorkshire Post, while the maid from the evening before came around his left elbow and ladled egg scramble with chive garnish onto his plate.

Mary Riddle had on a twilled gabardine jacket and matched skirt, with a pair of pearls the size of his fingernail dangling from each of her earlobes. From her seat, she directed the maid about in serving
the hot dishes from chafing dishes kept warm on the sideboard. By the number of platters, it seemed like the Riddles hadn't forgone any of their usual comforts due to the rationing. Milk, butter, cheese, eggs, ham—all that the housewives of London saved their tickets up and queued at the greengrocers' for were on casual display at the breakfast table.

*Domestic* was the right word to describe such a milieu.

It was so *normal* that Tom could scarcely reconcile himself to the notion of this being *his* life.

His impressions were reinforced when Hermione complimented Mrs. Riddle on the food, which led to Mrs. Riddle puffing herself up over her cook's skills; the cook was a former kitchen maid who'd accompanied Mrs. Riddle to Yorkshire upon her marriage to Mr. Riddle several decades ago, back in the old days when "inheriting" servants had been a common bridal gift. This insipid line of conversation was interrupted by a man at the dining room door, whose heavy footfalls and loud voice drowned out Mrs. Riddle's lacklustre attempts at self-effacement.

"Mother, I'm taking Diamond to the creek and back," said the man, going straight for the toast rack at the sideboard without greeting anyone at the table. "A clear day is too rare to pass up this time of year, and the dear gel hasn't been put through her paces in weeks. Don't expect me for luncheon—I'll have it down at the village."

He was dressed for riding in a swallow-tailed coat, jodhpurs, and polished boots; a riding crop and hat were tucked under one arm. Some people would have admired the dashing figure he cut in his well-tailored ensemble, but Tom's attention was drawn to the man's face, to the arrangement of familiar features that resembled his own so closely as to be near identical.

The man had a few extra inches in height over Tom, a more solid build with a greater breadth of shoulder, and a firmer shape to his chin, which had the slightest cleft where Tom's own chin was smooth. His skin bore the rosy tint of an active outdoors lifestyle, in contrast to Tom's porcelain pale complexion. But so many things were the same between the two of them, many more similarities than between himself and Thomas Riddle: the hair, thick and dark without any sweeping wings of grey; the elegant proportions of cheek, brow, and jaw. What unsettled Tom most was the man's *voice*. His accent was different, an immaculate Public School Standard lacking any traces of Tom's London origins—but the tone, range, and character were exactly the same as Tom's own voice. He recognised it intimately; he'd listened to his own voice hundreds of times from the sensory organs of the animals whose minds he'd entered.

Years ago, he'd consciously decided to hate Mrs. Helen Granger the first time he'd seen her from the window of his bedroom at Wool's, her fur coat and motorcar the most expensive things he'd ever seen anyone own. Now, without any conscious intention on his part, an instant loathing formed within him for this man—this spoiled overgrown brat who'd spoiled the lives of the people around him—who could be none other than his own flesh-and-blood father.

Tom pushed himself up from the table and addressed the man. "Good morning."

The man turned, a piece of toast in his mouth, just now noticing the inclusion of two strange guests at breakfast.

"Good mo—" he began, then his words choked to a stop. *"You!"

Their eyes met, and this was one other mark of difference between them: Tom's eyes were darkest brown, while this man—*his father*—had eyes of hazel green, the sclera traced with bloodshot vessels
all around where they'd widened in recognition—shock—terror—upon seeing his mirror image sitting on the opposite side of the table.

For an instant, a series of impressions flickered into Tom's mind, a confusing, non-linear stream of images and sensations: a dark room, the only light emitted from the thin join between door and floorboards; a soft and crooning voice, hands stroking his hair, fingers tracing down the line of his jaw, gentle kisses to his brow.

A parched throat, a tongue furrowed with thirst, and a glass of water on a tray that for some reason—he couldn't remember why; his memories blurred themselves into unintelligibility whenever he tried to cling onto them—he refused to drink it—wouldn't touch it—denied it to himself until the passing hours turned into an entire day, and in a moment of weakness, he couldn't help himself, and then it was too late to stop the veil from falling over his eyes—

Too late—

"You!" he repeated hoarsely, his riding crop gripped between white and shaking fingers. "I won't have you here—not here—Mother, Father, I told you I didn't want him!"

There was a clink! as the maid set the teapot down and tiptoed to the door.

"You will sit down and behave yourself," said Thomas Riddle coldly. He folded his newspaper and put it down to the side of his plate. "It's time you took responsibility for your actions."

"Mother," the man pleaded, turning to Mrs. Riddle and gazing at her imploringly, "please, please, I don't want him here—he can't live here—please, Mother, if you love me, send him away!"

Mrs. Riddle's eyes glistened, but she turned away from him and said, "You'll listen to your father, Tom. We're trying to do the right thing for our family, and the sooner you understand that, the better."

"That boy is not our family," said the other Tom Riddle, pointing a trembling finger across the table at Tom. "He's not mine; I won't acknowledge him—"

"It doesn't matter," said Mrs. Riddle, "we've already signed all the forms. We're his guardians, not you. It's out of your hands."

"Then have it your way," he snapped, and the plaintive whine in his voice was suddenly, jarringly, replaced by a tone of biting acid. He tossed his half-eaten piece of toast onto the platter of smoked kippers. "I wash my hands clean of this. Have Mrs. Willrow send my meals up on a tray—I shan't be sitting down for supper so long as he's here."

With that, he swivelled on his heel, coat-tails flapping, and marched out of the dining room, jamming his hat on his head. In the distance, a door slammed.

Tom sat back down in his seat, at a loss for words. His father had never been graced with his presence until today, but somehow, seeing the face of his long-lost son had triggered an instant flash of recognition. The man had been afraid of him. What did it mean? What had his father been thinking about, when Tom had peeked into his surface thoughts? The dark room, the empty glass; without context, he didn't understand any of it, and he was reminded of the incident last year when he'd looked into Nott's thoughts.
In the seat beside him, Hermione's face was pale and stricken, her fingers scrunching around the napkin in her lap.

"I had hoped that he would behave himself," Mrs. Riddle sighed.

"You know that he's always been a high-strung one. This is what comes of too much of your coddling, Mary." Thomas Riddle picked his newspaper back up, grumbling to himself, "If you hadn't tried so hard to set Cecilia on him, then perhaps he wouldn't have gone after that ghastly girl..."

When breakfast ended, they were finally able to excuse themselves. Hermione tried to make light of the situation by saying that she hadn't thought anything could be worse than the time the Riddles had had dinner with her family during the summer.

Tom, who often argued with her for the mere sake of arguing, couldn't disagree.
— Credit for the illustration goes here. Follow if you want to look at more art content, I guess.

— If this story was set 60 years in the future, the quote "I have had it with these motherfucking snakes on this motherfucking train!" would be very relevant.

— "Greatness inspires envy; envy engenders spite, spite spawns lies" is a real Voldemort quote from Dumbledore's memory in HBP, when Tom interviews for the DADA position.

— Historical newsreel footage has helped me research in writing this story. If you want to see what real life Britain was like during the war, have a peek. The Riddles, living in farm country (and owning farmland) have the money and influence to get things off the black market, and don't care about rationing allowances, which are way stricter in late 1943 than they were in 1939. They wouldn't stand for that tiny little meat portion as shown in the video. The video also shows the kind of old-timey Mid-Atlantic-style Received Pronunciation accents upper class people would have used back then, though it goes without saying that the Yorkshire locals sound much different.

"On the Ration: A selection of films looking at food rationing during the Second World War."
Length: 5m26s.
Nobility

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

1943

Despite living in a castle for most of the year, Hermione was impressed by the Riddle House. She supposed it was due to the fact that the sprawling grounds and non-Euclidean architecture of Hogwarts were shared by hundreds of students, and with the ghosts and talking portraits, it wasn't a place in which one could truly find themselves lost. In comparison, the Riddle House, a grand old Georgian-era home built to emulate an older Jacobean style, had three proper residents—or four, now that Tom had been adopted into the family.

The house, she saw as she explored each floor during her stay, had over a dozen bedrooms, a long hallway that doubled as a family portrait gallery, a wine cellar, and multiple single-purpose rooms dedicated to smoking, playing billiards, sewing, reading books, and cleaning boots. There was even a room in the South Wing of the house for storing toys, lined with shelves of soft animals, baskets of painted wooden blocks, and folded quilts in colourful prints.

That was another mark of difference between here and Hogwarts: the rooms and corridors at Hogwarts showed signs of wear from thousands of young witches and wizards over the thousand years since the school's founding; it felt ancient, storied, but never old. In comparison, much of the Riddle House felt dusty and desolate, as if it were a museum exhibit depicting everyday scenes from a bygone era of British history. It might be centuries more recent than Hogwarts, but the anachronistic armour and tapestries and gargoyles of Hogwarts had never felt antiquated to her, while the signs were everywhere in the Riddles' home. The pictures on the walls showing stiff-looking boys in sailor suits were one, and the holes cut in the wallpaper for the installation of electric light switches were another.

Mrs. Riddle came upon her when she was inspecting the black-and-white photographs in the toy room.

"Do you like it? The nursery?" asked Mrs. Riddle, standing at the threshold. "Of course, you'll be able to decorate however you like when you put the room to use."

"I beg your pardon?" Hermione said. "But why would I need this room?"

"When you decide to have children, where do you think they'll be raised?" spoke Mrs. Riddle in a patient voice, as if she was addressing a young child, or the hard-of-hearing. "I should imagine I'd drop dead before I'd permit any great-grandchildren of mine to be brought up in a London flat."

"Great-grandchildren?" Hermione only just kept herself from gaping in the most unseemly fashion. "You think that I would—that Tom and I were going to—"

"Produce children?" she finished for Hermione, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. (It was, well, a natural thing, but that wasn't the most alarming thing about their conversation.) "I'd certainly hope that you'd marry before it happens, but whichever order you choose doesn't matter as much as your doing both of them, and in a timely manner, too. I think this family could do with a
"I'm sorry," said Hermione, feeling more and more out of her depth, "but Tom and I, we're not like that, not what you think we are. We're just friends, Mrs. Riddle."

"'Friends','" Mrs. Riddle cast her a calculating look. "And yet, you know that he reads in bed all night, and he knows that you talk in your sleep. When I was a girl, this would have been considered the furthest thing from mere friendship."

"It's not what it sounds like," Hermione said quickly, "and it wasn't anything improper, I promise!" She was uncomfortably aware that generations of young men and women had said these same words to their elders, but perhaps just this once, she would be taken as truthful. "Anyways, these are modern times; standards have changed in the last generation. I'm not against the idea of marriage or children, but I've worked hard in school and would like to do something with my education when I'm finished. Having a certificate to hang on the wall isn't enough for me."

Mum's education hadn't just been a decoration for the wall, either. She'd married Hermione's Dad in the middle of completing her nursing training, but that was because of external factors to do with housing and living expenses: it was cheaper to rent a flat together instead of two separate boarding houses, but landlords did not like letting properties to unmarried couples. Mum and Dad hadn't had Hermione until her Dad had finished his stint as a house medical resident and they'd started their own practice. As a result, her parents were older than many of the parents of her primary school classmates. Not that it was a bad thing, as it meant Mum and Dad had established careers and a spacious family home in Crawley for Hermione to crawl around in as a baby.

(She wondered if Mum and Dad's late start was why Hermione had been an only child, as it wouldn't have been easy for an older couple to keep up with multiple young children. But Hermione still liked the example they set, and appreciated the emphasis they put on educational diligence and good career choices. If it meant not having the three to five children that was the average for the British woman, then she'd accept it without complaint. She worried over the Ravenclaw First Years enough that the addition of any other children—her own children—to the mix was positively overwhelming.)

"You're interested in going into... trade?" asked Mrs. Riddle, using the word as if it left a bad taste in her mouth.

Trade was an old word, outdated. The more acceptable modern terms were employment or vocation, when these days earning one's living from things other than collecting rents was no longer held in social contempt. But Mrs. Riddle's face went sour and her lips still pursed up as though Hermione had confessed to wanting to join the circus.

"If I'm capable and qualified to earn my own income, why shouldn't I?" said Hermione. "It isn't about the money—my mother works and volunteers, even though we'd still be well enough off if she didn't. But she wants to, and she makes a difference in the world because she does."

"How very modern." It was curious how the most innocuous of words from Mrs. Riddle's mouth could sound so vaguely insulting. "I suppose that your mother's idea of taking a proper interest in your education was in keeping to her position; far be it from me to tell another woman how to raise her own child."

Mrs. Riddle sniffed, then went on with, "You may find that a woman of means can just as easily 'make a difference', but only rarely does it necessitate common labour. You see, when one is born or raised to a lifestyle of gentility, such privilege does not come without its obligations. Social rank
entails social responsibilities: we are expected to lead by moral example; be pious, virtuous, charitable, and honourable, and through it set an example to our lessers. *Noblesse oblige*, as they call it, is the mark of true nobility—in both one's station and one's character.*

Hermione couldn't stop herself from staring blankly at Mrs. Riddle, unable to articulate a satisfactory response. She understood the concepts of virtue and the moral imperative, but she wasn't expecting these sentiments to come from Mrs. Riddle, of all people. The Riddles were... not exactly wicked people, but from what she'd observed of them, they were hardly virtuous. They lived comfortable, sheltered lives—lives of leisure—and there was nothing inherently wrong with doing so. But the most charitable thing she'd seen them do, outside of being courteous hosts to herself and Tom, was to put money in the collection plate, and treat their servants with basic politeness.

Remembering the names of the household staff, employment "perks" like allowing them to take dinner leftovers home to their families, first pick of unwanted clothes and old linens before they went into the charity bin, and a half-day off on Sundays for church attendance—that was what the Riddles called kindness, which smacked of demeaning condescension to Hermione's liberal eyes. She hadn't seen Mrs. Riddle knitting socks and rolling bandages, or Mr. Riddle opening his home to convalescing soldiers, nor had she seen Tom's father take it upon himself to lend a hand to the maids who kept up the house and estate. He was an able-bodied man who, for some reason, hadn't been taken into the army, and yet it was left to Mr. Bryce, a man who lurched around on a crutch, to do the yardwork and clean the stables.

Tom's father—the similarity of their names was getting to be a bother—did nothing but slam doors in a petulant manner, then go out for rides when Mr. and Mrs. Riddle ignored him. They paid more attention to Tom, asking how he was settling into his room and if he needed extra blankets, or if he wanted the maid to leave hot water bottles in his bed after dinner so it would be warm and toasty by the time he went up for the night.

"I think there are more important things than trying to look noble," said Hermione. She didn't have Tom's silver tongue for charming adults; she was much too straightforward in discourse to match Tom's sheer persuasiveness, and while Tom found it endearing, it didn't help in the rare instances when she wanted other people to not only find her arguments valid, but find her person likeable. "It's an admirable goal—privilege isn't something one should take for granted, of course—but I've always wanted to make a more active contribution to society. Public affairs, civics, or perhaps even governance."

"Oh, Hermione, my dear," said Mrs. Riddle, sounding immensely relieved. She patted Hermione on the shoulder and continued, "If that's what you wanted, why didn't you say? I'm certain I can arrange a position at the North Riding municipal office when you've finished with school. It's just north of the vale from here, and close enough that you'll be able to live here instead of boarding up in Allerton—a rather dull little parish if I'm to be the judge of it."

"A position? In municipal government?"

"In the aldermen's offices. They're always in need of competent secretaries."

Once again, Hermione was sent floundering for a response. While she tended towards frankness in conversation, she managed to retain enough self-control to steer clear of unsalvageable rudeness.

"Oh," she said, "well, that's generous of you to offer, Mrs. Riddle."

"Noble is as noble does, dear," said Mrs. Riddle magnanimously. "I do want you to feel welcome
while living here."

"Oh," she repeated, a little lamely. "If that's the case, do you mind very much if I use your motor? I know petrol is rationed now, but I promise I won't use much of it. I... I've wanted to see the village up close, and I shouldn't like to walk up and down the hill in the snow, especially if the weather changes while I'm on the way back."

She had magic to refill the tanks; they wouldn't miss any, even if she borrowed the Riddles' motorcar and drove to York and back. But she wasn't interested in going that far—the far edge of Little Hangleton was the farthest she was planning on exploring. There was information she was looking for, important information that would answer questions she'd been wondering about for weeks, and the village was the best place she knew to go searching.

"You may take the Sunbeam out," Mrs. Riddle replied. "That's the older one of the two—Bryce will know which one if you ask him; do let him give you a proper driving tour when you visit the village. Thomas doesn't like having mud on his Rolls when the weather gets as dirty as it does during the winter. And my Tom—" she sighed, "—prefers his horses, and never likes going past the property lines these days, so he wouldn't be put out for it either."

The Riddles had two motorcars? Somehow, Hermione wasn't surprised at that; by what she'd seen of their lifestyle, they were obscenely wealthy by the standards of the average family back in Crawley. And Mr. Riddle had a Rolls-Royce! She'd read several automobile manuals during her driver training that summer, and while she didn't have a preference for one make over another—the Muggle equivalent of how young wizards obsessed over the newest racing broomsticks—she knew that some firms produced more luxurious models than others.

It was a car that cost in the thousands of pounds. Hermione's parents had paid one-hundred and fifty pounds sterling to have the rest of their house warded after Nott's solicitor had the registration papers approved by the Ministry. On top of the fees for lodging the application and having two fireplaces in their house renovated and connected to the Floo, the total cost, in the hundreds of pounds, was dear enough that Mum and Dad had to have several serious discussions on the household budget. In the end, they'd decided that it was worth it, as Mr. Pacek was giving them a good rate on account of their friendship, and it wasn't as if they could shop around for a cheaper alternative to having their home secured against bombs, gassing, fires, and mortar strikes.

These thoughts lingered in the back of her mind the next morning, when she checked her study planner one last time. Reading the message that had appeared in the night, she stuffed it into her bag and headed down to the Riddles' garage, which was situated behind the house and invisible from the front drive.

The back of the house was less grand than the front, lacking the Gothic ostentation of the balustrades on either side of the front steps, or the rooftop's sculpted parapets. A flagstoned courtyard was the centre of the space, iced over in the winter, with the occasional black lump visible in the hard-packed snow where a horse had evacuated itself and it had frozen into a solid rock before anyone could shovel it away. It was surrounded by the functional buildings necessary for running a great house like the Riddles' home: the garage, the stables, the dairy, the kitchen gardens, and a glass-walled conservatory for the keeping of fresh herbs and hothouse flowers for the Riddles' table.

The nicker of horses was audible over the scouring wind, and Hermione tucked her scarf in tighter around her throat, cast a Warming Charm over her Muggle coat, and ducked into the garage, which she knew had the largest doors out of any of the house's auxiliary buildings.
Inside, she found a room that smelled of petrol and metal—over the pervading smell of horse manure, which wafted in when the wind blew in the right direction—and contained a small carriage, and what appeared to be a drover's wagon, tipped on its side to make room for the main occupants of the garage, the two motorcars.

One motor was black and rectangular, a commercial model that didn't look much different than the one her parents had—although the one the Grangers' owned was blue. It had a spare tyre strapped to the runningboards, and she remembered seeing that tyre when Mr. Bryce had gone to Great Hangleton to pick her and Tom up from the station. This must be their daily-use car, and indeed the wear was noticeable, in the dings in the body and the dirty streaks of mud splashed across the whitewall tyres; it must have been put to use quite recently.

The other motorcar was silver-grey, with a spotless chromed grille, slimmer runningboards, and a longer front bonnet, which was topped with a shiny metal figurine—the manufacturer's mark.

Hermione was slightly unsettled upon realising that this motor was worth twice the fees of putting a student through a first-rate education at Oxford or Cambridge. And in terms of performance, there wasn't much that separated it from the Riddles' affordable motorcar, the Sunbeam. It was close enough in dimensions to the Grangers' that Hermione knew she could enchant it with the same rune sets, and therefore make it *better* than the Rolls-Royce.

For now, she'd use her wand to cast a few Cushioning and Warming Charms for comfort. The spells would last a few days at most before the effects faded, but it was a quick job that only took a few minutes. That'd do, for now. She wasn't sure that the Riddles, even if they allowed her to drive their motorcar, would extend that courtesy to letting her carve mysterious symbols under various panels. Her suspicions lay with an abject refusal; the Riddles might have been relatively carefree with how they spent their money, but they were not *uncaring* about the state of their belongings.

(When the Grangers had been invited to dinner in one of London's more exclusive restaurants, Mrs. Riddle had ordered lobster bisque for their starters, and had made a fuss about sending everyone's plates back to the kitchen after Hermione pointed out a bit of shell she'd gotten in hers. Hermione had picked it out and laid it on the side of her bowl, but once Mrs. Riddle had seen it, she'd all but dragged the maître d'hôtel to their table by his ear.)

Once settled into the driver's side of the front bench, the engine turned on and the carburetor warming up, Hermione opened her bag and laid out a pair of books. The first was a surveyor's handbook on the area of Hangleton and the surrounding valleys, which she'd found digging through the Riddles' extensive private library. It was published in 1889, when the North Riding was established as a separate civil district from the South, East, and West Ridings of Yorkshire. The maps inside the book depicted the main roads and village boundaries of Little and Great Hangleton, which should allow her to find her way around without having to stop every few minutes to ask a local for directions. The second book was her enchanted study planner, which had, in the last week or so, been very useful in keeping her informed of Nott's convoluted plan to discover the whereabouts of the Gaunt family.

*The Gaunts.*

They were the mystery at the centre of all this.

A wizarding family, the Gaunts had isolated themselves from the rest of British society for the last century. Nott had gone through the historical records and family trees kept in his father's study, and found that before their self-imposed seclusion, the Gaunts had owned properties in Ireland. The trail
had stopped there: their lands had all been sold off before the birth of Marvolo Gaunt, the man who'd given Tom his middle name. Marvolo, according to one old tapestry whose recording enchantments had worn off a few decades ago, was Tom's maternal grandfather, and the last recorded Gaunt in Cantankerous Nott's *Pureblood Directory*.

In many enchanted tapestries, woven by experts in the magical arts, the names and likenesses of witches weren't recorded in as much detail as the wizards. The magical world had a far superior record of granting witches basic economic and civil rights—owning businesses or property, or participating in politics or diplomacy, in contrast to the official status, or lack of it, accorded to Muggle women. However, just like in Muggle society, it was traditional for a witch to take her husband's name after marriage, and therefore "lose" her own. From what Nott had written, some witches of the "best" families took hyphenated names if their mother's maiden name was superior in status to their father's, or if their own status was greater than their husband's. However, most creators of magical family trees left the witches out past the first generation if they married out, tracing the main male line instead, which resulted in maternal bloodlines becoming a convoluted trail of dead ends and unresolved questions.

She'd resigned herself to putting up with Nott as her co-collaborator if she wanted to solve the puzzle.

The growing list of reservations drifted into her thoughts, as she steered the Riddles' motorcar out of the garage, down the hill, and to the main road that passed through the centre of the village. There weren't many other vehicles on the road. A few horse-drawn drays, oil cloth tamped down to protect the cargo, a bicycle or two, but no motors. The wagon drivers tipped their caps to Hermione as she overtook them, going slowly over the slick bitumen. Yorkshire in winter was not much to look at: the land was coated in a layer of snow, dry stone walls and hedge fences separating one tenant farm from the next. They made a grid of dark borders, rising above the square-cut shapes of wintry pasture; it gave the North Riding countryside the overall appearance of a big white quilt.

The meeting spot was a patch of road outside the village proper, out of view from the Muggles...

*There!*

A wooden signpost rose out of the packed snow on one side of the road, its two arms pointing in opposite directions.

*Great Hangleton, 5 miles.*

*Little Hangleton, 1 mile.*

She eased down on the brake pedal; the motorcar coasted to a stop over the icy road. Stepping out of the magically warmed interior and out into the wind was painful, but she managed it, and trotted over to the signpost, shoes sinking into the frozen crust of now.

"Nott?" She peeked behind the sign. "Hello? Where are you?"

A rectangular section of air shimmered and Nott appeared, dressed in black robes under a thick winter cloak with a fur collar, a gold clasp at his throat in the shape of an oak branch sprouting with acorns. His wand pointed at the ground, where a series of runes had been melted into the snow. Hermione eyed the rune sequence, translating each letter in her head, placing their meanings into context with one another.
"Hey!" said Hermione, looking up from the ground to glare at Nott. "That's my rune pattern! You even took the idea of writing it in the snow!"

"Does it even matter where I got it?" Nott shrugged. "No one will ever believe you."

He blasted the marks off with an *Incendio*, and when he was done, he shook the slush off his boots. "Do you know where to go?"

"Yes," said Hermione. She hesitated, then added, "Well, I have a map and a general idea of where to search. But it'll be faster if we go by motorcar."

Nott narrowed his eyes as the motor. "*That* thing? Is that what Muggles use for carriages? It smells strange—and where are the horses?"

"There aren't any. The smell is from the petrol."

"Petrol?"

Hermione sought her memory for an alchemical term that wizards would understand. The textbooks on the subject she'd read always used *Salt of This* and *Oil of That* to describe what modern Muggle chemists called *Sulfates* and *Nitrites*. It wasn't as if the wizarding alchemists of the past—or present—were ignorant or stupid, but they were hidebound to old conventions, and one of those was the use of traditional ingredient names. She expected it was partly due to how long wizards lived, and alchemists in particular tended to live even longer than the average.

"Um," she said, "distilled and refined naphtha? It's used as the fuel."

"How barbaric," said Nott. "How fast can it go?"

"Forty-five miles an hour, I suppose," Hermione said. "Maybe sixty on a good road going downhill."

Nott gave a snort of derision. "The new Cleansweeps can go up to eighty miles an hour."

"But you can't fit two people on one and eat lunch while in the air," Hermione pointed out. "And I have a basket of chicken sandwiches under the seat; I'm sure if you tried to eat them at eighty miles an hour, you'd have a pleasant task of picking frozen mayonnaise out of your nostrils."

"Ugh, Granger, do you really have to make everything into an argument?"

Hermione scoffed, but resisted her impulse to take Nott at his word. And she kept her mouth shut while Nott got into the passenger's seat on the left side, wrinkling his nose at the Muggle-ish interior, which had not been placed with a minor Expansion Charm like the Hogwarts horseless carriages. At least her charmwork had ensured the inside was comfortably warm.

She got the motor moving again, and they rolled up and down one of the many low hills that made up the valley. At the bottom of the valley was nestled the village of Little Hangleton, and on the opposite ridge, at one of the highest points, was the Riddle House. On the opposite side of the village was another ridge, dark and wooded where the Riddles' hill was a clear and well-maintained patch of lawn blanketed in snow, bordered with ornamental shade trees.

This wooded ridge was the outer boundary of the village—and, according to the surveyors' maps,
where the Riddles' ownership ended.

There was a minor road that led off the main road, a pounded dirt track instead of smooth asphalt layered over macadam that was the standard for public motorist roads across England. This was an indication of where the private property began, and with a yank of the gearshift, Hermione steered the motorcar down the track and into the copse of dark trees. Instantly, the watery sunlight of late December dropped away behind a canopy of snow-laden branches, as if twilight had come upon them in the blink of an eye.

Nott drew out his wand and cast a *Lumos*. Hermione, rolling her eyes at him, flipped on the headlamps to light the path.

They turned a corner, the motor set in the lowest gear. Nott didn't put his wand away, but held it between his fingers in a duellist's grip.

"This is the place," Nott breathed. "Stop the carriage, Granger."

Hermione pulled the gearshift down to neutral. Nott hopped out of the front seat, took a few steps off the track and up to the edge of the woods, where he began digging under a leafless tree. A minute later he came back, and in his gloved hand was a thorny stem topped with a handful of tiny, bell-shaped grey-ish violet flowers, brittle and damaged from winter frost. It looked well past its harvesting season.

"Bettony," he explained, peeling open the flowers to inspect the stalk-like filaments within. "Wizarding bettony. We grow this year-round in our solarium at home."

"Also called 'Vettonica' or 'English hedge nettle'. Commonly used in healing potions and antidotes," Hermione recited from memory. She'd read the entry years ago in their Herbology textbook, *One Thousand and One Magical Herbs and Fungi*. "Best picked in late September when the petals are fully developed and have taken on a deep violet hue. The dried and powdered leaves are often steeped and used in hangover potions. The anthers can be plucked and crushed into a poultice to cure—"

"—Snake bites," Nott finished. "Keep going. If their herbs have escaped their garden and grown in so close to the Muggle road, then it means they haven't maintained their wards. They won't know that other wizards have crossed into their property."

"It's illegal for a property owner not to keep their wards maintained when living so close to a Muggle settlement!" said Hermione, scandalised. "Especially when there are magical plants or animals involved. They made a big fuss in *The Prophet* a few years ago when someone's flesh-eating shrub took the leg off a Muggle postman."

"You can report them later," Nott said, looking unconcerned about having found evidence of flagrant lawbreaking. "After we've got our information. Not that it'll do much, of course—Muggle welfare is well low on the list of things the Wizengamot cares about these days. The Aurors have more important things to do than write out minor fines." He cut himself short as the motorcar turned the next corner. "Not that these people could afford to pay them, I'm sure."

In between the scraggly, bare trees was a modest little cottage, its low roof sagging under a thick crust of snow. Thick icicles dangled off the eaves, inches from scraping the snow that had built up around the walls of the house, which had been cleared from around a rough door constructed of splintery planks. A thin thread of smoke wisped out of the cottage's crooked chimney. All in all, it
looked... uninviting.

_Weren’t the Gaunts a pureblood family?_ Hermione thought, looking the little house over. _That’s what Nott's book said they were._

She supposed a witch could live in there; it was the classic fairytale depiction of a witch's house, a place where disobedient children became plucky heroes over the course of a bedtime story. That had been her idea of magic before Hogwarts, and after learning that _she_ was the witch, she knew better these days. These days, she understood that pureblooded witches and wizards had manors and servants and family libraries full of books that she'd never find on a shelf at Flourish and Blott's.

The mystery deepened.

"I have to stop here," said Hermione. "If I keep going, there won't be enough room to bring the motor around. If I can't turn it around, I'll have to drive it in reverse up to the main road—and I haven't got the hang of that yet."

Nott muttered something about Muggle contraptions, but gathered his cloak and straightened his robes before he pushed open the door. Hermione buttoned up her coat and made sure her wand was in the right-side pocket before she turned the engine off and got out from her side.

It took them a few minutes to walk up from the dirt path to the front door, and in that time, she'd made a few observations of the area: the snow had settled in regular oblong shapes by the side of the house, and out of those poked a few hardy weeds. There had once been garden beds here, a wizarding apothecary or herb garden, but it had gone to seed over several years of neglect. The property wasn't surrounded by any sort of potent ward; she couldn't feel any compulsion effects to turn around and walk back to the road, nor could she feel the tingling that meant her presence had been detected and set off a linked alarm inside the house, the magical world's equivalent of a door bell.

And once they'd reached the house, she and Nott observed the most disturbing sight: there was a desiccated, frozen body of a snake nailed to the door. Its scaly skin was flaking off in long strips, like some sort of ugly mummified banana, and in the gaps between the skin and shrivelled grey flesh were dozens of thin stripes—rib bones—connected to a knotted line of vertebrae.

They exchanged a wary glance.

"You knock," said Hermione quickly. "I'm faster at casting the Shield Charm."

Nott grimaced, raising his gloved fist to the door, looking for the cleanest place to touch. He settled for a spot a few inches above the snake, but he had to awkwardly raise his arm over his head to do it.

**Knock, knock!**

They waited for a minute. Nothing happened. Nott raised his hand to knock again.

The door was torn open, and out of the dingy depths of the house lurched a strange creature with bedraggled hair and matching beard of indeterminate colour, dressed in mismatched layers of sack-like clothing that gave him the appearance of a vagrant. The most curious thing about him were his eyes, quick and dark and with a peculiar searching quality that came from, as Hermione registered with startlement, being pointed in two directions simultaneously.
The creature—an oddly deformed man—opened his mouth, full of broken teeth in varying shades of yellow and brown, and in reflex, Hermione cast a silent Protego.

He bounced off the shield, stumbling a few steps back. And then he hissed, spittle flying out at her, while a hand rummaged through his rags for his wand.

Hermione kept her own wand out, her concentration directed on holding the shield. Out of the homework study club's members, Hermione was one of the better spellcasters, and next to Tom, the best in terms of focus and consistency.

Nott stepped in front of her, keeping himself within the protection of the shield. "You there—do you know of a family by the name of Gaunt?"

The man cocked his head.

"Ministry man, are ye?" he said. The way the man spoke was like someone who'd learned English as a second language; his consonants were warped and inconsistent, as if his palate was unformed, unused to shaping such precise sounds; in contrast, certain syllables came out oddly sibilant.

"No—"

"I don' want your sort here," muttered the man. "Who do they think they are..."

"I'm not—"

"...Them filthy mudbloods, goin' 'round and tellin' me what to do... me!"

"Will you shut up and let me speak?" snapped Nott. "You really don't know who you're talking to, do you, you stupid brute?"

He tore off the glove from his right hand and flashed his signet ring in front of the man's nose.

"I'm Theodore Erasmus Nott, son and heir to Cantankerous Nott and Annis Celyn-Gamp of Broxtowe, pure of magical blood to the last eighteen generations. I'm not from the Ministry, and—most importantly—I'm not," Nott's lip curled up in a truly contemptuous sneer, "a mudblood. I'm looking and willing to pay for any information on the Gaunt family. Information on the late Marvolo Gaunt and any heirs of his name or body, particularly the whereabouts of a Merope Gaunt, presumed daughter of Marvolo. Are you their tenant? Do you know where they are?"

The man, who had been eyeing Hermione's drawn wand, turned his full attention to Nott, whose youth and fur-trimmed cloak rendered his identity an uncertainty. The robes he wore beneath his cloak were clearly of wizarding make; from out of his flowing sleeves peeped linen cuffs adorned with pearl buttons and fine blackwork embroidery. Nott had made no effort at all in blending in like Hermione had, with her driving coat and Muggle-made jumper and skirt. In Hermione's forays into magical law, she'd read that it was recommended for wizards to don Muggle garments and blend in when conducting business outside wizarding settlements, and for Ministry employees, those recommendations became official policy.

The man's lopsided gaze lingered on Nott's ring, a thick gold band on his middle finger with his family's coat of arms cast in reverse.

"What's it to you, then? What're you after Merope for?" said the man angrily, stepping back from
them, but not removing his hand from his wand.

"Do you know her?" Nott dug around into the satchel bag he wore beneath his cloak and drew out a small velvet pouch that gave off a metallic jingle when he pulled at the drawstrings.

"She's a little thief, she is," the man spat, his eyes taking on a greedy shine. "A thief, a liar, a slut, my sister." His expression sharpened, and his unkempt beard undulated. It took Hermione a second or two to realise he was scowling. "What're you askin' all these questions for?"

"I'm a genealogist studying pureblood bloodlines." Nott pulled a book out of his bag and opened it to a pre-marked page, flipping it around to face the man. The marked page showed an animated illustration of a family coat of arms: a green shield with an engrailed border that rippled like waves at sea, and on top of it was a serpent in silver coiled in the shape of a circle. "The House of Gaunt. According to the records and tapestries kept by other families, the most recent scion of the house was a Mr. Marvolo Gaunt, son of Morganus Gaunt, born in 1877 and died in 1927."

Nott turned to the next page, which had a branching family tree with little pictures of heads by the names of the male entries. "If there are no other family members left, then the next edition will have to reflect the extinct status of the name and blood. But... you say Merope Gaunt is your sister? Then you are a Gaunt yourself?"

"I am!" said the man fiercely, "Morfin Gaunt, son of Marvolo." He thumped himself on the chest, and continued, "Centuries of pure blood in these veins, I have—and not a single drop of filth!"

Nott coughed and tried to hide his look of mocking amusement at the man's words.

"What's that?" said the man, Morfin Gaunt, his eyes dark flashing with ire. "You think I'm jokin', do you, then? You may have your fancy books, but my blood's better'n yours."

Morfin raised one grubby hand up to Nott's face, just as Nott had done, and on his finger was a golden ring set with a black stone. Where Nott's ring had an elegant design, the oak motif of his family cast into its face, Morfin's ring looked to be nothing more than a simple carved stone.

"I've got one of 'em too, just like you; don't think you're better'n me," Morfin said. "I'm the last living descendant of Salazar Slytherin, I am! I wager that's more'n you can say for yourself, hah!"

Out of the corner of Hermione's eye, she noticed how Nott's expression shifted, then smoothed itself over. Where he had been disgusted and bored, he'd regained interest in the conversation with the thoroughly unwelcoming Morfin Gaunt. Nott looked intrigued.

"Is that so, Mr. Gaunt?" asked Nott. "That's a remarkable claim to make. A unique claim, if true. One worth recording with your name in the next edition. But there's one thing I need, though I don't expect it should be much trouble to provide..."

"Of course it's true!"

"Prove it," Nott said. "Speak to a snake."

"They've all gone to sleep for the winter, haven't they?"

Nott took a deep breath, composing himself. Then he raised his wand and incanted, "Serpensortia!"
A small, foot-long grass snake fell from the tip of his wand and onto the snow at their feet.

Without a trace of fear, Morfin bent over and picked it up, stroking its sinuous body and crooning at in a strange, hissing voice. The snake hissed back, twining around Morfin's fist, and for a good half-minute, they appeared to have an avid conversation.

Nott's eyes widened, and for a moment, his air of disdain dissolved away into undisguised awe.

"Parseltongue," he murmured. "No one's heard it spoken in Britain in centuries."

"Now, how's this, then?" Morfin prompted, untangling the snake from his fingers and then—carelessly—tossed it over his shoulder.

Hermione opened her mouth to say something, but Nott shot her a warning look.

"I never thought I'd see it," Nott remarked. "An authentic claim. Pardon me, Mr. Gaunt, but did your sister possess this ability, too?"

"Aye, she did."

"Do you..." Nott began tentatively, "do you know what became of her?"

"She run off with a Muggle boy years ago." Morfin shrugged. "Saw him, fancied him, took off with 'im, never came back. He come back, though, he did—went back to his big house over the dale, that way—" Morfin jerked his head in the direction of the dirt track, "—but I never see him come 'round on his horse since then." He broke off into a cackle, fingering his wand in sinister glee. "If he does come back, he'll get what's comin' to 'im. Serve 'im right—who does he think he is? Muggle rubbish! Filth like him, defiling the blood of Salazar..."

"Thank you, Mr. Gaunt," said Nott, cutting Morfin off in the midst of a tirade. He graced Morfin with a short bow, then tossed the man the pouch of coins; Morfin snatched it from the air and tipped it out, pouring out a stack of bright golden galleons into his dirty palm.

Morfin shoved one between his stained teeth, while Nott winced and tried to maintain his polite demeanour.

"I'll be going now. Have a good day, Mr. Gaunt." Nott backed away from Morfin, who was counting his coins and rubbing them between his fingers. "By the by, Mr. Gaunt? You ought to clean up your garden and put your wards back up in case any Ministry inspectors ever see this... place."

Morfin wasn't listening, so Nott just rolled his eyes and turned back to the track, gesturing for Hermione to lower her wand and follow. In a low voice, he whispered to Hermione, "You can report him at your leisure now, Granger. What an utter travesty."

They stomped their way back to the motorcar, which was as warm inside as when they'd left it. Hermione, who'd kept her wand out the whole time, siphoned off the mud and dried the melted snow off her coat and stockings.

She was still struggling to comprehend what she'd seen. The man had talked to a snake. She hadn't known what they were talking about, but she was certain snakes didn't behave like that normally—they didn't listen and wait for a response like that little grass snake had, when it and Morfin had
hissed back and forth in front of them.

*That man was Tom's uncle.*

"So..." said Hermione, grasping for conversation. "Is that what pureblood inbreeding looks like?"

"That's what the worst sort of pureblood looks like," Nott answered through gritted teeth. "We trace our bloodlines for a reason, and it's not just for vanity—it's so we can avoid things like that. Did you see his eyes?"

"I tried not to; staring's impolite."

"He had some rudimentary skill at Legilimency. Weak and untrained—nothing as sophisticated as what Riddle can do—but Gaunt knew right away when I was making light of his boasts."

"Are you really going to put him in the next edition of the book?"

Nott's jaw clenched. He glared out through the passenger side window. "He's a pureblood, and the Heir of Slytherin, a true descendant of Salazar Slytherin. He's disgusting in every way, but the title is rightfully his."

"Couldn't..." Hermione ventured hesitantly, "couldn't it be Tom's title, too? You said you were looking for Marvolo Gaunt's heirs in name and body. Tom doesn't have the Gaunt name, but he has the blood. Doesn't that mean something?"

"I didn't think you were one to put stock in our 'meaningless' courtesy titles."

"I..." said Hermione, who had scoffed at Nott's *Pureblood Directory* and the 'Ancient and Noble Houses' with their pretentious Latin mottos, "I don't like the idea of Morfin Gaunt having them, having any official recognition for something he did nothing to earn, which goes to vindicate his wretched opinions even further. And even you think he's gone too far down the deep end."

Her hands squeezed the wheel, leather driving gloves creaking. "He's perfectly rotten—did you hear the names he called his own sister?" In the few minutes of conversation in which he'd spoken about Merope Gaunt, Morfin had used language worse than she'd ever heard from the Riddles, who held no fondness for the woman. "And what he did to that snake! He just threw it away, like it was nothing! It might be an animal—but it's one he can speak to! And he had one nailed up to his door!"

"Calm down, Granger," said Nott, holding onto his seat, "you're swerving all over the road!"

"Sorry." Hermione drew in a deep breath, straightening the motorcar out and loosening her grip on the steering wheel. "What do we do now?"

"We?"

"Well, of course, we can't tell Tom about it! He doesn't know his mother was a witch, or his uncle is a nasty old blood purist." Hermione let out a tired sigh. "If Morfin Gaunt can talk about Tom's father like that, just because he's a Muggle—and if he'd go so far as to insult another pureblood—then he wouldn't hold back if he ever met Tom. Tom doesn't like being insulted; his feelings are very sensitive, you know—"
"—Sensitive," Nott repeated in disbelief.

Hermione ignored him, and continued, "—And I just know Tom would be tempted into doing something stupid, and get himself into trouble. So, obviously, we have to keep this between us, for his own good."

By this, she meant Morfin Gaunt, who would hate Tom for merely existing, and whose existence would offend Tom in return. Some people were so far at odds in ideology and disposition that they were best kept apart, keeping the peace for the greater good. It was common sense. She'd learned back in primary school that if two parties couldn't get along, then it was easier to separate them until they could shake hands and reconcile. It was to everyone's benefit: one could look to the example set by the Partition of Ireland two decades ago, which split the island into a sovereign Republic in the south and a British-governed section in the north.

(Shes been called naïve for thinking that such a separation could cool tempers, but she earnestly believed it could. It was the rational solution when the other option had been war.)

The rest of it—the inherited legacies—didn't have to remain a secret... but she didn't anticipate the prospect of bringing Morfin Gaunt or Merope Gaunt Riddle into the light. His family and the lack of it in his childhood and youth were sensitive subjects to Tom, who had felt he'd been unfairly wronged by the world from birth; just now the Riddles were giving him a taste of what he was properly entitled to, and it would be devastating to discover that both sides of his family were, to the core of their beings, ridden with carelessness and selfishness, having possessed the ability to help but had instead forsaken one of their own for so long. It troubled Hermione to imagine it, for what were magic and money but the means to enact change in the world?

And it would undo the recent strides Tom had made in learning to become a great wizard and great person in his own right. Hermione worried about Tom; she knew he was capable of great selfishness himself—the idea of the Unforgivable Curses had not fazed him back in First Year—and on top of that, he was never one to let injustices stand unanswered for. This would have been similar to Hermione's personal stance on injustice, if Tom was not so singularly focused on only those injustices directed toward his own person.

(Having to keep her hand on his under the table during meals at the Riddle House was fast becoming a routine.)

It was best to be circumspect about how the news was broken, at least for now.

Nott fell into a thoughtful silence. "You wouldn't be opposed to a 'pretentious fictional style' associated with Riddle's name, if the alternative was Morfin Gaunt having it?"

"They're harmless, aren't they?" Hermione asked. "Like clan memberships in Scotland. They don't do much these days, as most modern Scots speak English and make their livings in cities—they don't even wear tartans day-to-day. I don't know what an 'Heir of Slytherin' does, but if purebloods think it's important, then I'm sure Tom can put it in with his references if he wants to apply for jobs after Hogwarts. Maybe it will stop him from thinking that people will only take him seriously if he has an Order of Merlin."

It was Hermione's opinion that the ranks of peerages and nobility were a hallmark of the past. They had historical value, contributed to the formation of the modern Union, and had some influence in Parliament's House of Lords, but in this age, that was more a nod to tradition than an assignation of political power. She didn't mind if those who had titles used them; it was a link to one's heritage, and
for the most part, it was no different than tracing her own heritage to the tribes of ancient Britons, or
the Anglo-Saxon lords that followed. If she wanted to claim that she was descended from Iceni
warrior queens, what harm could it do? If she didn't put on prideful airs like Mrs. Riddle, or behave
as abominably as Morfin did in his self-assured superiority, then she found it somewhat acceptable, if
not whole-heartedly encouraged.

(But she also wasn't encouraging anyone to throw out their guillotines anytime soon. They were
worth keeping; it was only fair that historical value go tit-for-tat.)

"The 'Heir of Slytherin' isn't a title to be claimed," said Nott. "One can't just put it on a piece of
paper and have other people believe it—it has to be proven."

"Like what you asked of Morfin?" Hermione frowned. "Tom has to talk to a snake, and then he can
add it to his qualifications? Well, if that's it, then it's not that hard, is it?"

"It's something like that," said Nott, scratching his chin thoughtfully. He didn't elaborate on what
that meant.

Hermione parked the car at the top of a hill that gave them a scenic view of Hangleton, then
unpacked the lunch that the Riddles' cook had packed for her that morning: curried chicken
sandwiches, a crock of potato salad with crisp pickles and quail eggs, and a pair of small, tart apples
harvested from the estate orchards. She pointed out the local landmarks to Nott, who was lukewarm
to the tour, unimpressed by the size of the town—which had fewer than a thousand residents—or by
the Riddles' estate at one end of the valley, which looked much less grand when it was so far away it
couldn't loom as it did up close.

"My family's estate is around the same size," said Nott dispassionately. "Greater, if you count the
area added by Extension Charms on the house and grounds. My ancestors put them up before the
Statute was passed—the Ministry later banned them from personal use, to protect the fragile minds of
wandering Muggles, because Merlin forbid they see something that's bigger on the inside than on the
out."

"Extension Charms weren't banned by the Ministry," Hermione corrected him. She liked accuracy
when it came to referencing laws; in that same fashion, she couldn't stand it when she heard famous
quotes mangled in public rhetoric. "Their use was only restricted to certain licensed registrants and
specific applications. Trunk-makers and enchanters can still use them for magical luggage, and
anyone who had them before they tightened the rules weren't expected to take them down."

Other people, including Tom, thought her pedantic because of this tendency—although she couldn't
tell if it was because she knew the rules better than they did, or if it was because she made sure they
knew she knew. Either way, wasn't it a citizen's duty to know the laws of their nation? The
Wizengamot's pretentious Latin motto, after all, was Ignorantia juris neminem excusat, or Ignorance
of the Rules is No Excuse.

"You know, Granger, I used to wonder what you saw in Riddle," remarked Nott in a bland voice.
"Or what he saw in you. Then I realised that the two of you were equally insufferable, and the effect
is only magnified when you're together."

"If I'm so insufferable, then why are you here?"

"Because I seem to enjoy tormenting myself," Nott said. With his wand, he poked a parcel of
greaseproof paper tied up with string, which gave off a small puff of steam. Inside was a sandwich
cut into triangular halves, containing spiced chicken and fresh greens from the herb garden.

"Besides," he continued, "You're plenty insufferable, but when the pair of you are being insufferable in public, you've somehow gained the ability to make other people do as they're told. It's remarkable, really—and rather useful. And I also happen to know which side my bread is buttered. For now, it may be good enough—but it's even better to keep it buttered on both sides."

"That's an elaborate way of justifying your self-interest."

"If you were a Slytherin, a justification wouldn't be necessary."

After lunch, Hermione drove Nott back to the Hangleton signpost, their original meeting point.

"I suppose I'll see you next term," said Hermione, in lieu of a farewell.

"Unless you've found more information," Nott said, brushing the last of the crumbs off his cloak. "Now that I've got the lie of the land, it should be easier for me to come back later through Apparition."

"How did you get here, if you didn't Apparate?" Hermione asked. "We only start our Apparition lessons in the spring."

"Magic, what else?"

With that, Nott snapped his fingers, and with a small pop! of displaced air, a scrawny, goblin-like creature appeared before them. It had large amber-coloured eyes that bulged out of its thin face, as disproportionately sized as the apple in the mouth of a suckling pig. Enormous, membranous ears stuck out from the side of its head, the skin so fine that it was translucent in the noon sunlight. It appeared to be dressed in an embroidered towel knotted over each shoulder, though its most distinctive article of dress was a thick, golden torque engraved with runes that was wrapped around its neck.

Nott offered his hand to it, and without hesitation, the creature laid one knobbly-fingered little hand onto Nott's waiting palm.

"Amity," ordered Nott, "take me around the back; the south-side corner of the stableyard should do it."

The small creature bowed, and this time, with a louder pop! they disappeared into thin air, leaving Hermione staring at a pair of footprints in the snow.

Shaking her head, Hermione returned to the motorcar, which she drove back to the Riddles' garage, parking it next to Mr. Riddle's Rolls-Royce. When she got out, she cleaned the snow and mud from the body and bonnet, then topped up the petrol tank with a Refilling Charm.

She might not be interested in the 'nobility of character' that Mrs. Riddle had talked about, but the least she could be was polite.
On values and inflation:

Mr. Riddle's Rolls-Royce Wraith cost £2000 in 1938. That is worth £115 000 today. A modern Rolls-Royce costs £300 000, or ~$500,000.

The inside of the Riddles' daily driver car (1932 Sunbeam Coupé) looks like this. There are no seatbelts, so the passenger should probably hold on if the driver is a noob.
Implications

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1943

Over the next few days, Thomas and Mary Riddle did their utmost to pretend that everything at the Riddle House was perfectly normal.

It was a valiant effort, but in the end, a failure.

At meals, Tom's grandparents spoke of the Christmas pageant being put on by the villagers, and the church service they expected him and Hermione to attend, as a way of introducing the newest additions of the family to the curious local residents. When they used the word family, he caught them glancing at an empty seat at the dining table, but the subject of Tom's father never entered the conversation.

Tom Riddle, Senior—and how fiercely that name rankled, as much as it did for the title he bore, of father—had, since that first breakfast, refused to appear for meals. For all they knew, the man had locked himself in his apartments until Tom returned to school in January.

That didn't stop Tom from trying to find out more about him, however he could; Tom had little else to entertain himself with, as he didn't turn seventeen until New Year's Eve, and until then, he was as feeble and helpless without his magic as every single one of the Muggles that shared his grandfather's house. He hadn't had to live this closely among them since 1939, but the last few months, to his disgust, had involved more Muggle posturing than he'd been forced to perform for the last few years.

Adjusting to the Riddles' version of a Muggle lifestyle didn't involve lard sandwiches or turnip soup, which would've convinced him to pack his trunk and leave, whether Dumbledore liked it or not. But there were plenty of other inconveniences that made him wish for his comfortable room at The Leaky Cauldron. The bathrooms there never ran out of hot water, and the blackened iron sconces, despite being ancient and ugly, were charmed to keep the corridors warm and the draughts out. The simplest of enchantments would have saved him the nuisance of dealing with the maids, who had every morning found some excuse or another to loiter in his room while ostensibly tasked with cleaning the fireplace grates or changing the linens.

The Riddles had an old-fashioned view on what they called Service: they expected the help to be neither seen nor heard, invisible but available, ready to cater to their employers' needs before their employers had come to the realisation that they were in need of anything at all. It would have been a trying task for a full complement of household staff in the heyday of great houses—for the Riddle House of the previous century, there had been twenty-two indoor staff and nine outdoor. In the present decade, the upkeep of the house was stretched between a skeleton crew of five, and even with modern electrical appliances to help with the housework, the maids rotated between the kitchen and scullery, chambers, laundry, dining, and parlour duty. The most senior of the maids, Miss Frances Crewe, was also assigned to Mrs. Riddle's toilette, which would have been unthinkable in the years past, when Mrs. Riddle had been known to Society as Miss Mary Fenstanton-Coates.

(Tom had discovered this from an afternoon spent in the family portrait gallery. There, he'd learned
that his grandfather's middle name was Reginald, that his great-grandfather's middle name had been Thomas... and that there had been at least one boy named Tom or Thomas every generation for the last century and a half. Tom, who had always found the results of his investigative abilities entertaining—having cut his teeth in Mrs. Cole's office from the age of five—was not pleased by this discovery.)

That Tom, unlike his grandparents, was willing to acknowledge the maids' existence and, on top of that, help them lift the heavy mattress when they laid the fresh sheets (which he did to get them out of his room faster rather than out of kindness or charity) put him in their good books. A few polite smiles, greetings in the morning and evening, and they were ready to answer his questions. Ready to uncover the old skeletons, too, information he knew that servants hoarded, especially if they were overlooked by employers who spoke too loud and drank too much for their own good.

Tom wanted questions about his father answered.

It was a good thing that when it came to digging up the family dirt, the subject of his father was the motherlode.

"Mister Tom's been the village's most eligible man for nigh on twenty years," said the second housemaid, Becky Murray, as she vacuumed the carpet around the fireplace. To Tom's relief, she wasn't as annoying as the first housemaid, Frances; most days, Becky finished her work as efficiently as possible so she could go back downstairs and drink tea and eat the Riddles' luncheon leftovers with the cook.

(From what Hermione had told him after a few days of dining with Mary and Thomas, the Riddles' leftovers made better eating than what a servant could prepare for themselves, on their own time, with whatever ingredients they could acquire from the government ration booklets. Tom had come to the conclusion that the cook deliberately made the portions too large, even after accounting for the inclusion of two guests.)

"There was a few years early on, after he run off with your ma, that the title went to Vicar Elton—but then he up and left for the parish at Stokesley, so it went back to Mister Tom. Everyone says your pa is the finest man in the dales, but he's never looked at any woman twice since comin' back from London. He don't even like us girls comin' in to clean his room, makes such a fuss about it, like you'd never believe—Oh! I s'pose you saw him at breakfast the other mornin'—he does that now'n again. He had his better days when there was a valet in the house to wait on him, back before the war, but then his man enlisted and that was that. We have Frank now, but he en't the same; he can't make it up the stairs so easy, so he has to keep himself to the grounds."

She cast him a speculative glance, eyes narrowed in thought. "In a few years, all the girls in the village'll be lookin' to you, sir, if you'll pardon me for sayin' so. Mister Tom, as fine as he is, won't be gettin' any younger. But I can't expect you'll be eligible for too long, eh? The girls'll be disappointed by it o' course, but it en't the first time it's happened."

"Sorry," said Tom. "But what exactly do you mean by that? 'Eligible'?"

The maid tapped her nose. "I'm sure you know what I mean, sir!"

Tom could only give her an expectant look.

"Miss Hermione," Becky said. "She's got to be your steady girl, hasn't she? Your grandmama surely thinks so!"
Steady girl, thought Tom, what an awful colloquialism.

If there was anything he thought worse than Quidditch-related jargon (blagging, blatching, blurting, and so on) it would be the slang terms of Muggle vernacular. He had grown up amongst people who spoke in nothing but local idioms, and it was somewhat disturbing how most of the terminology (nobbling, feaguing, scrumping) revolved around acts of varying illegality. Not that he had an issue with skirting laws if he felt like it—he thought them relevant to everyone but himself. But Tom had no need of criminal accomplices, being able to take care of most things in life on his own, and thus saw no sense in perverting the English language in the creation of a impenetrable gutter dialect.

"...She has a picture of you and the little Miss framed in her dressin' room, next to Mister Tom's school portraits," continued the maid with a heartfelt sigh. "It's the sweetest thing I've ever seen; we all o' us thought she'd given up hope of having another lady in the house, ever since Miss Cecilia stopped callin' on Mister Tom all those years ago—though I shouldn't be sayin' any more on that; that's confidential business, that is—"

Tom interrupted her. "My grandmother thinks Hermione and I are... courting?"

"Well, sir, what else are you goin' to call holdin' hands under the table?"

He coughed and turned away, biting the inside of his cheek.

They weren't holding hands!

Hermione was just overly insistent on reassuring herself that he wasn't going to draw his wand on the Riddles in the middle of one of their dull mealtime conversations. These conversations always revolved around something that neither he nor Hermione cared about: Mr. Riddle drew up plans for a shooting party with some old chums of his who lived in Thirsk, and Mrs. Riddle discussed the possibility of the family driving to York for a day of shopping and entertainment as a special treat for Tom's birthday. 'Treat' was what she called it; but in reality, he could already tell he'd be expected to sit for tea at a fancy teahouse and be introduced around to the wealthy patrons, friends and associates of the Riddles. Because apparently everyone in Yorkshire who made above a certain income per year shared the same, limited circle of acquaintance.

Tom's fine manners and splendid conformation would be displayed as if he were an entrant in a kennel show—cue the repeated exclamations of "He looks just like You-Know-Who!", because almost twenty years later, Tom's father still hadn't been forgiven for marrying so shamefully beneath himself. (If the upper crust could count anything worse than being convicted for sodomy, then having been caught consorting intimately with their social inferiors would do it; marrying them was near inconceivable.) And whilst all this happened, Tom would be dreaming of practising magic from his spellbooks, as a freshly-minted legal adult by wizarding standards, but still bound by the Muggle laws which counted him a child and dependent until eighteen.

The only person in the house who understood how tiring it was to be among the Muggles was Hermione, and instead of listening to him complain about it, she'd gone off to explore the estate and village by herself. She could use magic, so of course it wasn't hard for her to find other things to do than go through the Riddles' drawers and cabinets for anything interesting—and since Warming and Drying Charms were only a wand-wave away, it was no trouble for her to venture outdoors in the freezing cold.

"Hermione is my friend..." Tom began, but stopped himself.
That wasn't accurate; Hermione wasn't his friend.

She was more than that, more than what could be put into simple words. For years, they'd never needed words to define what they had—what they were—as if words could ever encompass the depth of what it meant to be Tom Riddle's counterpart. It frustrated him that people needed to define their connection; they needed words, denotation and delineation, for a concept that was beyond the breadth of their comprehension. He had encountered this more and more often in the passing years, as he and Hermione grew older and they faced censure from people who believed that men and women weren't, couldn't be, equals.

"She's my—" said Tom. "Mine."

He ignored the maid's knowing look.

"Who's Cecilia?" he asked quickly, changing the subject. "And my father doesn't like his room cleaned? Why not?

"Oh, Miss Cecilia is no one important—never you mind," said the maid. "Last I heard, she'd married a businessman down in Sheffield, and the Riddles won't hear her spoken about—not by the likes o' us, I daresay. As for your pa, Cook—who knew him as a boy—says he's a queer one; it all happened before my time, y'see, but I heard tell that he never was the same as before he left for London. But that en't my place to say; your grandma would have me sacked in a jiffy if she knew I was tellin' stories about him."

Becky dusted off the mantel, rolled up the electrical cord to the vacuum, and began to load them onto the trolley. She bobbed a short curtsy, then proceeded to Hermione's room, which was just across the hall from his own.

Tom shut the door to his room and leaned his weight against it.

They thought his father was strange.

When he was a young boy at Wool's, the other children and the matron had thought him strange, though not for any discernible reason. (Tom knew he was brighter than everyone else at the orphanage, adults included, and they knew it as well, but they didn't speak of it, because that was tantamount to admitting that they were stupid.) Instead, they'd called him a 'funny boy', a phrase that had nothing to do with his sense of humour. It wasn't ever used in his presence, but he'd overheard them discussing it in low voices during Adoption Days, when young couples and sharp-featured housewives came shopping around for the perfect child to fulfill their household needs.

He hadn't let it bother him; he'd known all along that he was different to the rest, and Hermione and Professor Dumbledore had confirmed it.

That day at breakfast, the first and last time he'd seen his father face-to-face, Tom hadn't gotten any indication that the man was different—not the good type of different, which in Tom's internal dictionary was a less brow-raising way of saying Special, when he wanted to bring the concept out in public to educate the ignorant. Tom had come to accept that the Riddles were ordinary Muggles through and through, which was a disappointment... But at the same time, it made his own magical abilities unique, when everything else he had came from someone else—his name, his appearance, even the expression of cold disdain he used when one of his dorm mates asked him a particularly nonsensical question was one he'd seen on an oil-and-canvas portrait hanging up in one of the
corridors.

The more he found out about his father, the more things didn't add up, no matter how hard Tom tried to fit two and two together. He had been told—he had been under the impression—that his father was nothing more than just another Muggle, as ordinary as his Muggle grandparents. Wealthier than most, but Tom had seen wealth from the outside all his life, both Muggle wealth and Wizarding wealth; he already knew that wealth couldn't change the qualities inherent to a person's character. It couldn't bestow a mediocre person with brilliance, or the unexceptional, talent.

Wealth was nothing; there were other things in life that Tom cared more about than mere money. Magic was one of them. It had been one of the greatest mysteries in the early years of his orphan life. Now that he'd left that unpleasant era behind, it was en route to becoming his greatest secret.

What if his father had a secret too? The way everyone in the house spoke of him, how they spoke around him, seemed to imply that something was off with the whole affair of Tom's father eloping with a village girl. Had he thrown off another, more suitable prospect, this Miss Cecilia, to marry Tom's mother? Why had he done that, when all Tom had seen of the Riddles so far was how they flaunted their superiority in name and affluence?

Tom didn't know what they were hiding—it had to be more than an unfavourable match, or a romance gone sour. There were other things he did know, however.

His father's first impression of Tom had been one of recognition.

His father's second impression of Tom had been fear.

Why?

Tom resolved to find an explanation before the end of the Christmas holidays.

It wasn't as if he had better things to do with his time.

It didn't take Tom long to decide that the company of the servants was preferable over that of his own family members.

The maids were annoying, but his grandparents were even worse. Grandpapa and Grandmama, as they'd asked him to call them—although in his head, he thought of them as "Thomas the toffy" and "Mary the meddler"—did not heed the standard of formality that the servants observed, one which kept them from prying past the point of politeness; they understood the rule of 'Speak Only When Spoken To', and so were more useful for Tom to ask questions of them than the other way around.

Mary Riddle, however, was the opposite: she used her familiarity and her age as an excuse to cross-examine him, laughing off his chilly reticence with an affectionate pat on his hand and a kindly encouragement to indulge his loving Nana, who had not long left on this Earth—which meant that he
should spend as much time with her as was humanly possible. Tom had no experience with
grandmothers, but from what he’d overheard of his dorm mates’ complaining when they returned
from school holidays, it was not unusual for guilt to be a tool that old witches weaponised against
their grandsons. Tom was dismayed to find that it wasn’t something only witches knew how to use,
but universal to all women.

(At least Mary Riddle had the dignity to refrain from pinching his cheeks and ruffling his hair at
every opportunity.)

So Tom chose the servants. It was the lesser of two evils.

The servants turned out to be very useful indeed: they knew the schedules and personal habits of the
Riddles, and once Tom learned them himself, it made avoiding his grandparents even easier.

Mr. Riddle, for instance, spent much of his time in his study, making inquiries of the estate agent, a
man who lived in Great Hangleton and negotiated tenancy contracts with the local farmers and
business owners; other regular contacts were his Fund manager, the steward, the family lawyer, and
various parish notables who petitioned for the Riddles’ sponsorship in a children’s choir or new
leading for the leaking roof of the village hall. In the evenings, Mr. Riddle confined himself in his
workshop, where he assembled, painted, and rigged model sailing ships—the dullest pastime of
which Tom had ever heard.

Mrs. Riddle’s mornings were spent catching up with her correspondence through telephone or letter-
writing, and in the afternoons had Frank Bryce drive her around to call on the vicar or take tea with
other ladies of local significance, who had indubitably earned their position in the community by
marrying a wealthy and significant man. Her hobby was “gardening”, or rather, the well-bred form
of gardening that took place within the Riddle House’s conservatory, and involved more flower
clipping and floral arrangement in tasteful vases than grubbing about in common dirt.

Tom Riddle—the _other_ Tom Riddle—and thinking of him like this, as an alternative to calling him
Father, was going to give Tom an aneurysm some day—went riding in clear weather, or walked his
horse around the courtyard when it was murky. He owned a hunting hound, a collection of firearms,
and enjoyed typical country pursuits as a man of leisure. This meant that he was a professional loafer,
or in other words, a complete wastrel. In the evenings, whenever Thomas and Mary went out to dine
at a restaurant or watch a stage show in Great Hangleton, Tom Riddle (the elder; the Riddles’ lack of
creativity when it came to christening their children really was tiresome) would raid the cellar or his
father’s liquor cabinet, proceed to his rooms, then souse himself until morning.

(Working folk like Mrs. Cole overindulged on cheap gin that reeked of paint thinner, and this was
seen as a Social Evil amongst the morally righteous of South London. But, somehow, it was
considered acceptable for the likes of Mr. Tom Riddle to pickle himself on aged wines and imported
cognac. Such a distinction came from the same sort of people who looked at him and Hermione and
drew their own conclusions. Tom didn’t understand it. To him, it was equally contemptible
behaviour in equally two contemptible people; one useless Muggle was no different from any other.)

All this he learned from the senior housemaid, Miss Frances Crewe, who was an insatiable gossip on
top of her other unpleasant qualities, one of which was her shameless staring; if her eyeballs had
hands, then Tom would have felt extremely violated. He’d learned to discourage her attentions after
a few days: when she’d brought over his laundered clothes, he’d asked her which combinations of
shirt and trousers Hermione might like best as he’d gone about putting them away into the bureau.
The maid had flushed and stuttered, but it had stopped her from trying to invite him downstairs if he was ever in need of a "midnight snack".

It had led Tom to the conclusion that when he inherited the Riddle House, Miss Crewe would be the first to go, and her seniority could go hang. Her seniority was too much, anyway—she was around ten years older than him; why would she think that he'd even look at her, let alone consider her a suitable prospect for the sort of vulgar activity for which she seemed so keen?

Becky Murray could stay, and so could the cook, Mrs. Willrow, whose hard-boiled eggs were never boiled so hard that the outside of the yolks turned green—something Tom had always hated about the food at Wool's Orphanage, where the meals also included watery porridge bobbing with chunks of burnt brown crust that had been peeled off the side of the pot. This Christmas holiday had earned some credit toward its redemption through the quality of its meals, which equalled the ones served at Hogwarts, even if the rest of the Riddle House was far inferior to the Slytherin dormitories.

It was after an excellent luncheon meal of brandy-braised squab with creamed garlic potatoes, a recipe worthy of being published in Witch Weekly, that Tom continued with his "investigations". It was a more complimentary way to describe his sneaking about the house in an effort to learn the more intimate details of the residents' lives.

First he learned everyone's daily routines; the next thing he did was create a plan of the house itself, made easier when he knew that the architect had been a devout classicist who admired symmetrical perfection, placing the front door and portico in the centre with two identical wings curving around to the sides and back. Each wing contained within it the same hallway layout, and from the outside, Tom had counted the number of windows, chimneys, and gables. To his lack of surprise, he found that the numbers matched.

The Riddle family bedrooms were in the South Wing.

The corridor was decorated with sombre oil paintings of horses with glossy coats and pricked up ears. The plaques on the gilded frames were engraved with the year of each horse's birth and death, and under that, their names and awards. (If Tom had been asked, he'd call their names grandiloquent to an obnoxious degree—"Prince Selim", "Desdemona", "Coronation", "The Cypriot", "Dominance", really? In private, however, he could admire their uniqueness; had he been given a choice about the matter of naming his pet, he'd have picked something in that vein, instead of Hermione's mundane choice of "Peanut".) The hall carpet, unlike in the North Wing, showed signs of wear and constant traffic, the pile pressed and faded around two doors, a double-door at the end of the hall and another single door halfway down. Tom guessed them to be the master suite owned by his grandparents, and a standard residential apartment, similar to his own, which belonged to his father.

The doors, to his disappointment, were locked. The handles were stiff under his hands, and refused to turn when he jiggled them.

Looking both ways down the hall, Tom pressed his palm flat against the keyhole, brows furrowed in concentration.

He hadn't practised magic like this in years. Once he'd gotten his wand, the day after Dumbledore had delivered his letter, he used it whenever he could, and carried it everywhere. It was in his trouser pocket at the moment, the pointed end tucked under the hem of his jumper; even if he was banned from using it by the Decree Against Underage Sorcery, it was strange not to have it on his person, just in case. Where his dorm mates left their wands on their nightstands, or in the pocket of
yesterday's robes—which sometimes meant having to dig through a mound of dirty laundry in the morning before classes—Tom slept with his wand next to his pillow.

Magic could be cast without his wand, he knew. He'd moved things without touching them, in his early youth: coins, fruit from the piled baskets at the market, bits of chalk, the end of Jimmy Thurgood's shoelace, and as the boy had been standing at the top of the landing, it had caused him to tumble down half a flight of stairs. Every time Tom had looked into the eyes of a classmate who spoke to him or offered him invitations to their study group or the Hogsmeade teahouse, he was capable of discerning their true intentions without ever drawing his wand.

At Hogwarts, Tom liked having his wand to hand at all times. When he studied in the Library, he had his wand in one hand and a book in the other. When he worked on his essays in the Slytherin Common Room or the homework club's classroom, he dictated his drafts to his enchanted quill while mindlessly running his fingers over the bumps and ridges of his yew wand. This habit of his had made his dorm mates nervous, but it wasn't until several years into his magical education that Tom realised having one's wand out—when not in the process or preparation of casting a spell—was considered unmannerly. It was equated to carrying an unsheathed dagger while going about on casual business: not a gesture of direct threat, but still enough to put passersby on alert.

So he put his wand away in public spaces, and he'd gotten into the habit of not holding his wand when viewing the thoughts of his peers. If they were anxious, then he'd often catch them thinking about him, and although it was nice to be acknowledged like this, it didn't give him any information that he didn't already know.

*Magic doesn't need wands,* Tom thought to himself, drawing on his newly learned Occlumentic techniques. He cleared away the memories of his orphanage days, and the unconscious muscle memory that curled his fingers around a wand that wasn't there, ready to shape the circle-and-swipe movement that he'd memorised back in First Year.

*Magic doesn't need words or gestures.*

He had never cast *real* spells without a wand, only nudged things here and there, outside of the rare bouts of accidental magic where his anger had lashed out and instilled pain—discipline—on his fellow orphans. But what was the difference between that kind of magic and spellbook magic? Was there any difference at all?

Magic was magic.

Intent, imagination, and visualisation were all that mattered in manifesting his will into physical reality.

He pictured tumblers shifting, the *click-click-clicking* of each pin as it lifted and settled and was held in place by the force of his thoughts; it would be followed by the next, and the next, until they'd all reached alignment, and so the mechanism would begin to rotate, the latch retracting, and then—*finally!*—the door handle moved under Tom's questing fingers.

*Alohomora,* thought Tom, his eyes closed, lips pinched together.

He breathed shallowly, feeling a sharp throbbing in his temple, as if he'd just suffered his way through an entire hour of Dumbledore's eccentric teatime rambling.

*Snick,* the door replied.
He tried the door. It opened.

The door swung open into a dark room. A man's kind of room, which Tom perceived upon the first whiff. His nose wrinkled; living in the Slytherin dormitories ought to have desensitised him against the smells produced by so many active young men in close quarters. Magic helped quite a lot there—the curtains on the four-posters were charmed so any unusual smells generated by someone who'd over-indulged in the ham hock and beans at dinner wouldn't spread over the whole room.

This room had no magic. Or much light. He waited for his eyes to adjust before he stepped gingerly inside, leaving the door open to a narrow crack behind him.

His first impression was to observe that it was the same size as his bedroom, but visually, it appeared smaller—it had more furniture, more clutter, and it looked lived-in where his room was sparse and bare. The style of décor, however, was much the same: it followed the same aesthetic of the Slytherin quarters, sumptuous and rich, thick with age—not old, but historic. Heavy curtains in burgundy damask closed off the high windows, lined with gold braid and tassels. Furniture in dark hardwood, upholstered in gleaming leather and tufted velvet. Light fixtures overhead in crystal with cream silk shades, the carpets underfoot woven in lavish Oriental brocade.

He took a step further inside, and the floorboards beneath the carpet creaked under his feet.

Tom winced. He would have cast a Silencing Charm at his feet, perhaps even a Disillusionment, if he had wanted his investigations to be discreet—if his birthday had already been and gone. It was days away; perhaps he should come back later, when he had the full use of his wand.

But a quick look wouldn't do any harm, would it?

The longer he looked, the more his nose wrinkled in distaste. The end table by the wall was piled with dirty dishes on a tray, two uncorked wine bottles emitting the odour of mouldering fruit into the room's general miasma. The bed was unmade, white sheets tangled up on the floor, pillows scattered over the rumpled covers. By the foot of the bed was a large cushion covered in short, wiry fur. Figuring that the desk by the window would be the best place to turn up something interesting, Tom made his way over, feeling the floorboards shift under his weight. Not every step caused creaking, but it really was damaging his overall efforts to be sneaky.

Empty glasses cluttered the top of the desk, white rings left on the wooden surface, which was faintly greasy under his touch. A few tins of dubbin and a flask of whale oil mechanical lubricant sitting on a pile of grimy rags further demonstrated the lack of hygiene; Tom was faintly disgusted by the idea of someone putting their dirty boots on the same table where they ate and drank.

Looking inside the desk drawers, he saw that they were filled with odd bits of paper—betting slips, pocket-sized yardage books containing the scores of old golf games, the sheet music for a Bach minuet, and at the bottom, a linen-bound notebook with a fraying cover and wrinkly, warped pages from something that had been spilled across it and dried off.

Once he peeled open the cover and found what appeared to be a series of poems and doodled illustrations, he couldn't help feeling disappointed.

So his father fancied himself a poet, then? It was too bad that his poems were of the modern variety, all irregular lines, short stanzas, and intermittent punctuation, with none of the rhyme or structure of
traditional poetry—the type Tom would have preferred, had he any preferences for poetry at all. (He didn't.) Even the Sorting Hat, an eldritch amortal creation whose sole purpose was to plunder the minds of young children, could do better than this sentimental tripe.

Love is like bread
It rises, it swells and grows
It is kneaded
It grows stale and cracks apart
It is consumed
And you are told
It is your duty to provide it
Each and every day.

The drawing on the opposite page was of a woman's décolletage, which made Tom scoff. The lines were shaky and hesitant, which matched the lines of wobbling text in the attached poem. Tom was sure that whichever woman to whom his father had dedicated the poem—his mother? Cecilia?—wouldn't have appreciated the way her bosoms were depicted like lopsided sandbags. Like two potatoes in a burlap sack, with a pendant on an ugly chain necklace sitting in between.

Well, if it had been his mother, it was a good thing that she was too dead to see it. Tom was no expert in womanly thinking, but he was sure that most women would not like being serenaded with passive-aggressive poetry.

The following page was similar, and the next, and the next.

He shoved the notebook back where he'd found it, sliding open the next drawer, when he heard the clink and rattle of the housemaid's trolley rumbling down the hallway.

Time to leg it.

He slipped out of the room, closing the door, pressing his palm against the lock and willing the pins and tumblers to slide back into place with the force of his urgency, until he felt them catch and fall into position. The door locked, Tom put some distance between it and him, narrowly evading the maid who had been assigned to clean the bedrooms while the occupants were elsewhere.

So. It was almost certainly confirmed that his father, like his grandparents, was a Muggle. There were no signs of magic or magical items in his father's possession. His doodles were static, stiff and lifeless without the Animation Charms that were imbued into most magical media, from novelty trading cards to the classified advertisements posted on the Slytherin Common Room signboard. And what competent wizard would live in such slovenly surroundings, when simple magic could make cleaning a task of minimal effort? It was true that a Scouring Spell wasn't as effective by itself as it was in combination with a proper wash in hot water and soap—and it was advised against using Scourgify on delicate enchanted dinnerware—but most people could manage a Vanishing Charm on their empty bottles.

Unless they were Muggles, of course.
Tom had been half-expecting it; still, the disappointment came as a blow... but the more he
considered it, the more he was happy to be the only wizard in his family. Magic was an advantage, a
secret skill that only he knew about. It was legally permissible to tell them, as Dumbledore and the
Hogwarts authorities had acknowledged the Riddles as Tom's guardians, but why would he?

He had power—power over them—in keeping his magic a secret. An ace hidden up his sleeve. A
rabbit in his hat.

It suited him well to think of it this way, and gauge himself exceptional; to know that he had risen
above such lowly origins, such common stock, like man had risen above ape. Although he traced his
blood to the Riddles, he didn't call them inferior. No, their blood, their lineage, had produced him,
so they weren't inferior beings. They were merely... undeveloped.

In an unusual analogy, it was like the primitive Celtic wizards of millennia past, who carried staves.
When they encountered Roman wizards for the first time, with their cored wands and Latin
incantations, they were met with a disadvantage, for the Roman wizards had hidden their wands in
their tunics, and were indistinguishable from ordinary Muggle traders and craftsmen, gathering
information and passing it along to the tribunes of the invasion force. They kept themselves a secret
until the day of the first battle, where the Celtic wizards had had no time to prepare their elaborate
rituals to summon great storms or prophesy the best path for the tribal leaders to take.

(That day, years ago, when Hermione had mentioned the possibility of wizards being drafted into
Muggle armies, Tom had looked it up himself in the dusty, untouched section of the library where
the History of Magic books were shelved. He'd never told her what he'd found; she'd be insufferable
about it, in knowing that she was right all along.)

British wizards of the modern age had Celtic blood and were taught magic in the Latin style. And
none of them—not a single one of the purebloods he knew—considered themselves the lesser for
being descended from a conquered people.

He kept these thoughts in the forefront of his mind during the Riddles' Christmas festivities, where
the house was decorated, the tinsel hung and the Christmas tree put up, and Mrs. Riddle ensuring that
there was at least one photograph of him and Hermione posed in front of it, acting like they were in
the middle of putting up the glass baubles.

"This is your first family Christmas," said Hermione, looping a strand of tinsel around his neck like a
feather boa. "You should look like you're enjoying it more."

"I would—if there was anything to enjoy."

"Good food? Mrs. Willrow makes excellent eggnog."

"Hogwarts has better," said Tom.

"How about the presents?" Hermione suggested. "You'll have two sets this year, one for Christmas,
and one for your birthday. I don't think you've ever had a proper birthday party before."

"A Muggle birthday party," Tom pointed out. "Where they'll still consider me a child for the entire
year after that."

Hermione let out a huff of exasperation. "I don't see why you're making this so difficult. This time
of year, most people would be happy to be spending time with the people who care about them. If
you haven't noticed, there's a war on."

"They don't care about me," he replied, picking a thread of tinsel out of his mouth. "It's all just a show. They like the idea of having someone to inherit the family estate, instead of it going to a distant cousin who'll auction it off when they see how much the government has raised the succession tax."

Hermione shot him a look of disbelief. "That's such a cynical way to look at things."

"Sixty-five percent to the Crown!" Tom cried. "It's pure thievery."

"You looked it up?"

"This is going to be my house one day," said Tom, with a haughty lift of his chin. "Of course I'm going to make sure no one takes it from me, not even the government."

There was a quote, often bandied about at cocktail parties by people who thought they were witty, that went something like: "Nothing in this world can be said to be certain, except for death and taxes."

It was a Muggle saying, so Tom had quite naturally assumed it must only be applicable to Muggles. He was certain that auditors, as fearsome as they were reputed to be, could not be immune to magic —hadn't Llewelyn Caldwell's family dodged the Muggle tax collectors? And he knew there were ways to cheat death, if only by technicality. Libatius Borage's Draught of the Living Death, for example, put one in a stasis that would keep them from dying; in the right hands, it could buy the time to produce an antidote for someone who had ingested a lethal poison.

(Gamp's Law said there was no way to undo death with magic—that it was impossible to bring back a life that had already passed from the mortal plane. Tom had spotted the loophole immediately: undoing death was not the same thing as cheating death—never shuffling off the mortal plane in the first place.)

"They'll make a Tory of you yet," Hermione remarked. "You must have read enough on military campaigns to know that armies don't feed and equip themselves. That's where everyone's inheritance taxes are going to, these days."

"Yes, I know," Tom insisted, "but I don't see why it should come out of my inheritance."

It wasn't his, not exactly, since the estate legally belonged to Thomas Riddle. But the man had only a few years left to live, so it was perfectly acceptable for Tom to start counting his unhatched chickens. The only obstacle to collecting his proper dues was Tom's father, who would be equal inheritor of the less-than-half left by the Crown auditors.

To his irritation, Hermione just laughed and dropped a paper Christmas cracker crown on his head.

"Sometimes I don't know why you complain," she said. "You don't care about them either—but you like the idea of being heir to a family estate. You have more in common with them than you realise."

"If you care about them so much, why don't you stay here and deal with them for me?" Tom asked, pushing up the paper crown from where it had flattened his hair down over his eyes.

Hermione's laughter trailed off nervously at that. "Your grandmother offered. She seems to be
under the impression that I plan to stay here for good."

Tom's expression took on a quizzical cast. "Don't you? You have your own house in London, but when I get my fireplace connected to the Floo Network, you could come and visit as long as you like. There's more space here in the country—you wouldn't have to stay in that stuffy cellar all day."

"I don't think she intended it to be casual weekend calling," said Hermione, shaking her head. She chewed her lip and continued, "Mrs. Riddle seems to think I was going to move in and... and—"

"And?"

"And give her great-grandchildren," Hermione blurted, turning away from him, her cheeks flushed a bright and feverish red.

Tom could only stare. "Great... grandchildren?"

"You know—babies—"

"Yes," said Tom quickly, before she could elaborate any further, "I know what they are. I just can't fathom why she wants them."

Hermione pursed her lips. "I think... I think your grandmother regrets not having found you when you were younger. And by the way you've treated her and everyone else here—yes, Tom, I can tell—she knows that you don't think of her and Mr. Riddle as family, not truly. And that's what she's always wanted, a loving family, a real family that celebrates all the milestones—birthdays, Christmas, Easter, Bonfire Night—properly. One that looks good for the photos, and doesn't fall apart when the cameras are put away."

"How does a baby fix that?"

Tom's limited knowledge of young children came from living at the orphanage. As he recalled, his first experience with resentment had been when he'd seen how the babies were allocated the limited quantity of fresh milk, while he and the other children had to make do with the tasteless powdered stuff, artificially enriched with vitamins which, when mixed with water, collected at the bottom of his cup in the form of a grey sludge. (He'd learned later that it was bone meal, processed from the carcasses of slaughtered cattle.)

The babies gave off a foul odour, lying in their cribs and crying all day; this confirmed to Tom how useless they were, and why their mothers hadn't wanted them. Five-year-old Tom didn't see his own mother as having given him away. She'd died, which was a more dignified fate than leaving him in a basket on the doorstep. Back then, he'd had hope that his father, a grand and important man, would find him and bring him to the home he deserved to have.

In Tom's mind, loving families and babies were two separate concepts with no overlap.

"It's the, you know, the implication!" said Hermione, who would normally have a lot to say about everything, but in this moment seemed like she was having difficulty finding her words. "That you and I would... w-would make that family for her, just like that!"

"Oh, is that all?" Tom prompted, trying to keep hold of the fraying ends of his patience.

"She also wants me to marry you and live here forever!" Hermione burst out.
"How ridiculous," said Tom.

"That's what I told her!"

"As if I would live in a tiny farming village for the rest of my life," Tom continued. "Having an estate of my own is nice, but I'd still want to keep a flat or townhouse in Diagon for the weekdays; it'd save hours and hours of waiting for the owls to deliver notes from the editor."

Hermione gaped at him, her hair frizzling out of her pins like a poked porcupine. "Did you hear what I said?"

"Obviously."

"But," said Hermione with a deep frown, "I thought you didn't care for marriage."

"I don't," said Tom. "But after Hogwarts, we won't be living in the same castle anymore. If you know of any other ways where we could live in the same house—see each other every day—without counter-productive damage to our reputations as Hogwarts' best students this century, then by all means, suggest an alternative."

Hermione was at a loss for words after that, sputtering out, "What? Is that what I think it is—"

"It's sensible. Not to mention, convenient!"

"It's the least romantic thing I've ever heard—and I've read Darcy's speech a dozen times over!"

As Tom was about to form the first words of his rebuttal, Mrs. Riddle came in with the camera, having installed a fresh roll of film. She pressed them into posing for more photographs, twee Christmas scenes with Hermione hanging up the felted stockings—still at a loss for words—and Tom wearing his paper crown, Mrs. Riddle motioning them to stand closer and closer together and put on a smile.

Up close, Tom observed that Hermione's smile was as forced as his own, but only half as convincing.

It was only after the impromptu portrait session with Mrs. Riddle and her camera that the implications of what he'd said to Hermione began to dawn.

"I thought you didn't care for marriage."

He didn't.

It wasn't something that had crossed his mind, even if the boys in his year had begun to stress over
who their parents were considering for their future wives. Quentin Travers' father prioritised political influence over other considerations like money or a Sacred name. Lestrange's parents cared about maintaining their pureblood status, but preferred a girl with a family history of producing multiple, healthy children. Orion Black was heir to his name, and with so many cousins of close age, his parents thought to consolidate the family fortune instead of letting it fritter off through dowries; the Blacks had in recent decades lost a number of noteworthy heirlooms upon the marriages of the honourable Mrs. Harfang Longbottom and Mrs. Caspar Crouch, who had both been girls born to the Black family.

These things were irrelevant to Tom, who had never for an instant imagined venturing out on the marriage market himself.

Tom had also never put much thought into contemplating Hermione's femininity, or her lack of it.

He knew she was a girl, a matter of physical biology that grew more undeniable with every passing day, but in behaviour she was more laddish than ladylike. Hermione wore skirts with her school uniform and tied her hair back with a ribbon for Herbology lessons or Defense practice, but she didn't fuss about with powder or lipstick or aesthetic charms, unlike the infuriating Sidonie Hipworth who stopped and made him wait outside the girls' loo every time they went on joint patrols together.

Hermione didn't exactly heed the expectations set for those of her gender, but in terms of social convention for a person of her birth and class, she didn't deviate too far from the norm. Her beliefs in what was right and what was wrong fell in agreement—most of the time—with whatever the law permitted. Her values fell into a similar state of conformity: she didn't like the suffering and misery of others; she felt concern on others' behalf when it came to the living and working conditions for the urban poor and the citizens of the British colonial territories; she felt a responsibility to improve the situation wherever she could; she genuinely, earnestly believed in being good.

He supposed that someone like Hermione thought of one day being married and having children, because that was what was expected for people to do once they'd reached a certain age: have a house and a family with the statistical average of three children and a pet. Tom felt a bit nauseous at the prospect of there being another girl out there with Hermione's soft brown eyes that lit up whenever she found the book she wanted in the library returns pile, or her curly hair that ate combs and spat teeth, and her smooth, freckled skin that smelled like soap and flowers. (It was preferable that any children Hermione had in future got her husband's looks.)

*Hermione's husband.*

In Tom's mind, the Imaginary Mr. Hermione Granger had been a faceless stranger who grew more and more detailed the longer Tom brooded over it.

If Hermione got married, then it was assumed it'd have to be someone whom Tom approved of, someone who met Tom's exacting standards. This husband would have to ensure that Hermione was properly taken care of, so he couldn't be a useless lump.

Perhaps it would have been Mr. Roger Tindall, who knew how to calculate an exponential function and was otherwise competent in his own way. He didn't have dirty grey rings under his nails, nor did he have gin or cigarettes on his breath, which would have immediately classed him as unsuitable. It was difficult for Tom to think of and apply positive attributes to other people, so he settled for checking them off against a mental list of negative traits.
Any husband of Hermione's had to be biddable, of course. A Muggle, though hard to stomach as a match to a witch of Hermione's calibre, would be easiest to steer around, not having any native defenses against magic, especially Tom's particular brand of mental control.

A malleable Muggle husband would be a man who wouldn't make a peep about Tom's having a key to their house or Tom calling on his wife every other day. Someone meek and retiring, who'd watch over the hypothetical children without complaint when Tom took Hermione out to an evening at the opera, or a weekend visit to the seaside where they'd take walks around the scenic cliffs and Tom would show her the cave with odd carvings on the interior walls he'd found when he was eight years old, a few months prior to their first meeting.

The voice of common sense spoke up most inconveniently at that moment.

_Hermione is a Good Girl who cares about other people's feelings, _it said. _Loyalty is one of her most invaluable traits. Do you think that Hermione would ever allow her husband—Muggle or wizard—to be treated like that, even by you?_

The voice of righteous anger retorted, _She would pick someone else over me?_

The Spirit of Christmas Past, that part of Tom which would never outgrow his origins as the penniless orphan boy, chose to speak then. _Why wouldn't she pick me?_

_Because marriage is a scam, _thought Tom.

He didn't want a wife and family; after his formative years spent among dozens of grubby young children, everything about them repulsed him. He didn't even want a woman, not in _that_ way—_yes, he wouldn't deny that he'd imagined it once or twice, what boy his age didn't—but the realities of the act itself were, to put it lightly, _undignified_. The mechanics of it were vulgar and unseemly; everything about it appeared so incredibly... unsanitary.

When he thought of the act, _that_ act, his first association was with the women of indeterminate age who lingered on the docks and in the alleys. They, these so-called "fallen" women, addressed every man they met with terms of endearment, because in their line of business, no one used their proper Christian names.

When he was a young boy, he'd asked the orphanage minders about them, and been told off for asking, because he was too young to know such things, and anyway, it wasn't anything a person of any age should want to know about. Being a curious and intelligent child, he'd gone off on his own and read about them in the books he could scavenge at the Saturday market peddler booths and the local church's book collection. In the books, he'd discovered that those women were the cause of the "Dissolution of Moral Society" and a symptom of the "Decay of Modern Values". Further reading on what these symptoms were had educated him on the existence of what public health posters quite mildly called "V.D."

Young Tom Riddle, who hadn't wanted to touch the orphanage's milch goat, wanted even less to do with _that_.

Older Tom Riddle, who was better educated about these things, with a greater perspective than he'd had as a boy of six or seven who had never ventured past the city limits of London, found himself
conflicted.

Hermione wasn't that kind of girl. The words and labels other people used didn't apply to her.

He'd held Hermione's hand, he'd touched her knees, wound her hair between his fingers, and afterwards, the experience hadn't left him feeling tainted and unclean.

(It had left him... unsatisfied.)

Hermione was a part of his life, but a separate part; she was different—Special—and from their many years of knowing one another, he'd kept her distinct from all the other bits and pieces of his life experience. There were hundreds of witches and wizards at school with him, and of those he had his group of "friends", his circle of admirers and minions. And then he had Hermione, who was neither. He had his past Muggle life, the ignominious upbringing that he never talked about when he was at Hogwarts, that he made himself forget when he entered the Magical world—and he had Hermione, who was connected to it, but independent of it.

Why wouldn't she be different in every other aspect? He called her Friend in public, but she wasn't his friend the way everyone else used the word, not really. Why couldn't he call her Wife, say that word for the ears of other people, but signify the traditional definition of what a marriage meant?

Helpmeet.

If God Himself had decided that Man's life was incomplete without worthy companionship, then who was Tom Riddle to deny Him?

(To be perfectly truthful, Tom denied Him whenever it was convenient to do so. The commandment of Honour Thy Mother and Father couldn't very well be applied to orphans who'd never spoken to one parent, and only exchanged a sentence or two with the other, could it? Anyway, it was God who was responsible for Tom's unfortunate separation from mother and father, so it was ultimately His fault that Tom didn't care enough to respect them.)

Yes, he could permit that possibility. And wouldn't that solve all his problems, if he allowed the formation of that kind of relationship?

Once past a certain age, when boys and girls became men and women, society couldn't accept their being friends without assuming that there was something more between them. It was already happening; his meddling grandmother wasn't the last of it. His classmates and professors had made assumptions, Professor Slughorn the most obvious among them. Where once no one had thought anything of Tom sitting beside Hermione in their shared classes, now they did. They cared, they gossiped, and they forgot the fact that Tom and Hermione's shared desk had been reserved from the first term of First Year, outside of the few weeks in the beginning with that awkward disagreement they'd eventually resolved.

Tom, in First Year, had recognised that he'd been bestowed a Foil of his own, and he'd taken it in stride, a consequence of being Special. It was a sign, wasn't it?

Slowly, Tom began to countenance the prospect of a Mr. Hermione Granger whose presence he could tolerate on a daily basis.

He wouldn't be named Mr. Hermione Granger, obviously. That was a stupid name, a conceptual placeholder who now had no reason to exist.
She would be Hermione Riddle.

Now all he had to do was convince her that she wanted it too.
Chapter End Notes

This chapter was supposed to feature Tom's confrontation with his father, but balancing the set-ups took so long that some things had to be split up and rearranged. Tom's PoV will continue directly into the next chapter, which is meant to be read continuously. This one went past 9k words, and I decided that a ~20k chapter is way too long, but in the interest of posting an update without delay, here it is. I'm not super happy about the pacing, but it's better than before, which had too many things happening at once. This chapter gets emotional progression, while the next one will get the Riddle Senior subplot progression we've all been waiting for.

**Behold, the gold medallist of mental gymnastics: Tom Marvolo Riddle.**

— "V.D." is an period-accurate acronym for "Venereal Disease", or STI/STD's, as it was impolite to use the word "sex" back then. Before the introduction of penicillin and modern antibiotics, these diseases (along with others like tuberculosis, polio, and measles) were common and very dangerous to public health, resulting in wartime governments running shame campaigns to increase awareness. Propaganda posters of the era to illustrate.

This kind of upbringing is why I think Tom would consider most people around him to be dirty and inferior to him, reinforcing his distance from them, as well as his disdain for humanity. For this reason, I can't imagine Tom to be a bedhopping playboy, not to the extent that he is portrayed in fanfiction. I've also said in past Author Notes and chapter comments that I headcanon Tom Riddle as aromantic; even when he feels attachment to another person, it's far from romantic, but founded on emotional dependence and entitlement. Feel free to discuss or debate this characterisation.

**Genesis 2:18 (King James Version)**

*And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.*

— *Helpmeet or help meet* is the old-fashioned Biblical term for a partner, spouse, and companion.

In this fic, I write Tom as an atheist who is raised in a time period when people are culturally Christian, and it's the norm to say prayers at school, at the dinner table, and before bed. Tom doesn't do these things himself, but was forced to do it when he was younger, so he's familiar with Christian ideas and customs. Part of his motivation to study up on them was to debate adults who tried to make him go to church.

It should be said that if you want wholesome Christian values in your fanfiction, you won't find them in stories about baby Voldemort.
Destination

Chapter Notes

*Content warning: Implied rape and sexual assault, mild graphic violence.*

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#).

1944

Tom had known he was superior to the people around him from a very young age.

It was something that was as much a part of his identity as being Special and magical, or being British. Which wasn't something he thought of often, but he *did* consider Britain and the English language superior to any other in the globe; he respected the power and might that produced empires, and what modern empire could rival Britain's?

(He *did* make it clear that respect for the British empire and her imperial hegemony was different to respecting the monarch or the institution of the Crown. Anyway, there was only one crowned head Tom would ever respect... There was a bit of a delay with acquiring the crown in question, but that was a separate issue entirely. And no, that paper crown that he'd slipped between the pages of his diary as a bookmark didn't count.)

He was superior, but for the first time in his life, his inherent superiority was openly acknowledged by people who recognised themselves as a rank below him, or as his grandmother would have termed it, his *lessers*, a group of people who couldn't help being what they were, and were best treated with gentle, if corrective, authority. (Mary Riddle called this *moral guidance*, and an obligation of the upper classes; Hermione would have called it frank and categorical paternalism; Tom called it for what it was, which was unwelcome meddling.) This was different from the way his dorm mates treated him at Hogwarts: there, his superiority came of having established himself as more powerful, more capable and skilled than they were. They deferred to him because he'd taught them to; he'd earned it of them, and from them.

Respect garnered from Slytherin classmates or the readers of his articles—that was not the same deference that was given him—*due him*—for the status of his name and blood, which he had experienced upon arriving at the Riddle House. The former was cultivated. The latter was *expected*.

Here, Tom was a *Riddle*, and that meant something in the village of Hangleton.

Here, unlike Hogwarts, people touched their caps or ducked their heads in his presence. They called him *Sir*, and their being his elder did not diminish the fact that they considered Tom their better. If he was coming down the stairs while a maid with a basket of laundered pillowcases was going up, she stepped to the side and allowed him to pass, without his having to say a word—without her expecting that he drop the obligatory *Pardon me* and *Thank you* combination that was engrained into the psyche of every commuter on the London Underground.

It was a strange and almost heady experience. It was the kind of thing a man could get used to, and, once he did, find it enjoyable. And once he had become accustomed to it, he would find it hard to let
go of it, to ever contemplate the notion of going without; the dignity of Man would henceforth be prioritised below the comfort of The Man.

There was a word for what it was: Privilege.

Privilege was getting to ride in the back of Thomas Riddle's Rolls-Royce with Hermione, while Frank Bryce hitched up the wagon to drive Mrs. Willrow and the maids down the hill to the village church, because the petrol couldn't be spared for the likes of the servants. Privilege was having a cushioned bench reserved for his family, his surname carved in scrolling letters across the backrest.

The Christmas morning service from the Little Hangleton village parson was as boring as it had been in the chapels of London. Tom, who had inured himself years ago to dreary lectures about things he found neither useful or interesting, quickly arranged his expression into one of earnest attention. Beside him, Hermione listened with equal attentiveness, although that didn't stop her from nudging him with the point of her elbow if she caught him snorting when the parson said something he found particularly amusing.

"One should never fear he that might kill the body but cannot kill the soul," the parson recited from the pulpit.

The sermon had so far touched on the difficulties of the past years, but offered hope that Britain would prevail in the current war. There had been a moment of silence dedicated to the many local boys who had enlisted in the army, leaving their families behind—and some of them, permanently bereft. One of their number, recalled Tom upon hearing the sniffling of the maids sitting on the pew behind the Riddles, had been his father's valet.

"Rather, one should fear he who has the power to destroy both body and soul..."

It had been seven years since Tom had last sat for a church sermon, and in coming today, he had ascertained that he had not been missing anything in the intervening time. In fact, he was reminded why he'd hated going to church in the first place: the old ladies.

When he had lived at Wool's, the matrons herded the children to church once a week, not just to have Reverend Rivers add a bit of a spit-shine to their grubby souls, but to peddle the orphans in front of a congregation of prospective families who might like the look of one of them. That was what church was: a customer-base containing plenty of good Samaritans, Christian families who believed in the virtues of charity and goodwill. But there was a limiting factor to making the sale: the matriarchs of those families who wanted to ensure the quality of the children, picking and prodding at them the same way their spindly, arthritic fingers felt up the aubergines and rutabagas at the market.

This time, Tom wasn't paraded around and prodded like grocery produce—as if his grandmother would let any of the old ladies try, although some of them did eye him up like they were thinking about it.

His grandmother hovered by his side, introducing him to Mrs. Swindon, Mrs. Perrin-Andrewes, Mrs. Hutten, and Mrs. Branthwaite, ladies of local significance, which he could tell they were by their dainty, lace-trimmed gloves, fur stoles, and glossy pocketbooks.

"This is the boy, then, Mary?" they twittered to each other. "Oh, how darling. He looks just like—"

"Shhh, Bernadette!"
"Are we not meant to talk about—"

"No!"

"But—"

"Wait for them to leave!" one of the women hissed.

"My father didn't attend today, madam," said Tom helpfully. "If you were wondering."

This was one of the things Tom had learned to dislike about the tiny village. In Little Hangleton, one was allowed no privacy, everyone was acquainted with everyone else, whether they liked it or not, and the gossip circuit was a closed loop where decades-old news was recycled *ad infinitum*, because nothing else happened that was worth talking about in this quaint Yorkshire backwater.

"Oh, we weren't wondering about him," said a lady, Mrs. Swindon. "We're ever so pleased to meet you; Mary has just been impossible these last few months, after she got the news from London. In all my years, I'd never seen her so rattled. Why, we heard she had to rescue you right out of the poorhouse!"

Tom's grandmother spared her a brittle smile. "It was an orphanage, and a thoroughly respectable establishment, Edith, dear."

"And a respectable sixteen years, wasn't it?" put in Mrs. Perrin-Andrewes, tutting in disapproval. "I could never have let my Wallace out of my sight for that long; even seeing him off to school each September is a trial." She gave Mrs. Riddle a sidelong look. "I admire your fortitude, Mary. You've borne it rather well, all considered."

"It bears repeating that his mother was the cause of the whole quandary," said Mrs. Riddle stiffly. "I'd never have countenanced it—had I a choice in the matter."

"His mother!" gasped Mrs. Bernadette Hutten, her gloved hand rising up to her mouth. "Is it true that she—"

"She has passed from this world, for better or worse," said Mrs. Riddle, cutting her off. "May God rest her soul."

"*Amen,*" said all the women in unison.

"Pardon me for intruding," said Tom. "But did you know my mother?"

He could feel the clawed fingernails of his grandmother's hand digging into his forearm, but he ignored it.

"Oh, darling, did *we* know her?" said Mrs. Branthwaite. "*Everyone* knew her. She and her family... Well, I'm sure you've heard tell of it, but they certainly were the funniest sort of people in the whole of the dales."

"I hear the son still wanders about the woods doing who knows what," Mrs. Swindon volunteered, fanning herself with her hymn book. "I've told our Irving not to take his hounds past the east ridge; the last time they went out there, his spaniel bitch died!"
"You are such a prima donna, Beryl," snapped Mrs. Perrin-Andrewes. "She was bitten by a snake, not eaten by the tramp's son."

Mrs. Riddle cleared her throat. "I'm sure Thomas has brought the motor around to the front by now. Have a happy Christmas, everyone."

Seizing Tom by the elbow, she steered him away from the ladies and out of the front door of the church, where the Rolls-Royce was gliding majestically up the snow-dusted path up to the front steps of the church. He could see Hermione through the windshield, sitting in the front passenger seat and looking down at the dashboard, but when she saw Tom and his grandmother at the top of the steps, she waved at them.

"You oughtn't to listen to them, darling," said Mrs. Riddle, brushing a sprinkling of snow off Tom's shoulder. "I don't imagine that I shall ever forgive your mother for what she did to you. Leaving you in London—not a word to anyone—oh, Tommy, dear—" She squeezed his arm. "We would have come for you had we known. But you've done nothing wrong, nothing at all. It's not your fault she comes from such..."

She sighed, falling silent for a moment or two. "You should know that her lack of respectability is no reflection on you. You're a Riddle, of the North Riding Riddles, and those harpies would do well to be reminded of that. But once they have, no one will ever forget."

On the drive back to the Riddle House, his grandmother pointed out the gravestones behind the churchyard, the Little Hangleton cemetery. It was the place where his ancestors had been interred for the last two-and-a-half centuries, at the foot of the hill overlooked by the great house.

"You were born in the south, Tom—nothing we can do about that—but we'll make a northern lad of you yet, won't we?" said Tom's grandfather, chuckling. "The last thirty years, half our neighbours have sold off and moved to the city. Couldn't keep up the houses; too much work, not enough money. But we Riddles have stayed right here in the valley. This is our home, and one day, it'll be yours. Won't just be by law, or name." He pounded the steering wheel with a fist. "It's in our blood and bones."

With a faint sense of unease, Tom catalogued the tone of their words and associated mannerisms—not the words themselves—to fall under the definition of affection.

Defference was something he was familiar with; he'd learned the meaning of servility in the past week. Envy was something of which he had intimate knowledge, dissecting the differences between himself and everyone outside the gates of the orphanage and finding that he came up short. In recent years, it was what other people felt upon seeing him, rather than the other way around. And spite was a constant in his life, as ubiquitous to his everyday experience as air and magic.

Affection—this form of it—was tremendously alien.

It was different to admiration, which he'd basked in at the Hogwarts Duelling Club whenever he débuted a new spell that cleared through the ranks until he had, once again, risen to first. It wasn't the unrequited longing of the Third Year girls who peeked at him over their magazines at the breakfast table, trying to keep their staring from being too obvious. Their emotions were simplistic and shallow, not so much directed at him, but externalised symptoms of someone else's lack of personal fulfillment.
This was different. It was somehow... less hollow.

The closest comparison he could draw was how he'd felt in the Grangers' house in the summer before Fourth Year, curled up with Hermione on the sitting room sofa after dinner, the murmur of the wireless in the background, and the minted raspberry coulis from Mrs. Granger's dessert of baked apple meringue lingering on his tongue, tart and fresh. He'd been warm, well-fed, and he'd just gotten his new school textbooks; in that moment of contentment, he'd thought that the world, war aside, could be a pleasant place. Once certain conditions had been met, naturally.

It wasn't the same thing as he was feeling now, with the Riddles, but nevertheless, it was strange. Strange and troubling.

He was still thinking of it by the time the motorcar had chugged its way up the hill and into the garage. Thomas and Mary invited him inside for tea and chocolate as a prelude to their Christmas luncheon, but Tom demurred. After the service, the fussy old ladies, the impending Christmas festivities, and the return of his grandmother's camera—if that thing could fit in her handbag, she'd have carried it everywhere and taken it to church—he wanted some time to himself.

The Riddles' garage (two motorcars, a carriage draped in white dropcloths, and an empty space where Bryce had taken the wagon), opened out into a paved courtyard behind the house. The tradesman's entrance was marked out on a sign by the kitchen, adjacent to the small awning that sheltered the household dustbins and vegetable scrap, the latter of which was carted out twice a week and fed to the tenants' pigs.

With the Riddles and Hermione returned to the house and the servants having their half-day off to fraternise with the villagers, the courtyard was quiet; the clump-clump of his feet on the snowy flags seemed to echo off the high stone walls, as if there were two or three people marching in step, instead of merely one. The only other sound that broke the stillness was the whinny of a horse from the opposite side of the yard. The stables.

Tom had never seen the stables. In fact, his only experience with them was Old Ab's goat shed, which had been converted from stables built in the old days when winged horses were a common method of magical travel. Since then, improvements in enchanting had made broomsticks and Floo fireplaces a much faster alternative, on top of being quieter and less trouble to store. These days, the only people who still kept horses were wealthy estate holders like the Malfoys, who used them for sport and entertainment, and not for transport.

(Reading about them in the Care of Magical Creatures textbook had made Tom curious about them—it was said that magical horses, Threshals in particular, were more intelligent than the wingless Muggle breeds, in the same fashion that wizard-bred owls were cleverer than wild owls. He wondered what the inside of their minds looked like, compared to the intelligence of an Acromantula. Tom's own Acromantula was the brightest of all the animals he'd studied, but it wasn't a mammal; he'd found that it was possible for him to interpret only a tiny fraction of its sensory perceptions.)

He supposed that similar economics applied to the Muggle world. The London broadcasters had urged people to euthanise their pets as a merciful alternative to leaving them at home during air raid evacuations—and it was sensible, too, as pets weren't allotted a ration and there was only so much meat to go around for the human members of a family. Owning hobby animals was now an immense luxury, although he had his doubts that the Riddles would ever indulge proletarian sensibilities in the name of the war effort, and let their horses pull a plough or be butchered for meat.
The inside of the stable was eerily familiar, a long row of stables opposite a wall of leatherware and tack hung on pegs, and a big pile of baled hay and burlap sacks at the far wall, two pitchforks buried in the stack, tines down. Tom realised that he'd seen the same rafters and haylofts in one of the paintings outside his father's bedroom. The wooden structures in the painting were golden and bright, a summer scene with a horse (Prince Selim) peeking its head out of the top of the half-door. In reality, however, the wood was greyed with age, and the light, where it filtered in through doors closed to keep out the snow, was thin and feeble. The stables themselves were empty too, with only one horse in residence, whose name on the feed-bin proclaimed it to be named "Wellesley".

Wellesley, a grey horse with a black mane, came over and dangled its nose out of its stall at Tom's approach, snuffling at his upraised hand. Tom felt the horse's bristly whiskers scrape against his open palm, and though he recoiled internally at the sensation—in the year he'd had the Acromantula, he'd never once touched it with his bare hands—he kept his hand steady and guided the horse's muzzle down until he could look it in the eye.

The confirmation came within the first minute or so: Muggle horses were rather dull creatures. The horse's eyes were spaced so far apart that it had trouble keeping the figure standing in front of it in focus; to Wellesley, Tom smelled and looked about the same as its regular handler, and with the poor depth-of-field and lack of colour vision, it couldn't see any reason to panic or kick the doors and walls of its stall, its standard approach to expressing disapproval. Or boredom. Or anything else, really. Wellesley, for the limited thinking that a horse was capable of, thought it was fun to kick the stall walls, because that drew the attention of the handler and often resulted in being moved to a new stall closer to the tasty haystack.

It wasn't much different than what Old Ab's goats were like: the horse was fed, watered, walked, and cleaned on a daily basis. There wasn't as much herd interaction as the Hogsmeade goats, which was a clan of female milch animals and a single stud billy. The other horses in the stables were female, and Wellesley was a castrated male—Tom's discovery of this detail made him shudder. The Acromantula's being so different from mammal biology was a point in its favour. The pain it felt never fully translated to Tom's senses when he cast *Crucio* while observing its mind; sympathetic pain was only an echo brushed off in the name of scientific initiative.

In the midst of his decision to rank domesticated working beasts at the bottom of his list of interesting specimens, Wellesley's thought patterns began to shift, from a restive drowse to sudden alertness. Its ears pricked up and it lifted its muzzle from Tom's hand, forelegs drumming against the inside of the stable door.

A distant bark echoed off the rafters. Wellesley whinnied. 

*Attentiveness*, the flavour of Wellesley's instinctive response, anticipation with no tinge of concern or alarm.

Tom withdrew his explorations from the horse's mind, wincing at the return of his binocular vision, and the colour that burst like magnesium flares across his sight, almost overwhelming him with the rush of sensation, his eyes all at once discerning the shadow of blue in the snow by the stable door, the threads of brown striation in the faded wooden struts that held up the roof, the pink skin beneath the stiff grey hair at Wellesley's lip and nostrils. He shut his eyes, pressing his hand—not the one that had touched the horse—over his eyes, until he was sure he'd acclimated himself to being in his own body.

He had just about sorted himself out when he heard the *hush-hush* of hay stalks swept off the
ground, and the clop of iron-shod hooves striking the floor.

A dog, slender and long-legged, bounded past the corner of the stable, skidding across spilt hay, its
toenails clicking. It hesitated, backing away from Tom, ears lowered, a low growl rumbling from its
chest.

Tom straightened up and eyed it warily, sliding a hand into his coat pocket for his wand.

Slowly, he drew the wand out, keeping his gaze on the dog, picking out the details of its
appearance: a smooth-furred coat of white and splotched brown, a thin, whip-like tail, a sloped
back. It wore a leather collar with a gold-plated ring buckle around its neck. Not a stray dog, then,
which would be starved and mangy this deep into winter. This was a well-kept pet.

The tap of hooves diverted his attention, as a handsome bay-coloured horse turned the corner, tossing
its head.

Tom noticed the man on its back a second later.

Of course it would be him: Tom Riddle, the Elder. His blighted father.

The man noticed him in turn, gloved fingers pulling on the horse's reins in a signal to halt. His
features shifted from one of repose, then one of astonishment, and finally to abject displeasure, his
mouth tilting down and his nose lifting up as if his horse had just dropped a sloppy mound of poo
right on top of his polished jackboots.

The horse shifted from foot to foot, as if sensing the tension in its rider's bearing. Its foreleg pawed at
the ground. The dog trotted over to the horse without turning its back on Tom, still growling.

"What are you doing here?" said Tom's father curtly, looking down at him from the horse's broad
back.

"I live here," replied Tom, scowling. "I don't need a reason to go where I like."

"You live here," said the other Tom, nostrils flaring—in stark resemblance to Mary Riddle. "But this
is my house."

Tom's fingers tightened over the handle of his wand.

"Wh-what's that?" asked the other Tom, his gaze darting down to Tom's hand. "No! Don't you dare
point that thing at me—"

One of his hands dropped from the reins, going to his hip, and suddenly Tom found himself staring
up at the gleaming muzzle of a revolver.

Tom raised his yew wand. A strange sensation swelled in his chest, as if someone had put him under
the vascular constriction spell; he could hear his heartbeat thundering in his ears, and his muscles
tensed as they did when he stood on the duelling platform and Merrythought was counting down
from three; he could scarcely draw breath—he felt his vision narrowing to a small circle of focus: the
gun pointed at his face, and the man pointing it, pale and white-lipped in pure, reciprocated terror.

"You're just the same as she was," the man breathed, sweat glistening on his forehead, "I knew it—
there wasn't a doubt in my mind. You've taken Mother and Father in; they refuse to hear a word
against you. But I, I won't be taken in—not again, never again!"

"What are you talking about?" snapped Tom, stepping sideways and finding the barrel of his father's revolver following his movements.

"You know what you are!" shouted Tom's father, and his knee jerked, urging the horse to retreat, to put distance between its rider and Tom Riddle. "You can't hide it, not from me!"

Tom tried to make eye contact with his father, but the man's eyes were wild and rolling in panic; the horse, too, was spooked by the anxious atmosphere, fidgeting from foot to foot and pulling at its bridle, but Tom the Elder maintained his seat with a firm grip of the knee and a tight hand on the reins.

He got only glimpses of the man's thoughts, the briefest of vignettes, colour and shadow and impression blurring at the edges into an incomprehensible jumble of noise.

A dirt path on a summer day, chirping birds, a wavering green canopy casting cool shadows in the afternoon heat. The warmth of a horse's barrel between his legs, a glass of water refreshing him as he dabbed moisture off his brow with a monogrammed kerchief.

A woman's touch, soft arms supporting his weight as he wobbled on the path, watching his sorrel stallion trot merrily off and away, tail flicking to ward off flies, reins dangling loose over the sweat-foamed withers.

A spoon pressed against his mouth, ladling lukewarm soup past his chapped lips. The morning light blinded him, lifting a darkness that had fallen over his senses; it revived faculty and memory; he raised his hand to the spoon, adamant on feeding himself, and the light glinted off a golden band encircling the fourth finger of his left hand...

"Stop it!" roared Tom's father, and the shout roused his horse, which reared and kicked until it was brought back under control, dancing in circles on the stable floor. The dog barked; the gun trembled.

Tom took his chance.

"Expelliarmus!" he cried, his left hand—not his wand hand—raised. Intent, willpower, visualisation —

The gun flew out of his father's hand, flying off behind him, ten feet, twenty feet, until it buried itself in a pile of feed sacks.

His father gave a wordless shout, and for a second, they stared at each other, father and son, two empty hands lifted in the air, but Tom still had his wand—his fingers curled around it, his shoulder twitched, and then, without any conscious thought, the white stick of yew levered itself up, up, up—

Tom the Elder wheeled his horse about, spurring it into a great leap that glanced against a stack of hay bales, toppling them over. The dog followed, howling; it dived into the feed sacks and retrieved its master's gun, while Wellesley brayed in distress, kicking against the wooden stable walls, adding a rousing counterpoint to the headache that beat with ferocious enthusiasm from the inside of Tom's skull.

Tom lowered his wand.
For a few minutes, he stood in the middle of the stable floor, grasping for the black sky that appeared so easily before him when he wanted to drone out Dumbledore's amiable anecdotes and twinkling eyes. His heart quietened as he seized control of his emotions, his thoughts, and his temper.

He'd just performed magic in front of a Muggle. The official consequences didn't bother him so much as what it meant to have lost his secret advantage. Yes, he'd done it because who wanted a gun pointed at their face? But in doing so, he'd revealed his hand; he'd broken what Muggles understood to be the natural rules of the universe. He hadn't wanted Hermione to help Frank Bryce—their worlds were meant to be separated for good reason—and now that the illusion had been demolished in front of his father's eyes, Tom felt as if he were losing control of the situation.

His father would have to be Obliviated, as soon as possible. Muggles, and that word was articulated in Tom's mind with disdain, didn't understand magic, or what it meant to be Special. It wouldn't do them any good if he and Hermione were outed as unnatural; he didn't pay much attention to Professor Binns, but he knew enough of magical history to comprehend that the Statute was upheld for a purpose.

But... something stayed his hand, made him hesitate to chase his father down immediately. Whatever did the man mean by his words?

You know what you are!

His father had reacted with anger and fear at seeing Tom's wand.

Not confusion or puzzlement, or even bemused interest.

You're the same as she was.

A few more minutes passed.

Tom pocketed his wand, brushing the hay off his coat and trousers.

No owls appeared in the sky; no message arrived from the Ministry, warning him for unlawful use of underage magic.

When he returned to the house, his grandmother had set out a platter of mince pies and iced biscuits, an accompaniment to the hot tea and creamy cocoa.

Six days left, thought Tom, joining Hermione on the sofa and listening to her prattle on about a Christmas charity drive for the local children. Then I'll go and find out what he meant, and no one will be able to stop me.

Midnight in the Riddle House was marked by the chiming and clanging of dozens of mantel clocks, carriage clocks, and longcase pendulum clocks. The noise, annoying as it was on a regular day,
concealed the pad of Tom's footsteps as he tiptoed out of his room, closing the door behind him. His wand tightly gripped in his right hand, he made his way to the South Wing, holding his Disillusionment Charm steady, even as he felt his fingers twitching in anticipation.

Tom Marvolo Riddle was officially seventeen years old.

There were no rainbow sparklers to mark the occasion. An engraved pocket watch had not been presented to him on the hour of ascending to his majority. No owls would arrive to his breakfast table, bearing an iced cake and a bottle of wine or firewhisky that his family had put away at his birth, just for this occasion; he had seen several classmates receive such birthday gifts earlier on in the year, and had been offered his share of cake slices in the Slytherin Common Room.

Not that any of it mattered to Tom.

What really mattered was that magic and independence, the two things he valued above almost everything else, were now his to exercise at his own discretion. No Ministry intervention, no threats of expulsion, no Dumbledore to look at him in pre-emptive disapproval down his crooked nose.

The lock on his father's door unlocked with a silent tap of his wand.

The drapes, like the last time he'd seen them, were closed, but the room wasn't dark. The lights were on, the wireless over the fireplace—the interior architectural arrangement an exact mirror of his own room—was switched on, tuned to an orchestration of baroque string, the filler music played in the late night and early hours when there was no proper programming on the broadcast schedule.

Tom turned his gaze to the bed. Bundled under the covers was a formless lump, one hand sticking out from beneath the sheet. On the nightstand was an empty glass and a dark brown bottle, its paper label proclaiming it to be 'Nerve Tonic — relieves exhaustion, for a sound and restful sleep.' By the bottle was a spoon, with a liquid of syrup-like consistency dribbling from the bowl and beading on the surface of the table.

He stepped toward the lump under the blankets, wand raised.

The floorboards squeaked; the lump shifted. The blankets stirred and produced a low groan.

"Who's there?" groaned the man, his voice rough with sleep. "Mother? Is that you?"

Tom flicked his wand and cast a silent spell.

Stupefy!

The blankets went still.

Shuffling forward cautiously, Tom approached the bed, casting a Silencing Charm on it, and for good measure, on the squeaky floorboards. On the bed, his father lay slack-jawed in unconsciousness, waves of dark hair tumbling over the pillow. For a moment, Tom stared down at the other Tom, noting their similarities—and their differences.

Tom's superioriy to the other children at Wool's had been apparent from early childhood. He grew straight and tall—thin for his height, but that couldn't be helped—while the other children were short, scrawny, or bow-legged. His teeth came in without crooked angles or gaps; his voice deepened without warbling and his skin remained clear and smooth, untouched by pockmark and blemish. In
the last few years, his popularity amongst his fellow students had grown, and he regularly fended off invitations to group projects or outings in Hogsmeade. The boys of the Duelling Club might have admired his wandwork, but the girls of Hogwarts admired him for his appearance; he found it immensely shallow of them, but he couldn't discount their usefulness when it came to seeing who had been lent supplementary textbooks for an independent project, from a professor's private collection.

Tom supposed he ought to be thankful to his father, a man slumped gracelessly and drooling over his pillowcase, for these blessings.

Despite being a few years from forty, Tom Riddle Senior had aged well. He had the same clear skin, sun-darkened over the cheeks and the bridge of his nose, fine wrinkles tracing the corners of his eyes and the sides of his mouth, but the lines weren't deep and his flesh hadn't sagged like that of the working men and women of South London. Still as striking as a picture star: there was no wonder that the local ladies of Hangleton thought of him as the finest man in the valley.

Leaning over the bed, Tom peeled back the man's eyelids with his left hand, watching for any sort of response. The eyeballs flickered back and forth in reflex, but the man himself remained still and unseeing, his chest rising and falling in steady rhythm.

Gusts of sour breath wafted over him. Tom winced, bending over his father's face. He inhaled slowly, relaxing his grip on his wand, allowing the thumping beat of his heart to slow and settle to an even pace; his body relaxed. His thoughts wandered, drifted, and strayed from an observance of his own perceptions and into the realm of something less familiar...

By increment, he was drawn into the misty dreamscape of his father's mind, the memories sweeping him up with the warmth of high summer and the merry jingle of riding tack.

The new stallion, Cirrus, was finally broken to harness, chestnut coat lathered with sweat from taking the packed dirt trails of the valley at a hard gallop. It was an exhilarating ride; at one sharp corner, Tom's heel had slipped the stirrup, but in the end he'd kept his seat and let the horse have his head until he'd bled off all his energy, and now—together—they took the trail at a sedate pace, both of them panting and glistening with sweat.

The girl was bent over the weeds in her family's garden. Not much to look at: where the fashion for the modern lady was sleek finger-waves and a Riviera suntan, this girl was pale and mottled of skin, her dark hair in priggish braids pinned to the back of her head. Her clothing was grey and shapeless, more like a charwoman's shift than a young lady's dress, the only concession to femininity in the glint of a gold chain around her throat. Otherwise, there was nothing about her to tempt Tom into giving her a second glance, not like Cecilia Banbury—now, that was a woman!

Tom remembered having seen the girl around in the village now and again, but she didn't live there, not as one of their tenants. She was a member of that queer freeholder family who lived on the far edge of the dale, ne'er-do-wells who had caused trouble on more than one occasion when they got roaring drunk and set off fireworks in the woods.

Cirrus jerked the reins and came to a stop; Tom only just held on to them, nudging with his knees to prompt the horse into continuing down the path.
Tom clucked his tongue, leaning forward to press his weight on Cirrus’ withers. Cirrus stamped his feet and pulled at the bit, but refused to move.

The girl got to her feet, brushing the dirt off her apron and tucking her tools into the front pocket. The wooden handles clacked together as she scurried over to Tom and Cirrus.

"D'you need any assistance?" she asked, and like the other girls who lived in the village, she couldn't stop herself from staring at him, and Tom felt his breath catch when he saw her strange dark eyes aligning in his direction, first one, then the other.

She must have noticed his expression, for her face fell in disappointment.

"No, thank you; I'll have him moving in a minute," said Tom, tearing his gaze away; it would be appalling for anyone to catch him looking at the daughter of the local tramp, even if it was out of profound horror. "He's just a tad difficult—new to harness, you see. Have a good day... er, Miss."

He needed to get Cirrus turned around, then he could get the horse back in the stable where the groom could cool him down. After that, Tom could go for a bath himself, sponge off the sweat, and get himself ready for a dinner with Cecilia, the prettiest girl in Great Hangleton.

The tramp's daughter hadn't stopped staring at him. It was really getting uncomfortable, but he supposed it would be more uncomfortable to be stuck with that face on a permanent basis.

Her plain features hardened by the slightest degree.

His—their—memories began to blur together after that, each scene muddled into the next, and chasing them was like catching snowflakes on his tongue in the winter—he saw the briefest glimpse and then it was gone, melted away on contact and giving way to great stretches of darkness. The darkness was complete; it was muted and soft and strangely devoid of sensation, like a dream, a drunken reverie, but it was one in which he was submerged with no means of exit. Occasional pinpricks of light broke the darkness, small clues that reminded him that he was a real person, and not a figure created by his own scrambled imagination.

His name. Tom Riddle.

His home. The Riddle House, Hangleton, Yorkshire.

There were moments in time—although time had become a vague concept to him; he registered the light and dark of a passing day, and the changing of the seasons in the ambient temperature, but he didn't dwell on it—rare moments in time where he rose up from the deep, ascending to the surface like a breaching whale. These were the moments when he possessed the greatest awareness of his own self, at the notion that there was a self, and that self was named Tom Riddle.

Tom Riddle was a person.

Tom Riddle loved horses.

Tom Riddle loved the scent of sweet clover hay, beeswax saddle soap, and the sharp menthol burst from a freshly uncorked bottle of horse liniment.

Most of all, Tom Riddle loved Merope Gaunt.
That last one seemed strange to Tom Riddle, who was sure that he didn't like Merope Gaunt, the village tramp's daughter, crooked eyes and crooked teeth and a crooked little stick that she pointed right at his forehead—

Tom Riddle loved Merope Gaunt.

There was nothing in the world that he loved more than Merope Gaunt.

Merope Gaunt was the light of his life. She was better looking than Cecilia Banbury; she was a better cook than Mrs. Willrow; she was better company for a ride in the dark than any of the coursers in the family stable.

Yes, Merope Gaunt was the centre of his existence.

There was no Tom Riddle without Merope Gaunt.

There was no Tom Riddle—

No Tom Riddle—

Only darkness—

Tom clawed at the darkness, resisting its power, struggling against it as it smothered him with his own weakness. He had spent so long immersed that he'd begun to hate the deadened sensation, the impotency of his body, the hermetic silence enclosing his mind, stifling him even as he screamed and railed at his own inexorable helplessness.

His mouth moved to cry out, and a low moan slipped out through his convulsing vocal chords.

The darkness began to recede.

A warm tickling feeling curled around his toes. That was strange—it felt warm and wet, and then... hairy?

Tom felt himself returning to his own body, and as he was thinking of the growing itch at his foot, he was struck by an eruption of pain, sharp and sudden and eye-watering, as if someone had just stabbed him in the ankle with a butter knife.

The darkness dissipated.

When his vision returned, he saw Merope's eyes staring down at him. Dark eyes, brown as beetle shells, uncannily penetrative. For some reason, those eyes were set in a reflection of his own face.

Was this a dream? He couldn't tell.

He reached under his pillow, feeling for the cool metal barrel, the six-chambered cylinder.

It was there.

It was a clear confirmation to the reality of his situation.
Tom tore his way out of his father's mind, not caring to be gentle about it. The images scrambled together as Tom's consciousness fell back into his own body.

His wand hand trembled, but not out of anticipation, but disgust. Stomach-churning disgust, visceral revulsion, sickened astonishment.

His skin felt hot and feverish; the combination of his revulsion, the memories in which he was the subject—the participant—the headache that came of tearing through another's distant recollection without regard for delicacy, and spending too long immersed while his own body was relegated to an empty shell, awaiting his return—all of it converging at once almost made him retch onto the Oriental carpet.

How much of it was a dream?

He had rarely practised his talents on unconscious subjects. When he used the Acromantula for his experimentation, he'd cast a Full Body-Bind before looking into its eyes—and it wasn't an issue, because spiders had no eyelids. Here, he had Stunned his father into unconsciousness instead of binding him. Binding him would have stiffened his body to the point that his eyelids would be stuck shut, and then there would be no way to maintain eye contact. With the Stunner, the body remained pliable, manoeuvrable. The mind, however, lapsed into the subconscious, and while he avoided having to deal with a constant, bewildering influx of new information, memories in this state lost their clarity of organisation, their sense of internal chronology.

But that had no effect on the vividness or verisimilitude of the memories. As he had peered into his father's mind, the man's consciousness began to overlay his, until their two minds became indistinguishable, and he felt each pulse of his father's heart thudding in his own chest.

His head still swam, making sense of the memories, detaching himself from the sensation of being the first-hand observer. This was the first time he'd explored so deeply into a human mind, and it was different from a spider's tactile perception, or even a horse, whose limited consciousness revolved around its basic needs and its primitive social instincts.

But there was one thing that he latched onto immediately:

His mother, the dark-eyed woman in the memory, was none other than a witch.

An incompetent witch at that, snaring his father through magic and potions, then Obliviating him multiple times when he'd tried to reject her advances. They were shoddy, amateur Obliviations that repressed the conscious mind but left the subconscious mostly intact: the memories had returned in the form of the dreams, and leaked into the waking consciousness upon encountering familiar, recognisable stimuli.

The mind-based magic had lacked delicacy and skill; even in the memories, he had seen the witch's—Merope's—wand movements and incantations lacking conviction. In the Healing textbooks he'd read, it was said that fumbled memory alteration—or even too many Obliviations in too short a time—risked long-term damage and personality alteration.
A moan issued from the crumpled blankets.

"M-Merope..."

Tom blinked, his vision still bleary, and focused on the man stirring on the bed.

Their eyes met.

Tom lifted his wand. Although his mind still felt as if it was swimming in treacle, he began the incantation for a Full Body-Bind, as it appeared his Stunner had worn off rather quickly.

"Petrificus..."

"Nooo," groaned Tom's father, his eyes bloodshot, trying to push himself upright.

"...Tota—"

Before Tom could finish the incantation, a large shape rocketed out from under the blanket, barking madly.

Like being hit by a Knockback Jinx from the far end of the duelling platform, it pummelled into his chest and then he was driven down to the floor, his wand clattering out of his hand.

The air was driven out of his lungs; Tom was pinned to the floor, dazed and unable to draw breath, unable to call out for help.

The pain came after—first, the sharp pain of his chest, a heavy weight pressing down on him. Then, the dull throb at the back of his head where he'd smacked it on the carpet.

Pushing the pain aside, he made an attempt to lift his arm, and with great effort, he reached for his wand, which had landed a few feet away. But before he could grab it, the weight on his chest gave a rumbling growl.

That stupid dog.

His eyes narrowed in concentration—continuing to ignore the pain for later, later, anything but the present—forming the visualisation, he thought the incantation: Accio.

The wand hurtled into his open palm just as the dog leaped for it and grabbed on to the other end, teeth scratching against the polished yew, pulling it away from him, like a game of Fetch turned into a Tug-of-War.

Without second thought, without consideration about performing magic in front of a Muggle witness, or anything else but the thought of getting himself out of the current situation, Tom acted in his own defense.

Diffindo!

Blood sprayed in a broad arc, hot droplets falling against his face and the collar of his pyjama shirt, bitterly metallic against his open lips, a rain of red spattering over the floor. The body of the dog slid off the end of his wand, its brown and white coat squelching on the soaked carpet.
Distantly, Tom watched as his left hand rose up to swab the blood out of his eyes, and then his right hand lifted the bloodied wand, like peppermint stripes of red on white—

*Crack!*

Once again, Tom was shoved back down onto the floor, and this time, the pain of it was worse than the last. It was merciless—it was *excruciating*—it radiated from his hip in a nexus of heat, the worst pain he’d ever experienced in his life; he imagined himself to be not a man, not a human, but a vessel for this all-consuming pain, so intense that it stripped him of awareness for everything but the heights of purest agony. Searing waves tore up through his nerves and shuddered beneath his flesh; his spine bowed in reflex, his body curving and quivering and gasping for breath, choking for air as blood dried tacky on his cheeks and foamed pink on his lips and chin.

Tom Riddle Senior raised his handgun and pulled the trigger.

Tom gripped his wand and closed his eyes.

*P-protego—*

In a delirium of pain, he imagined himself pressing his nose against his bedroom window at Wool’s, watching a storm that had swirled in from the North Sea, heavy black clouds hovering over the city like the fist of a sky god, crackling with lightning. He had seen hail rattle against the windowpanes, chunks of ice fallen from miles up, smashing on the glass, but he himself remained safe and warm on the other side—

*Crack!*

Five shots were deflected by Tom's non-verbal Shield Charm, and then the cylinder spun empty.

Biting his tongue—his ears rang with the echo of gunfire and his pelvis must be shattered; he’d tried to roll himself over and felt the unsettling sensation of something shifting inside—Tom murmured one last spell, *Imperio*. With that, his father fell back onto the bed, tossing the gun aside, forced into a deep sleep that would repress recent memory and blur them into dream, the most Tom could do when he couldn’t summon up the mental direction for a thorough Obliviation. Immobilisation would do for the moment. He didn’t know how long the spell would last, cast in such a half-hearted way, but this would have to be enough for now.

He drew a shallow, rattling breath, the pain immured in a box in the back of his mind, guarded by empty space and black velvet and sheer force of will.

*Charms.*

He needed to cast several charms, to tide him over until he got access to a Healer or Mediwizard.

Charms were the easiest, requiring precision and focus over outright magical power. He cast them, mumbling the words through his sticky lips. Cooling Charm to numb the heat. Featherweight charm, Levitation, then a charm to siphon and scour and a Drying Charm to clean himself up. Not as good as a proper bath, but it would keep him from leaking a trail of blood onto the floor and down the hall. Sticking Charm to press a scrap of fabric from his trouser leg over his broken hip, holding down the pressure and stemming the blood.

He was shivering by the time he’d cast the charm to reduce his heart rate, arm twisted at an awkward
angle to point the tip of his wand to his chest and form the pattern, the same one he'd used on Nott in the dorm bathroom a year ago.

Somehow—likely a monumental exercise of willpower—Tom dragged himself to his feet and half-stumbled, half-floated himself to the door, leaning on the walls every few metres to catch his breath.

*One step. Then one step more. One more; he could do it.*

He repeated those words to himself, over and over, drowning out the shooting bursts of pain that made each step an agony.

Soon—or not so soon; he hadn't been paying attention to the chiming of the clocks—he left the South Wing, passed the atrium, still decorated with spruce sprigs and tinsel garlands from Christmas, and entered the North Wing of the house, which contained his own room.

His room—and Hermione's.

*Hermione.*

Her name became his new mantra. His new goal.

A destination.

When he arrived to her door—*finally*—he smacked his open palm against it, once, twice—

The door opened. Hermione stood in the doorway in her nightgown, yawning and rubbing her eyes.

"Tom, what are you—"

Tom swayed against the door frame. "Pelvis broken. Losing blood. Need Healer."

Hermione guided him to her bed, and he lay on her pillows, absorbing her scent as she fluttered around him, tossing warmed blankets over his body, shoving a cushion under his legs to elevate the wound, bombarding him with questions that he couldn't be bothered to answer.

"Tom? I've sent for help; it'll take a few minutes... What happened to you? Do you want anything to drink? Tom..."

He closed his eyes—

Hermione slapped his cheek.

"Don't go to sleep!" she scolded him. "You have to stay awake."

"I'm fine," Tom murmured. "Just resting my eyes. You'll fix me up soon; I trust you."

"I—" Hermione began, but then there was a strange *pop* from behind her, as if someone had just uncorked a bottle of champagne. Well, why shouldn't they? It was *his* birthday.

Tom couldn't lift up his body or even turn his head to look. Not that he wanted to. The charm that lowered his heart rate—reducing the blood loss—decreased the oxygen circulation of his body and drew a veil over his thoughts, dulled his usual acuity and perception. He found himself wondering if
this was how Avery or Mulciber felt on a regular day.

She whirled around, then he heard her say, "Finally! Come on, we have to take him to St. Mungo's. You've been there before, haven't you? Amity, that's your name, isn't it?"

A familiar voice said, "She can't speak. Father bound her with a silencing collar to protect our family secrets." Then, adding in a muttered tone, "And he thinks elf-speak is annoying to listen to."

"How... how awful!" Hermione cried. "B—but I suppose it means she can't go and report this to your father, can she? And she can take us to the hospital? Hopefully someone there can treat this kind of wound."

There was a rattle of stoneware, and then the other voice said, "She says yes. Here, you ought to put this poultice on him to hold him over for the moment."

Something cold was poured over Tom's burning hip, rendering the area gratefully numb. He sighed and turned his face into the pillow, breaths coming a little easier.

"Thank you," said Hermione.

"I'm not doing it for free, Granger. There's a cost to this."

"I can pay," Hermione said quickly. "I don't have the galleons now, but if you take me to Gringotts in the morning, I can exchange them—"

"Not that kind of cost." There was a pause. "He'll owe me a life debt."

Hermione didn't reply.

"You don't know what they are, do you?" said the voice. "Huh. Well, we can settle that after. Take his wand and hold his arms down. Apparition isn't the most comfortable thing with this many people. Come, Amity, take us to St. Mungo's."

The blankets were removed, and Hermione leaned over him, her curly hair tickling his nostrils.

"Mmm, Hermione," said Tom.

"Shh," she whispered, and her hands closed around his wrists, her palms warm against his chilled skin. "Ready?"

"Ready," said the other voice.

"Hold on, Tom. We'll have you back to your usual self in no time."

"To our eternal regret—" the other person said, but Tom heard no more as he was, without warning, thrown out of the bed and onto a cold tiled floor, which would have hurt had Hermione's arms not held him and broken his fall before his hip touched the ground.

Hermione lowered him down, then brushed his hair out of his eyes, leaning in close. She pressed her cheek against his sweaty forehead.

"Mrs. Riddle will be upset if you miss the birthday party," she sighed into his ear.
Tom closed his eyes, a thin smile cracking the crust of dried blood on his cheek. "Then let her eat cake."

"Insufferable," remarked the other speaker in a snide voice.

"Oh, shut up," said Hermione, holding Tom tighter in her arms.
He pointed the wand very carefully into the boy’s face: he wanted to see it happen, the destruction of this one, inexplicable danger. The child began to cry: it had seen that he was not James. He did not like it crying, he had never been able to stomach the small ones’ whining in the orphanage—
"Avada Kedavra!"
And then he broke: he was nothing, nothing but pain and terror, and he must hide himself, not here in the rubble of the ruined house, where the child was trapped and screaming, but far away… far away…
"No," he moaned.
The snake rustled on the filthy, cluttered floor, and he had killed the boy, and yet he was the boy…

"Bathilda's Secret", *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*

Tom, why do your plans always backfire?
Hermione stayed with Tom until a Healer came by with a stretcher to take him in for treatment.

Looking around the reception area, she saw that no one had taken down the wreaths and charmed icicles after Christmas, which had passed several days ago. The decorations dangled from the walls and from the gilded frames of enchanted portraits; the inhabitants, dressed in green Healer robes and matching green night caps, snored away in peaceful repose. This time of the night—or morning, technically, since it was past midnight—the waiting room was empty, and the magazines on the coffee table were neatly stacked. The only other person was the receptionist behind the front desk, too busy working his way through a runic crossword to pay her or Nott any attention.

She approached the desk, waiting to be acknowledged, but as several minutes came and went, the reception wizard never looked up from his crossword.

"Nine down, 'Whistlestop interrupted by a lost itinerary', isn't Ehwaz. It's Raidho," said Hermione snippily, who had been waiting at the desk for almost ten minutes. "Ehwaz means 'motion', but its alternate form is connoted with spiritual journeys—not interrupted journeys. Raidho, on the other hand, symbolises physical movement. If you haven't noticed, all the abstract entries are in the horizontal spaces—just look at the next clue for ten across: 'Inner eye and inner ear in alignment'."

The receptionist set his quill down and gave Hermione an irate look. "I'm sorry, did you need anything?"

"Yes, in fact, I do," said Hermione. "Is there any information on my friend? He was brought in a quarter of an hour ago."

With a deep sigh, the receptionist got out of his seat and slunk over to the pigeon holes at the back of his office. He dug around, then returned with a scroll of parchment.

"He's been classed as Type A: Artefact Accident. These forms must be filled out before more information can be released. If any space is answered improperly, you'll have to do the whole form again."

Hermione took the scroll and brought it to the waiting area, balancing the sheets of parchment on her knees. Nott's feet, clad in shearling-lined house slippers, were propped up on one of the empty chairs, his cloak wrapped around his body like a blanket.

"'Medical contact owl address'," read Hermione, "'If underage, name or address of parent or guardian'. Well, I suppose it's convenient that Tom's birthday is today. His family would think a billing form from St. Mungo's would be some sort of absurd joke."

"'Convenient'," said Nott, incredulously. "You don't think that Riddle got himself bloodied up an hour after he came of-age... in an accident?"
"No," Hermione said, wrinkling her nose, "Not an accident. I know he did something stupid the minute he knew he could—brewing potions in his bedroom or experimenting with something he read in a book. But the most important thing right now is making sure he gets better. Learning his lesson can come later."

Nott curled his lip. "You're very forgiving."

"It's called 'friendship'," Hermione replied. "It's your own fault if you don't know what that means."

Anyway, she thought, friendship was something that went both ways.

Tom didn't like Nott, and no one else in their study group knew that she'd kept in close contact with him. There were bound to be questions about that—just as many questions as Hermione had about Tom's extracurricular adventures. He'd said that his pelvis was broken, but in transporting him to the wizarding hospital, she'd seen the circular bloodstain on his hip, oozing with fresh blood after the flannel of his pyjama trousers had become so saturated that it could no longer absorb a single drop more. His blood had stained her nightgown and bedsheets, and his wand was crusted with it, shedding dried flakes into her coat pocket.

She knew enough first-aid medicine to recognise that blunt-force falls, which could break the pelvis of an elderly man or woman falling down the stairs or into the bathtub, would not produce nearly this much blood. Breaking the skin was, in fact, a rarity compared to the more realistic consequence of severe bruising, swelling, and reduced bone density around the affected site. If she hadn't known any better, she might have assumed from the size and shape of Tom's wound—the circular radius of the entry point, trickling with thick spurts of blood—to be the result of a gunshot.

But it couldn't be, could it? If Tom had somehow acquired a firearm, and had experimented with it, she would have heard it from his room, right across the hall from her own. And where would he even get a gun, if he wanted one in the first place? Somehow, Hermione couldn't imagine Tom using any other tool but his wand.

Nott snorted and pulled the hood of his cloak over his head. "Wake me up if something happens. Or if Riddle bites it."

Once she'd finished answering the last question, Hermione brought the forms back to the reception desk, and was rewarded with a slip of parchment that listed Tom's ('Patient 48529') arrival time, room number, designation code, and his treatment status, which was 'In Progress'.

"What does 'In Progress' mean?" asked Hermione, turning over the slip and seeing that the back was blank. "Can I see him?"

"It means 'Wait and see'," the receptionist grunted. "Now if you'll pardon me, I'm busy!"

She returned to the waiting area, where Nott had fallen asleep under his cloak, and paced around anxiously. A few prospective patients, including one pregnant witch in voluminous maternity robes, entered the waiting room and were quickly dealt with by the receptionist. For one hour, then two, she chewed her fingernails and waited, head jerking up to peer at the door whenever she heard it open.

At four in the morning, Tom was brought out into the waiting room in a wheelchair, his complexion an unhealthy white and his hair lank and matted with dried sweat. But the rest of him looked so much like his ordinary self that Hermione's heart ached in relief. The blood had been washed off his
face, and his torn and stained pyjamas replaced with thin cotton hospital robes, fastened at the throat and wrists with wooden toggles. A Healer in green robes pushed the chair, and it must have been enchanted, for she did it with only one hand—the other hand was occupied with a small wooden chest emblazoned with the St. Mungo's seal, the contents of which clinked as she walked.

"Tom!" Hermione cried, leaping out of her seat and running over to him.

"Hermione," replied Tom, and his eyes alighted on her face, unfocused gaze sharpening in recognition.

"Mrs. Riddle?" the Healer addressed Hermione.

"Sorry?" Hermione choked. "Um, you're talking to me?"

The Healer gave her an impatient nod.

"B-but Tom and I aren't married!" she stammered.

"Do the forms not say that you and he share a residential owling address?" said the Healer.

"Yes," said Hermione, "but it's just temporary, we aren't—"

The Healer harrumphed in disapproval, then shoved the wooden chest into her arms. 

"'S'not my business what you young fellas get up to, but since you've listed yourself as his medical contact, you'll ensure that he takes his potions. Twice a day for three days, then once a day for seven days after that, and he should stay off his feet and avoid strenuous activity for that time—no Quidditch!

"The pain potions have a bone restorative—we had to use some of his own material to patch the fractures—and the instruction scroll is inside, with the directions on how and when to take them. If the bruising and muscle pain haven't faded after that, bring the scroll back and we'll give you more."

Speech finished, the Healer left the waiting room.

Hermione hefted the potion chest and looked at Tom. "Are you alright? How are you? Does it hurt?"

"I'm fine," said Tom. "The potions they gave me were brewed with... hmm... root of valerian, I think. A cheaper substitute for red myrrh oil, to reduce the swelling, but the side effects are... uncomfortable."

"Is it the soporific effect?" Hermione asked. "Ground valerian is used for pain relief; it relaxes the nerves, and is a central ingredient in Calming Draughts. But the relaxing effect may cause drowsiness in some individuals. Oh... Well, at least it doesn't hurt anymore, I suppose."

Tom had a great understanding of how magical plant and animal parts interacted with each other; she, on the other hand, had always followed the textbook instructions to the letter. Tom was less precise and more intuitive, experimenting with their class potions, to her alarm (what if he ruined their brew and earned them a zero mark for the lesson?!?) and Slughorn's delighted praise. But her memory was better than his; when it came to encyclopaedic lists, she, unlike Tom, could still quote their First and Second Year material.

"No." Tom grimaced. "But I want to go home now—how did you get me here in the first place?"
"It's a long story," said Hermione, looking pointedly down at Tom's hip. "That we should definitely save for later." She glanced over her shoulder at Nott. "You can summon Amity now!"

Yawning and stretching his arms above his head with the sound of popping joints, Nott got out of his chair and ambled over. "You're done here? Not going to buy anything from the gift shop?"

"No," said Hermione, "we should get back before anyone notices we're missing. And I'd like to have a few hours of sleep before Tom's grandmother makes us take birthday photos for her picture album."

"Right," said Nott. "Amity!"

The little creature appeared at Nott's side, wearing a pair of oversized oven mitts.

"What's this?" said Tom, peering at it; sitting in the wheelchair, they were around the same height. "Nott? What are you doing here?"

"I invited him," Hermione spoke hurriedly, "because I didn't know anyone else who could Apparate us here on short notice."

Tom's brow furrowed. "But why would he say yes?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Nott put in, sounding affronted.

"Because you don't like us, or our unacceptable blood status," said Tom bluntly. "And no one likes you."

"In case you've forgotten, Riddle," Nott said, "Our House was founded by a wizard whose personal beliefs the other founders didn't like. But that didn't stop them from having a professional relationship."

"Until they chased him off because he pushed his teachings too far," Hermione remarked.

"They respected him enough to keep the House he founded up to the present day," said Nott smugly.

"The other founders kept Slytherin around because he was useful—an excellent craftsman and enchanter," said Tom, turning to Hermione. "History lesson aside, what did you promise him, Hermione? Nott would never have agreed to help for free."

"What, I couldn't have volunteered out of the goodness of my heart?" Nott asked, folding his arms.

"No," said Tom and Hermione simultaneously.

"Yeah, alright," conceded Nott. "As I interceded at a mortal juncture, by technicality and magical law, you owe me a life debt."

"Very well," said Tom in a calm voice. "Hermione, hand me my wand—"

"No!" cried Hermione, shoving her hand into her pocket to keep Tom from Summoning his wand back.
Tom shot her an aggrieved look. "The fastest way to clear the life debt is to put Nott under the so-called 'mortal juncture'. And the sooner we get it over with, the sooner we can go back home."

"Trying to force it on purpose wouldn't even work," said Nott, giving an uneasy tug to the collar of his robes. "This kind of magic is based on intent, which can't be forced or faked, no matter how much power you put behind it; not even the greatest wizard can choose his own Animagus form. But nevermind that—I'll forgo the debt on one condition." His hand dipped beneath his cloak for his own wand. "Which will render all debts null and void."

"What is it, then?" said Tom impatiently.

"Help me find and unseal the Chamber of Secrets," Nott said, "and I'll consider the debt settled. No need to try an elaborate plan to cancel it."

"But the Chamber of Secrets is a myth," Hermione said. "Hogwarts: A History said the Chamber was a legend, a story perpetuated by the students of the three other founders, who wanted to reinforce Salazar Slytherin's reputation as a blood supremacist."

"Yes," said Tom. "This is just a pointless quest, isn't it? Like finding the tooth of a white-feathered phoenix. You're just playing for time. Hermione—my wand, please."

"It's not a pointless quest, like hunting the Hallows or the Fountain of Fair Fortune," Nott huffed. "And I count that one pointless as the treasure was the 'friends they made along the way'. This one's a more tangible quest like... the Philosopher's Stone, which sounds too good to be true, but it does exist. From historical accounts and my own research, I have reason to believe that the Chamber is real. I'll go under Veritaserum to confirm it. I'll even share my research to help find it."

"If you've done all this, why do you need my help, then?" Tom's features took on a sceptical cast.

"Because," said Nott, squaring his narrow shoulders, "Slytherin's Chamber is rumoured to contain a legendary creature, according to the myths. And you're the best duellist in the school. I don't like you, but even I won't deny that you have... unique talents that the rest of us could never hope to match."

"' Legendary creature'," said Tom in a thoughtful voice. "Hermione—you've read the book, is that true?"

"Um," Hermione mumbled, "I-I think so."

She was trying to figure out what angle Nott was attempting to play; it was clear he had fabricated a plan whose finer details—or any detail whatsoever—he hadn't informed her about. And just now, he'd cleverly stepped around the truth without telling any overt lies, stroking Tom's sense of vanity, too. She hadn't realised that Nott had been running an ulterior strategy utterly opaque to everyone but himself. That is, until today.

"In the book, a secondary or tertiary source, the creature was described as a 'horror' left by Slytherin, so that those that came after him could cleanse the school of the impure or unworthy," Hermione recited from memory. "Slytherin was reported to be able to control the creature, and passed the secret of how it was controlled to his true heir—the book speculates it to be one of his apprentices, and that the creature itself is something rare and associated with dark magic, and has an extended lifespan compared to the average wizard-raised magical creature."
"A rare creature?" Tom mused, stroking his chin.

"No one knows for certain," said Hermione, who was suddenly worried by the fevered glint that had just appeared in Tom's eye. "But hundreds of people over the years have gone looking for the Chamber, as it's said to be where Slytherin studied rare magic he wanted to keep from the other founders. No one's found anything, or come up with solid theories of what the creature could be—a dragon would have died by now, unless Slytherin put an egg under stasis... but I can't see anyone being afraid of a hatchling dragonet, since a Flame Freezing Charm would work against it at that size, and its hide wouldn't yet have the magical resistance of an adult."

"Thank you, Hermione," said Tom, lifting his eyes to meet Nott's. "Since it looks like I can't nullify a debt with a reverse debt, and I can predict firm opposition to the cleanest solution I can think of to... deal with you, I've an acceptable counter-offer. We have a year and a half left at Hogwarts. That's the upper limit of how long we can spend looking for the Chamber. If it's not found by the last day of our last year, then you'll swear an oath of loyalty to me."

Nott scowled. "And is there a time limit to that oath?"

"For life," Tom said, giving him a thin and humourless smile. "It's the most convincing argument you could make in proving that the Chamber isn't a fairytale quest. A gesture of good faith, you see."

Nott hunched in on himself, his forehead wrinkling, not looking quite so confident as he had been earlier. "Fine, fine. I'll agree to those terms. But if I have to swear a loyalty oath, then it's on my own person and personal fortune, with no inclusion of my family members, present or future, or assets and properties accorded to the family estate."

"Agreed," said Tom. "Hermione, you're our witness."

Without Hermione being able to slip a word in edgewise, the boys agreed to the deal, setting further stipulations (that they'd hold each other at a mutual truce for now, that any chambers found must be clearly proven to be Slytherin's, that the last day of the search was the morning in June of 1945, the hour the Hogwarts Express left Hogsmeade Station for London). She found it difficult to understand how two people who made it so obvious that they neither liked nor trusted one another could come to such an agreement, so quickly, and with this much cordiality. Even after the deal was made, each boy still eyed the other with wariness; Nott had never taken his hand off his wand.

But then it was over, at a speed that Hermione put down to their sheer pragmatism, an ability allowing Slytherins to put their differences aside until it was time to divide the spoils produced by their combined efforts, at which point the previous alliance was forgotten as if it had never existed. It was a very alien notion to her, until Hermione considered the fact that Ravenclaws were not naturally cooperative, either; the Slytherins at Hogwarts presented themselves in public as a unified House, while Ravenclaw didn't even have that. As a Prefect, Hermione had helped introduce the new First Years to their class subjects, and lectured them on forming good study habits, but no one had ever tasked her with ensuring that they made friends.

Amity Apparated her and Tom back to Hermione's bedroom, bowing once, before Disapparating with a pop! back to the St. Mungo's waiting room where they'd left Nott.

Upon their arrival, Tom subsided into his wheelchair, his face white, his brows pinched together in pain. Hermione rushed over to him, dropping the potion chest on her bed, the covers still stained with Tom's blood. She took his hands in hers, sliding back the sleeves of his hospital robe, and ran
her thumbs down the inside of his wrists to feel his pulse. It was faint, but steady; the Healers would have given him a Blood Replenishing potion, but that didn't cure the shock the body went through when it lost a large volume of blood at once.

"Oh, Tom," said Hermione, sinking to the floor. She felt his fingers caress her hair, which must look a mess—she hadn't put a thought to her appearance before rushing Tom to the hospital, throwing on her Muggle coat over her nightgown and a pair of soft driving plimsolls. "I think you should have a potion—and a few hours of sleep, too, if you can get it. And then we'll have to find some way to keep you off your feet; we wouldn't be able to explain where you got the wheelchair."

"You never explained why you invited Nott, of all people, to join the party. As far as I remember, his house doesn't have a telephone line." Tom spoke in a mild tone, but she caught the note of reproval.

Hermione couldn't stop herself; she let out a little croak of laughter. "You disapprove? We just got you out of the hospital for whatever you did to yourself!"

"Of course I do," said Tom fiercely—not elaborating on how he'd earned his stay in the hospital—then he winced, and tried to cover for it by speaking in a clipped voice, "He isn't trustworthy. Even in First Year, he never lifted a hand for anyone unless he saw the utility of it. You saw him just now, how eager he was to put a price to a life."

"Are you worried he'll try to get one over you?" asked Hermione.

"No," said Tom. "I can take care of myself—"

Hermione made a scoffing noise.

"—Yes, yes, have your giggle." Tom rolled his eyes. "But I think you ought to be careful around him. He doesn't like people of 'our sort', and you know it. He only tolerates us because he thinks we're useful for whatever sneaky little plan he's concocted."

Hermione sighed, straightened up, and dug in her pocket for Tom's wand, flaking with dried blood, which she tossed onto his lap. She drew her own wand and pointed it at her bedcovers, Conjuring a stream of water to help lift the bloodstains off before she applied a cleaning charm. She wasn't sure she could get out every spot, but she hoped that the maids who came to change her sheets would assume that anything left was her own blood, and not make a fuss about it, other than to commiserate on the shared difficulties of womanhood.

Without a word, Tom joined her in casting cleaning spells, though the point of his wand dipped and wavered, and she could see his cheeks hollowed where he was biting his own flesh in single-minded focus.

"Isn't that the same way you used to think of me?" said Hermione, her question pointed. "Or perhaps you still do."

"I don't think of you as one 'sort' or another. Nor as a tool, useful but dispensable," said Tom. "And certainly not as 'one of our unfortunate lessers'," he added, his voice lilting and vowels shifting to match Mrs. Riddle's distinct manner of speech.

An unladylike snort escaped her, and just like that, the tension between them dissipated, until the bed had been made as clean as they could. Leaving it as it was, Hermione picked up the potion chest and
began to roll Tom's wheelchair back into his own room, glancing both ways down the hallway before she snuck in and closed the door behind her.

There was a tightly-furled scroll packed inside the chest, which contained several rows of glass phials stoppered with wax plugs set into neat, square niches. Scraping off the seal stamp revealed it to be a standard set of apothecarist's instructions: *Take with one glass of water, ensure adequate food and rest for best results, may contain extract of gingko, consult Healer if allergic to any ingredient, or if unusual side effects make their appearance, up to and including gassiness, glowing excretions, or prescient dreams.*

Their Potions classes had centred on brewing, but Professor Slughorn had gone over the usage of various potions—though she supposed it was less to prepare them for future medical emergencies and more to warn students from indulging in the unhealthy over-consumption of Wideye Potions as a study aid, or drinking Memory Potions before an exam, which was counted as cheating and would result in a null mark when detected. Or to dissuade those who'd considered the idea of mixing two or more potions for double the effect, which was more likely to poison the drinker than elevate them to academic genius.

She filled a glass with Conjured water, unstoppered the first potion, and handed it to Tom, watching him with a stern eye as he gagged at the flavour. Most potions had a nasty taste, she'd learned, but it was only to be expected when the ingredient lists included dried woodlice and dung beetle wing cases. After he'd emptied the phial, his eyelids began to droop, and the crease between his brows faded with the alleviation of pain.

Hermione helped him get into his bed, observing that there were no signs of blood on his sheets, no suspicious grimoires or dirty cauldrons lying about, which would have given her a clue as to what he'd done to injure himself. Everything seemed to be in its proper place, tidy as was his usual habit; the only sign of the room's being in use was the papers on the writing desk, where Tom had been completing his holiday homework.

She'd just pulled the bedcovers back and leaned over to fluff the pillow, when Tom caught her by the wrist, stroking along her pulse point as she'd done to him minutes earlier.

"Don't go," said Tom, his voice soft, his expression somehow... unguarded.

"Tom," she said, trying to draw her wrist back. He didn't let go. "I'll be just across the hall—"

"Stay with me. Please."

She searched his features, and found nothing but frank and open sincerity. No duplicity, not a hint of guile.

"I-I can stay until you fall asleep," she stammered.

"Stay until morning," said Tom, shifting over to the side and patting the empty space on the bed next to him.

"It's already morning!"

"It's also my birthday," said Tom. "You can't refuse the power of the birthday wish."

"Hmph," grumbled Hermione, but tired and unable to think of a convincing counter-argument, she
unbuttoned her coat, threw it over the bedpost, and kicked off her shoes, before climbing into the bed and letting Tom bring the top of the blanket to cover her.

His fingers—he hadn't let go of her yet—traced down her wrist, down the line of tendon, up and down, a strange and calming sensation that made her yawn. It occurred to her that she had gotten as little sleep this whole evening as he had. Up to now, she'd been stressed out of her mind, pacing circles in the St. Mungo's waiting room, hours of going back and forth between the receptionist and Nott, both of whom had nothing supportive to say and had ended up ignoring her to focus on the more productive pursuits of crosswords and napping.

She felt herself drifting off, when Tom wriggled closer to her, so close that she could feel his breath on her cheek.

"I meant what I said, you know."

"Hmm?" Hermione's response was groggy and far from eloquent.

"I've never seen much use in marriage... but if there was a way to have this every night—not just one night a year, and without anyone able to say a word against it—then I could see how it would be worth the bother."

"Mmph," said Hermione, burrowing into the blanket. "Maybe that's why everyone gets married."

"Not my parents," Tom muttered, under his breath.

"Wha—"

"Shhh."

Tom curled up next to her in a rustle of sheets, and the heat of his body warmed her frozen toes; it lulled her into a peaceful doze that soon deepened to true sleep.

Morning arrived sooner than Hermione would have liked.

She was deep in a sleep of utter exhaustion, dreamless and dead to the world, when she was, without any forewarning, forcibly revived by Mrs. Riddle knocking on the bedroom door. The knocking went on, and a voice spoke unintelligible words in the distance, while Hermione groaned into the pillow and ignored it. A few seconds later, the door was thrown open and the electric light switched on, a harsh reveille in contrast to the weak winter sunlight that had barely pierced the heavy drapes at the window.

"Tommy! Have you dressed? Mrs. Willrow cooked a special birthday breakfast for you this morning. We've been waiting for you to come down; you mustn't let it get cold—"
Hermione made to push the blanket off, but was impeded by a heavy arm draped over her waist, pinning her down and limiting her movements. In fact, as the muddled dregs of slumber fled from her mind, she realised that it was Tom's arm. And that was Tom's chest pressed against her back, his nose nuzzling against the nape of her neck, and his breath that she felt puffing out, hot and ticklish, against her skin. At some point during the night—or very early morning—she'd wound up tucked up into his side, her legs tangled into his and in urgent need of extraction.

"Tom," hissed Hermione.

"Hermione," murmured Tom, pulling her closer.

"Tom!" she repeated, speaking louder in an attempt to wake him.

"Tommy!" said Mrs. Riddle, her voice growing louder, as she bustled over to the bed. "Tommy, darling, it's time to get up."

The blanket twitched aside. Hermione heard a choking sound.

"Hermione!" Mrs. Riddle gasped, the last syllable swerving up a whole octave in surprise. "Goodness, you two!" She gave a delicate cough before she went on, "Why, I never! Hmph! I do certainly expect you to sort yourselves out properly when the time comes. And you, Tommy—you'll make a decent man out of yourself, and I know you can hear me, so don't pretend. For now, however, I want to see the both of you at the table in a quarter hour."

She dropped the blanket back over them, then went to the door, closing it behind her without turning off the light.

"Tom." Hermione pushed at Tom's arm. "We have to get up."

He only squeezed her tighter. "Just one more minute."

Hermione sighed.

It wasn't a terribly uncomfortable experience to be in such close quarters with Tom, even if the rational side of her mind (the one that chaperoned the younger Ravenclaws as part of her duties as a Prefect, and had deducted her fair share of House points from students caught in the Astronomy Tower after curfew) recognised that her current actions had crossed the line into inappropriate fraternisation. This was exactly the sort of conduct that got students sent back from Hogsmeade early, or polishing trophy cases in detention with the school caretaker. This was worse, because she'd just now been caught in a very compromising position, and even those students who'd become the subject of gossip in the girls' loo had been caught with their positions being strictly vertical.

The irrational side of her mind (the one that hadn't gotten nearly enough sleep) didn't find it an unpleasant experience. It had a lot in common with an extended hug, and it was, just perhaps, even enjoyable. There was something about the intimate closeness with another person that was comforting on an instinctive level—the comfort of another's touch, being held, relaxed in the warmth produced by another human body. And then there was something else which was comforting and familiar to her: scouring her recent memories, she realised that it was the scent she'd smelled in the Potions classroom during Professor Slughorn's lesson on Amortentia.

Herbal soap, a faint scent that was almost overpowered by parchment and ink and leather-bound books.
That day, she'd gone to her dorm's bathroom after class and smelled all her dorm mates' soaps and shampoos to confirm a match, but she'd come up with nothing. She'd put it out of her mind after that—all in all, it was a silly thing to worry overmuch about. The perfume of Amortentia was a figment of imagination, an interesting magical illusion drawn from the depths of a person's mind, the same way a boggart drew out one's greatest fear. Worth studying and understanding for anyone who wanted to be a potioneer (or wanted to do well on the N.E.W.T.s, as it would be examined later on), but a novelty of the magical world beyond that context.

But then the unexpected happened, and in that instant, rational cognisance met irrational supposition: the herbal soap scent was from Tom's soap.

During the summer, Tom's grandmother had given him a number of gifts, one of which was a shaving kit with soft white face cloths, a folding razor—which she'd never seen Tom touch—and bars of imported soap. The few times she'd visited him in his room at the Leaky Cauldron, she'd arrived early and observed him going about his morning routine. Tom used magic to shave and trim his sideburns. After shaving, he washed his face with the soap.

She was at once triumphant at having discovered an answer to this months-old mystery, and disturbed at the implications. She'd smelled Tom's scent in her Amortentia. It had no bearing on their friendship—Tom didn't even know—but she was aware of what it signified: that he was an object of... well, if not desire, exactly, but great fondness. A different sort of fondness than what one felt for parents, siblings, or beloved pets, for Amortentia's 'air of romance' wasn't called romantic for no reason.

And then there were the other facts: she had good reason to believe that these feelings were reciprocated by Tom to some extent, because what else would she call her present situation—her present predicament—but an indication of fondness? He kept most of their classmates at a cool distance, speaking of them with open disdain (with his one exception being her) and she couldn't imagine him sleeping by anyone else's side, whether he was dosed on potions or not.

Tom was fond of her.

The more she thought on it, the more she began to feel that the word 'fond' was not the most apt descriptor. Twyla and Siobhan, two of her dorm mates, were fond of each other, linking their arms together on the walk to class in the morning, eating off one another's plates during meals, even sharing toothbrushes (after the use of a thorough cleaning charm) when Twyla's cat made off with her own. But that fondness had never extended to nuzzling each other on a shared bed.

This was a different sort of fondness, one she couldn't reconcile with her understanding of friendly fondness.

Instead having her confusions cleared up, Hermione was only beset by more questions.

"Propriety" and "decency" were two concepts the Riddles clung on to like life rafts; they were rare points of refuge in the changing tides of modern Britain. What Mrs. Riddle wanted—for Tom to make a decent man of himself—was an old-fashioned term for something that Tom had not too long ago reversed his opinion on, declaring that he was in personal support of it, although it appeared to be more from convenience than any sense of moral obligation.

She hadn't thought he'd meant it...
But now, she wasn't sure at all.

Nevertheless, the day awaited, and Hermione couldn't spend all morning contemplating these mysteries in bed, tempting as it might be. Eventually, she pushed Tom's arm away and got up, casting a few Warming Charms to relieve the winter chill that had settled in during the night, after the fireplace's banked coals had crumbled into white ash. Tom still seemed as if he was willing to forgo his birthday breakfast if it meant malingering under the blanket for several more hours, but Hermione summoned a set of clean clothes, refilled his water glass and made him take a vial of potion; after that he seemed more alert, even if he shuddered at the flavour.

"It's making me drowsy," said Tom, tucking his wand into his trouser pocket. "It dulls the pain, along with everything else."

"You only have eleven potions in the box," Hermione replied. She'd read the labels and counted the vials, recognising several ingredients that were found in commercially-prepared Skele-Gro—which explained the terrible taste. "If you were being treated in the Muggle way, you'd have been laid up for months. In a plaster cast, too—and Dad says those things always give patients trouble in the bathroom, since they have to wash around it and then it ends up smelling off after a fortnight. You should count yourself lucky."

"Lucky," Tom muttered, but that was the only complaint he made before it was time to go down for breakfast.

Mrs. Willrow had prepared a breakfast feast that wouldn't have been out-of-place for the holiday offerings in the Hogwarts Great Hall. French toast made from thick slices of white bread was the centrepiece of the meal, dipped into a rich egg custard, fried, and accompanied by an assortment of toppings: golden syrup, sweet beaten cream, homemade marmalades, bits of cured pork and fried game sausage. Tom took some of each, while Hermione limited herself to a small scoop of jam and cream only, narrowing her eyes at the vast spread of breakfast offerings—the meal had multiple courses, but was served banquet-style so that the fresh fruits shared table-room with the cheese omelettes and bacon butties.

Silently, she estimated the expense that had gone into such a meal: sugar was still available, but each family was allotted enough to sweeten a few pots of tea over the course of a week; the official ration loaf was made of brown wholemeal flour, and Muggles without access to a wizarding grocer would have only found white bread flour on sale through the black market. With how much the Riddles indulged Tom, she shouldn't be surprised by this. They'd cut no corners for their Christmas dinner, and very likely believed that no amount of saved money was worth eating French toast made from brown bread.

She was still counting the varieties of fruit preserves on the table while the Riddles tucked into their breakfast, Mr. Riddle scraping the last of the brown sauce from the jar with a clink of silver on glass, when a maid rushed into the dining room, her cap askew, screaming incoherently.

"Mr. Riddle! Mrs. Riddle!" she cried, one hand pressed to her heaving chest. "Oh, it's Mister Tom—he's gone mad!"

"What do you mean, mad?" Mrs. Riddle asked. Her fork, burdened with a bite-sized portion of egg white omelette, was set back on her plate. "Frances?"

"I—I was bringin' up his breakfast plate," said the maid in a hoarse voice, smoothing down the pleats of her apron in her anxiety, "and after I set the tray on the table and got to the curtains, I saw the
Mrs. Riddle's face went as pale as her napkin. "Blood?"

"Oh, you'd never believe it, Mrs. Riddle—blood on the carpets, blood on the floor—and the room reekin' of a slaughterhouse!" The maid swooned, laying the back of her hand over her eyes. "And the worst of 'em all: Mister Tom's hound dead on the floor, sliced open like a river trout! I've never seen the likes of it—it were the shock of a lifetime, let me tell you!"

Mrs. Riddle stood up, dropping her napkin on her plate. "I shall need to see this." She turned to Mr. Riddle. "Thomas, send for Doctor Talbot; I don't care if he's off on holiday, get him here at once! Frances, you'll go and fetch Bryce and bring him to the house."

Mr. Riddle gave a forlorn glance at his half-eaten bacon and set it aside, while Mrs. Riddle took charge of the servants, leaving Tom and Hermione at the dining table unsupervised.

Tom continued forking bits of crisp French toast into the fluffy mound of beaten cream on the side of his plate, his expression serene and unruffled.

Hermione stared at him.

Tom kept eating. "Would you like me to pass the butter?"

"Tom..."

"I do recommend it; it pairs well with the peach preserves."

"Tom!"

"Yes, Hermione?"

"Do you know anything about this?"

"Is there any reason why I should?"

Hermione cast him a look of great scepticism. "Maybe... because you were covered in blood when you showed up at my door last night. When you woke me up, I might add!"

Tom scoffed, reaching over the table to scoop another spoonful of peach preserve onto his toast. "Hmm. What a coincidence."

"What are the chances of that?"

"I don't know, Hermione," said Tom amiably. "With magic, we can break the physical laws of nature whenever we want—so what makes you the arbiter of what is possible and what isn't?"

"That's a non-answer," Hermione said, her tone waspish, "and you know it."

"I'm not sure what kind of answer you want me to give," said Tom. "Are you expecting me to tell you that I slaughtered my father's dog last night?"

"No!" Hermione shook her head hurriedly. "Of course not! I j-just wanted to hear the truth!"
"The truth... is that my father is a very disturbed man," said Tom, his eyes dropped down to his plate, looking shaken all of a sudden. "He's not been well, not in the head, and not for a very long time."

"Oh!" said Hermione, feeling abashed. She put down her fork and knife and slipped her hand under the table to grasp Tom's. "I'm so sorry—I don't mean to pry or anything. I-if you don't want to talk about it, I understand. But if you do, you know you can talk to me about it—I don't think the Riddles like anyone bringing up the subject of your father."

"Thank you, Hermione." He squeezed her hand and gave her a soft smile, leaning to the side so that their knees and shoulders brushed. "They like to say that my father came back home because he ran out of money, but I've always wondered if it was my mother who left him. It was always understood that they separated on poor terms, you know—and that was how I ended up at Wool's. I lived there from the day I was born."

Right then and there, Hermione wanted to tell Tom the truth: that his mother, the late Mrs. Merope Gaunt Riddle, was a witch. And the unhappy separation between Mr. Tom Riddle and Mrs. Merope Riddle, if she was to offer her speculations on the matter, would probably have come from Mr. Riddle, a Muggle, learning about the existence of magic, as he was legally entitled to know the moment the York registrar's office certified their marriage license.

Her own parents had been shocked about finding out, and they weren't religious people—not had they raised her to be someone who paid earnest reverence to God or the church; church for their family had always been a social habit, not a moral imperative. Mum and Dad's introduction to magic had come from Professor Dumbledore, and despite the man's eccentricities, he was well-spoken and astute, a seasoned speaker. He knew how to broach the topic, explain the salient details, and answer every question about wizarding culture or governance thrown at him. Merope Gaunt, on the other hand, was a village girl whose family had not allowed her to attend Hogwarts, due to their uncompromising blood-purist beliefs that even Nott had seen fit to deride.

Merope had lived in a mouldering shack with a strange and disturbing brother, talked to snakes, and hadn't known or seen much of the world outside of Hangleton, before she'd married Tom Riddle and left Yorkshire for good. Hermione couldn't see any way that Mr. Riddle would have taken the news well, or any way that Merope could have delivered it well, either. This kind of thing would be a stumbling block in anyone's marriage, which depended on honesty and good communication from both parties, or so she'd observed from how Mum and Dad worked out their problems, even on their busiest days when they came home exhausted from taking shifts at Dad's clinic.

"It's possible that their disagreement, if they had one, was mutual," ventured Hermione. "I used to be that only women were the ones at fault in divorce cases, but after the laws were changed so that either party could lodge their case, it was seen that these things were rarely the fault of any one person."

"Perhaps," said Tom, sounding dubious. "Though I still think that, no matter how they felt back then, that my father still had—still has—strong feelings about my mother, all these years since she died giving birth. He was very young when he ran off and eloped with my mother, you see, and never re-married or looked at another woman again, even though half the village would've jumped at the chance of stepping out with him. If I was a romantic soul, I'd chance it to say that it was young love, and he never got over her loss—even regrets his poor choices to this day."

"That's very sweet." Hermione patted his hand. "And sad, how he's let his loss define his life, to his detriment... and yours, too. I do hope he gets better."
"Some people can't be helped," said Tom sadly.

"That doesn't mean we shouldn't try," said Hermione in a firm voice. "Sympathy goes a long way—don't you remember how we met?"

"I wouldn't want to forget," Tom replied, giving her one last squeeze before he withdrew his hand and returned to his meal, the mood lighter than it had been before.

Soon after that, they finished their breakfast, leaving their plates and napkins on the table when no staff popped out from behind their shoulders to collect them. They spent the next few hours working on their homework in Tom's bedroom (which was larger and better appointed than hers) and now that Tom could perform magic, he didn't hesitate to show off the efficiency of his Charms technique. He could perform many of their textbook spells non-verbally, with interesting variations that he claimed had won him extra-credit points in last year's O.W.L.s: partial enlargement, for instance, where he increased the size of a lightbulb's glass bulb while the filament within retained its original dimensions.

At one o'clock, they came back down for lunch, and saw that Mr. and Mrs. Riddle were absent from the table. The dining table had places set for two people, and a single maid to serve them—the second housemaid this time.

Hermione, eager to be apprised of any news, asked the maid, "Is everything alright? I don't suppose Tom's father has fallen ill?"

The maid, who had been carving the breast of a roasted bird, hesitated. "Mrs. Riddle says that Mister Tom's just had one of his, er, 'episodes'. I've never seen 'im have one since I started here, but Cook says he used to have 'em all the time when he come back from London years ago. No worries, Miss, he'll be right as rain after the Doctor comes in and has a look at him."

"'Episodes'?" Tom repeated. "We aren't in any danger, are we?"

"No, no," said the maid, who looked rather uncomfortable and was now carving as fast as she could. "Nothing dangerous—I expect he'll be pickin' at his supper and sendin' his food back because the parsley had the wrong colour or looked the wrong shape. Cook said he used to do it for every meal, and he'd come downstairs to watch her make up his tray, afraid that she were slippin' poison in his almond puddin' or summat of the like. Harmless stuff, but it puts more work on the staff." She let out an awkward chuckle. "Though we're happy with our place here, o' course; service en't easy, but it's honest work."

That seemed to be the end of the discussion, for the maid refused to say any more on the topic, her lips pinched together as she portioned out the meat with a pair of silver tongs. This was followed by the ladling out of the starter, a consommé with mushroom and leek, and a side dish of marrow stuffed with spiced pilaf. The finishing touch was a slice of almond and rum cream birthday cake for dessert, which seemed to be the extent of Tom's birthday celebrations due to the state of emergency that had fallen over the house. Tom did not appear to show any disappointment about it.

It was only the next day that she found out what happened to Tom's father: he'd been sent away.

She hadn't dared to ask Mrs. Riddle about it, so it was by chance that she overheard the maids speaking about it in the stairwell, while she'd been practising on her Disillusionment Charm in preparation for next year's N.E.W.T.s.
"He's been sent away until the boy goes back to school—put up in a hotel in York for now. Claimed he'd been bewitched by his own son when the Doctor saw him; the old lady was mortified!"

One of the maids giggled. "I would've loved to see 'er face."

"S'not worth it when she gets into one of her moods. Did you know, she up and asked me if I reckoned she were a bad mother? I swear, if someone had told me I'd be signin' up to serve in a madhouse, I'd have gone to the elders' home in Middlesbrough. I'd still be wiping invalid arses, mind you, but I wouldn't have put up with Their Highnesses' airs and graces."

"Do you believe that he'd got bewitched? No one would've done what he done, not in their right mind; Her Highness said the carpets had to go, and sent Frank to town to get paint for the walls."

"He's not done anythin' like that before—not while I've been 'ere. I knew he were no gentleman—the whole village knew he threw over his main squeeze to run off with the tramp's girl—but no one took him for a madman then."

There was a pause. "Shame, really."

The other maid hummed in assent. "It's always the pretty ones."

"...The boy's pretty, en't he?"

A snort of amusement. "Give it up, Frannie, you haven't a chance!"

"How d'you know?" After a brief hesitation, the maid said, querulously, "I reckon I do so!"

"When I went up to change the linens this mornin', I found hairs on his pillowcase—long, curly hairs! If you wanted to teach the boy what it takes to be a man, someone else has got there first."

Hermione's cheeks heated up, and losing her concentration, her Disillusionment Charm flickered. Before she could be noticed, she slipped away and back to her room.

Disregarding what had been said about her and Tom—which she wanted to avoid thinking about as much as possible—what had they meant about Tom's father being a madman? She'd gotten the impression over the last two weeks that something was not quite right about Mr. Tom Riddle, with his isolation, his strange habits, and the tantrum he'd thrown the first morning of their arrival. He'd gone from two extremes of temper, begging his mother for favours, then storming away when he was denied.

She had never seen anything like it, that wildly erratic shift of mood and attitude; the closest comparison she could draw was her fellow students' emotional outbursts the previous year, which ranged from sobbing over textbooks to pitching said textbooks out of the Common Room window. For most of them, it was stress induced from the exams. But there was a minority—in the ones who exhibited the worst behaviour—of students who'd mixed spells and potions without following the directions on the label. One was not meant to mix Calming Draughts with Cheering Charms, due to their magical intents conflicting with each other. Those who ignored the instructions (and common sense) found themselves unable to participate in a normal conversation without devolving into hysterics.

Tom's father was a Muggle, so he wouldn't have had access to anything magical. Thus, Hermione
was left to presume that he was indeed unwell: there was evidence, the more she considered it, that
proved that something was off about him. She still thought it suspect that Tom shown up to her
room bloody, and his father's carpet had been bloodied that same day—with the separation of a few
hours or less. She'd observed without doubt that the blood that stained Tom's pyjamas and her
bedcovers had been his own blood, whereas the blood on the discarded carpets had been from a pet
dog belonging to Tom Riddle the elder, a female whippet hound who had been a loyal hunting
companion for years.

She assembled the other facts she knew about him:

The man was relatively young—not a youth, but hale and able-bodied in a way that Mr. Bryce was
not. He had no formal vocation while other men went off to war or contributed through volunteering
and National Service. If he had been exempted from service, then it would have been through an
internal issue. Hermione's father had performed his share of physical examinations for prospective
soldiers, and most who'd been struck off had had heart dysrythmias, epilepsy, or impaired sight or
hearing. Of those, a tiny portion were exempted for being mentally unfit—more people who tried to
pass themselves off than those with genuine conditions, Dad had said. He'd been offered ration
tickets, off-ration luxuries like spirits and tinned caviar, even cash, to sign exemption slips for
conscripted soldiers. Dad had refused, not wanting to risk the loss of his medical license, which
came with such privileges as extra rations that regular civilians weren't afforded. Hermione
wondered if the Riddles had found a doctor of their own to tempt, and had succeeded.

Well, it wasn't her place to judge them for it, as Tom's father had proven himself to be legitimately
unwell. She felt guilty for speculating on it, and the slightest bit ashamed for suspecting Tom for
having a hand in the affair. Tom, though he did a lot of talking, hadn't made much comment about
his father; he complained more about Mary Riddle than anyone else at the Riddle House. In fact,
Tom had even been sympathetic about his father's health since his departure to York, offering his
best regards and condolences on what was now looking more and more like a spontaneous fit of
some sort.

It wasn't unheard of, for those who suffered from ailments of the mind—after all, shell shock was a
well-known condition, one that had no external symptoms, and whose internal effects were capable
of re-occurrence: tinnitus, headaches, and fugues, as reported by veterans of the Great War, after
they stood outside a church when the bells struck the hour, or had a motorcar blare its horn when
they crossed the road.

An unpredictable stroke of misfortune, and it was no one's fault, not really.

A day or two later, the rumour arose of the Riddles having their son committed for his own good.
Hermione refrained from participating in the speculation, which she had to tell Tom several times—
while reminding him of his own lack of sensitivity—when he kept asking what she thought of the
whole affair. She wasn't qualified to give a formal diagnosis, so perhaps it was for the best that Tom
Riddle Senior got professional attention. Because some of those rumours had proved true: Mrs.
Riddle had Mr. Bryce in and out of the house every day after New Year's Eve, wearing paint-
splattered dungarees and a weary expression. Renovations, if they were ordered, were something
most households did in spring, not winter. And they didn't limit it to one room out of the whole
house, but all of them.

She hadn't much time to dither about the Riddles' affairs, anyway, as a few days into January,
London and the Home Counties were once again beset by German air raids.

The headlines were printed in bold text on the front page of Mr. Riddle's morning *Yorkshire Post,*
which made Hermione gasp and tear the paper out of his hands, flipping it open to the casualty listings on Page 3. Mr. Riddle bravely withstood Hermione's increasing alarm, sighing as her shaking fingers slopped hot tea over his newspaper. He eventually ushered her to his private study to use the telephone, before retrieving his sodden newspaper to read the business articles on page 14. It took some time for the operator to put Hermione through, but finally she was connected to Mum and Dad after ringing the house first—and panicking for ten minutes after no one responded—before she thought to try the clinic.

"Mum! Are you alright?" Hermione spoke urgently, her fingers clutching tight to the telephone receiver.

"We're fine, safe and sound. Your father's with patients now—he can't come out, but he sends his love."

"The wards worked," breathed Hermione, sighing in relief. "Oh, I'm so happy I had the house registered in time."

"I suppose they did," agreed Mum. "We went to bed and didn't hear a peep until the morning, when it was over. The smoke filter certainly has been useful. Our neighbour—Mrs. Carraclough, you must remember her—the poor lady had to throw out the curtains from her front windows. She couldn't get the smoke smell off them, and can't even find replacements with the ration on fabric. But nevermind that! How are you, Hermione? How was your Christmas?"

"It was... interesting," Hermione said, not wanting to give her mother a reason to worry, not with so many other things that Mum and Dad had to stress about. "We went to a church service in the village on Christmas morning, and had a nice dinner afterwards. The village is small, but charming; I imagine it'd be much prettier in summer. And the Riddles have been very welcoming to me and Tom. They've made sure we've had enough to eat—though I suspect that they haven't even heard there's rationing going on."

"If you like it there, then you might consider if you want to visit again during the summer holidays," Mum said. "In Mary's letters, there are some rather broad insinuations that she's looking forward to your staying with them in the summer and after graduation. National Service exempts positions in both medicine and government, you know."

"I still want to look into magical careers, if there's anything I can apply for on merit," Hermione admitted. As a child, before she'd met Professor Dumbledore, a career in medicine had seemed like the natural path to take. She still couldn't disdain the thought of working in her parents' clinic as a contribution to the war effort, but a week of dealing with the convalescent Tom had shown her that her bedside manner veered closer to brusqueness than strict professionalism. Who'd known it would be so difficult to make people take their medicine and follow the Healer's advice? Why couldn't they sit down, take directions, and do what was good for them?

If they'd gotten themselves into such a scrape in the first place, she thought, then probably not. She was reminded of the way Tom whined every time he saw her bring out the potion chest; each evening, he fought against her orders when she told him that bedtime was meant for sleeping, and not for—for, well, whatever else he wanted to do.

"I'd have the qualifications after Hogwarts, and I wouldn't want to waste my N.E.W.T. marks—and then there's being able to have a magical lifestyle. I'd never be able to afford it with the wages of a junior magistrate's secretary, not with the Gringotts exchange rate."
"I suppose it's sentimental thinking of me, but Dad and I would be happy to have you with us as long as you like," said Mum. "If you decide you want a wizarding career, you could always commute back and forth, now that we have the Floo connection set up in the cellar. I won't have you wasting your galleons on renting a flat in Diagon Alley, when it's much wiser to save up until you can buy outright. You know, your father and I have thought about investing in property; when the war's over, London's predicted to have a lot of growth..."

Hermione and her Mum discussed career and investment advice for a few more minutes, before the conversation moved on to more general subjects. Dad stopped by for a minute or two, before he was called back to treat a patient. Mum reminded her to brush her teeth before bed, not to stay up too late reading, and to dress warmly before going outside, magical Warming Charms or no.

"Do write to us when you start school again, darling! Mr. Pacek gave us a book for your Christmas gift, but we'll wait for you to get back to Hogwarts before we'll have Gilles deliver it. Can't have the Riddles wondering how the pictures move, of course. The Tindalls send their regards, too—Roger especially; there's a packet of letters from him we'll pass on with your Christmas presents..."

It was heartening to feel the love of her family, belated Christmas well-wishes and air kisses and affectionate endearments, even from two hundred miles away. Distance or not, Hermione could tell how much her parents loved and missed her, and supported her no matter what course she chose to take in life. In this way, she was given clear evidence of how far of the mark the Riddles fell; she realised, with some discomfort, that the way Mrs. Riddle spoke to her was closer to a mimeograph of true affection—there was familiarity and some measure of fondness, but it seemed to Hermione that Mrs. Riddle wanted the two of them to share a close attachment, for the connections it brought rather than the sake of the connection itself. It was transactional rather than unconditional, and although Hermione was too generous to call it disingenuous, something about it still rang false.

Every night for the rest of the Christmas holidays, Hermione went to sleep thinking about how Mum and Dad were doing. She knew they were safe—that she'd done her best to ensure they were—but the rest of London wasn't. Their nights would be calm, but in their daylight hours Mum and Dad would be tending injuries, aware that they'd avoided sharing this fate through their great fortune in producing a magical child.

(She certainly wouldn't be thanking Nott for his timely intercession with Ministry bureaucracy.)

When Hermione listened to the evening broadcast from the wireless in Tom's room (her room didn't have one, nor did it have the en suite bathroom that he had) he seemed to perceive her state of melancholy, and offered what reassurance he could.

They listened to the broadcast together from Tom's bed, Tom having the presence of mind to refrain from his usual commentary about Muggle foolishness. In the late hours when the presenters signed off from the programme and played God Save the King, he wrapped her in a blanket and tucked her in. More than a few mornings, she'd woken up to find herself by his side in the bed, her arms and legs wrapped so securely within the bedcovers that she could barely move them; Tom had also, quite thoughtfully, cast a Warming Charm on her toes.

Each time, she wriggled her way free and slipped out of his room and back to her own.

It would be too embarrassing if she overheard the maids gossiping about how they'd gone to change the linens and seen the bedcovers untouched in the second guest room.

Again.
Chapter End Notes

*Operation Steinbock*: also known as the "Baby Blitz", lasted from January 2 to May 15.

I was editing this chapter late into the night before I was planning to post it, but realised that I was skipping over words due to my exhaustion, and each proofing pass kept turning out more mistakes that I'd missed. But this chapter turned out longer than usual, so there's that.
The sky was black and the wind laced with stinging shards of ice when Tom and Hermione were handed their coats by the maid. A basket of sandwiches was passed on by the cook, in preparation for their journey to the Great Hangleton train station, while Bryce, still yawning, took his own flask of hot beef tea, his tweed flatcap jammed low over his head to cover the tips of his cold-bitten ears.

The Riddles had bought them First Class seats on the York Flyer to London, and the trip was not as bad as it had been before Christmas, now that Tom could cast his own Warming Charms and shrink his luggage to the size of a lunch box to keep the Muggle porters from putting their hands on his things. It saved him a few pence in tips, which he spent on tea and biscuits in the train's dining car—something he found superior to the Hogwarts Express' snack trolley, where one was limited to a selection of disgusting sugary confections. (As much he enjoyed being a wizard, Tom had never learned to appreciate putting frogs, mice, and cockroaches charmed into animation, in his mouth. Whenever he was offered a chocolate frog by another student—never bothering to waste his own money on them—he checked the seals and let the charm wear off before he ate them.)

A minor note of awkwardness was Hermione's recent habit of fussing about him, asking if his leg ached, if he needed a place to sit while they transferred trains, when she went to fetch food or drinks from an attendant, or if he needed to hold onto her arm to go up and down the stairs that separated each platform from the station proper. Hermione had been attentive ever since they'd returned from St. Mungo's, and although he'd finished the potions the Healer had given him, his legs were still weak from staying off his feet for the last week and a half; he would not be winning any marathons soon... but he doubted he could have, even before what was spoken of, in whispered voices, as "The Accident".

"I thought there was something off about my father the first time I met him," Tom had said sadly, his eyes cast down to the pile of laundered shirts on his bed. "It was such a shock, that first breakfast..."

Becky Murray, the second housemaid, who was folding his laundry and sorting them into a 'Winter'
section to put away in a mothballed chest, and a 'Spring' selection to pack with his school things, gave him a consoling nod. "You couldn't've known. None of us knew he were like this, sir—Cook's the only one been on staff for more'n ten years. She'd known Mister Tom since he were a lad, and he didn't do nothin' like that back then, she says."

"I've never had a father before," Tom said. "I suppose I couldn't have known that all fathers weren't like that. But now... he's gone beyond all definition of normal. It's such a terrible blow to everyone—to me, as well: I thought we'd all be having a quiet family Christmas for the first time ever." Tom shook his head solemnly. "If Grandmama is sending him away like I heard, then I'll never have a chance to know him."

The maid's eyes glistened; she dabbed at them with her apron and sniffled. "Oh, sendin' him away's for his own good, sir. He'll be in good hands, truly—there'll be people for him who can look after him proper, to make sure there'll be no more of that... that irregular behaviour."

"Does he really need looking after?" asked Tom. "Is he doing that poorly?"

"Night terrors, I hear," said Becky, her eyes darting to the open door to check that no one was passing through the hall. "Nothin' for you to worry about, sir. You'd better get on with packin' your things for school; Mrs. Riddle wants to see you wearin' the new shirts and trousers she got for Christmas."

"He's my father; of course I'd be worried," Tom said, his expression mournful. "You only ever get one. Please, Miss Murray, if Hermione asks for any news on his health, do you mind being delicate about your answers? She's sensitive, and her father is a doctor back in London—she's always hated to see people suffering. Just tell her that he's unwell, and has been so for some time. He deserves his dignity in these difficult times, you see; no matter who he is or what he's done, he's still family to us, isn't he?"

"O-oh, that's a very kind thought." The maid pressed her hand to her mouth. "S'not a bother, o' course, sir!"

"Thank you," said Tom, and his grateful smile brought a flustered red bloom to her cheeks. Afterwards, he hadn't felt bad for how he'd dealt with the servant, steering her through a careful placement of words, glances, and smiles. It wasn't as if he'd lied to her—he despised being lied, and made an effort to avoid lies in his own life; after all, those who relied on outright falsehood were those who lacked the vision to re-interpret reality, and the imagination to shape it into whatever form they wished it to be.

Tom didn't tell lies: he told selective truths. Lies might be convenient, but an inconvenient truth was the most efficient method of settling an argument for good—that is, if he'd wanted to argue, and on top of that, come out the victor. And unlike a convenient lie, a barbed truth was still truth, and couldn't be denied.

But this time he could sway the maid's feelings through guilt and pity, and it'd be manipulation, not lying. Tom's grandmother used guilt all the time on other people, and as far as he'd seen, she hadn't looked like she regretted it, or even like she was going to stop at it anytime soon. She was pragmatic; so was he, even though he had some exceptions, a personal standard of integrity, where Mrs. Riddle had none at all.

Hermione was one of his exceptions.
Tom was as honest as he could be around her, as Hermione was someone who didn't need to be cushioned and coddled from confronting the reality of her own existence, as his fellow Slytherins did. Their worlds would fall apart if they were told unequivocally that their names meant nothing and their magical ability was no different—or even inferior—to that of any other witch or wizard in the castle, yes, even including the Muggleborns. It was to Tom's great satisfaction that Hermione had accepted years ago that some people were better than others (or perhaps she'd just stopped trying to argue with him about it), in ways that had nothing to do with name or lineage, even though it was oftentimes necessary for the functioning of society to pretend otherwise, a convenient self-deception in the same category as believing one's local Member of Parliament actually cared about the public good, or that the funds put in the church collection plate were spent on community programmes, and not on the parson's personal comforts.

So Tom didn't lie to her, even if he massaged the truth now and again. But if the maid lied to Hermione, then that was nothing to do with him, was it? He hadn't ordered Becky Murray to do anything but be sensitive. To be tactful.

The real truth was that Tom preferred to keep his participation in The Accident as private as possible. He couldn't say that he felt guilty or remorseful for what he'd done to his father (that would be a lie) but he knew that other people would prefer him to be, or better yet, prefer him not to have been involved at all. Hermione was one person in particular who was better off blissfully ignorant; he knew that she would disapprove, and would never consider any justification for his actions as valid or sensible. He didn't want to argue with her about it (out of the many things they had in common, one was their ability to settle arguments by not arguing at all—it was better than a compromise, as compromising more often than not left both parties dissatisfied) and he knew that Hermione was so soft-hearted that she'd never change her stance if she ever found out about the death of his father's dog.

That had been an accident, of course, but she'd call it murder and make a big deal out of it, her big brown eyes swimming with unshed tears for an animal whose existence she hadn't even known about until it was already dead.

(He had once pointed out, years ago, that her meals had been made from the carcasses of dead animals, and her reaction had not been to acknowledge and embrace his logic. He'd learned then how often her reasoning was tainted by sentimentality and emotion, which he couldn't understand himself, but had come to accept as one of her many charming eccentricities.)

Tom didn't like it when Hermione's eyes looked like that, though he found it difficult to explain why. He knew that it was better when she was smiling than when she was moody, and when she agreed with him instead of trying to draw him into a debate that would inevitably slip into personal criticism when things became too heated. When they weren't rowing, she was more amenable to inviting him to study with her in the Riddle House's library, sitting next to him at dinner, and of course—the most important part—inviting herself into his room to listen to the wireless, where, like clockwork, her eyes would droop at half-past eleven and her head would begin to sag onto his shoulder.

His Christmas had been dreadful, what with putting on the double pretense of being a harmless Muggle and a Good Boy, and suffering all the family experiences his grandmother could fit in, as she'd been under the impression that she had to make up for seventeen years of deprivation with seventeen sets of gifts for his birthday and Christmas Day. Spending time with Hermione had been the redeeming feature of the entire holiday, and the best part—the most noteworthy part that he could not imagine himself forgetting anytime soon—was the first time he'd felt her sleeping form at his
side. His mind had been clouded and his body benumbed from taking a vial of pain potion, but somehow he’d been conscious the whole time of her soft skin and her sweet-scented hair, every single breath and shift in position.

Yes, it was preferable that Hermione not be distracted by a bout of sympathetic indignation—as if his father deserved anyone’s pity—from learning the finer details of The Accident. He might be able to hold his ground in an argument as long as she could, but it would ultimately be counter-productive to the goal he’d established for himself a week and a half ago: that Hermione would be convinced to share with him all his future family Christmases, now and after Hogwarts.

The end of their time at Hogwarts was fast approaching, and Tom could not see his way to lowering himself to the kind of humdrum institutional career path to which Hermione aspired. She’d suggested he join her in applying for positions, either in a Muggle office or the halls of the Ministry, once they’d gotten their N.E.W.T. results. He’d refused to participate in this, but nonetheless, he couldn’t see—couldn’t dare to imagine—he and Hermione parting ways after graduation. They had grown up together, studied together, lived together; it was only logical (by both his clear-sighted rational thinking, and Hermione’s girlishly sentimental thinking) that they be joined in other ways. It would make up for taking their leave of each other during the working week; it would be a clear refutation to anyone who might mistake an ambitious witch climbing her way through the rank-and-file for anything but a proper, respectable young lady.

And it would grant him the opportunity to stop by and bring her a homemade lunch, hang up one of Mary Riddle’s many framed photographs of himself in her office, touch her and hug her and hold her while any witnesses cooed over how sweet it was, rather than how unseemly. For some strange reason, these worthless labels mattered to people. Simple words and titles and symbols changed the way society viewed things; Tom found it puzzling how an official document made it an imprisonable offense for wizards to bait Muggles with magic, but it only took another one to endorse the wizard who Obliviated Muggles into drooling vegetables.

(He’d come up with another good quote for his diary, after giving it some thought: "There is no good or evil, only legitimacy and those who lack the foresight to seek it.")

By the time he and Hermione had transferred to King’s Cross Station and boarded the Hogwarts Express, it was still on his mind: maintaining his reputation in the eyes of the Hogwarts student population was useful, whether it was as an exacting taskmaster to his group of followers, or the polite and helpful Slytherin Prefect to everyone else. In Hermione’s case, her good regard was not just useful: cultivating it was essential to his goals.

Hermione must have shared his sentiments to some degree; in the interest of maintaining a convivial atmosphere for the rest of the holiday, she’d never mentioned Nott after they’d left St. Mungo’s. He’d wondered about that, but kept his thoughts to himself until he had the chance to discern the truth on his own. Until then, he revisited his thoughts and impressions on the boy, gathered over the last few years of sharing a dormitory.

Nott, he’d observed, had never shown anything but disdain for those who could count Muggles anywhere in their family tree—or those suspected to have some trace of Muggle ancestry of any kind. Hermione, on the other hand, had the idea that good company didn’t involve having to stop the conversation every few minutes to explain such basic concepts as significant digits or dependent variables. This ruled out most purebloods, whose private tutoring informed them only on the aspects of natural philosophy which fell in between Aristotle and Plato, to Descartes and Newton.

Tom couldn’t see any real reason why they would tolerate each other’s presence. Hermione didn’t
like it when she was made to feel as if she was anyone's inferior—and for all that Tom was willing to refute her arguments, he'd never denied that she, as an individual, was anything less than Special. Nott, like most of their classmates, would have found Hermione insufferable, which was magnified by her being a witch and not a wizard. Magical Britain was progressive in certain aspects, but in others it was no different from the Muggle world: witches of good breeding (or the witches of lesser family who set their life goals on being chosen to incubate someone's heir) were placed under a similar ideal: a proper woman was domestic and demure, gracious and obliging. Hermione, though she tried to be a Good Girl with a self-imposed standard of moral rectitude, made no attempt to be a Proper Woman. Thus, Tom could see nothing in common between Nott and Hermione but a vigorous and mutual condescension.

It was this which he kept in mind, observing Nott in the train compartment on the way to Hogwarts, during the dinner put on for the returning students, and on the walk from the Great Hall down to the Slytherin dormitories in the dungeons.

Nott hadn't made himself a figure of suspicion. His hair was combed, his uniform as neat but unremarkable as usual. Living in Scotland for most of the year, few of Tom's classmates had anything other than pale British complexions, but Nott in particular seemed to have an aversion to venturing outdoors, dropping Herbology as a class subject right after O.W.L.s, even though it was generally considered an easy way to score an Acceptable N.E.W.T. or higher with Professor Beery's lenient teaching style.

Nott's milk-white skin had a faint blue-ish pallor, with prominent shadowed crescents under his eyes and veining down his temples. He twitched whenever he was directly addressed; when he wasn't, he kept to himself and his books, and trained his eyes on the floor. He spoke to no one unless spoken to. He drew no attention to himself—he tried to, at least, but it didn't take long for their Slytherin dorm mates to pick up that something was off when they saw Tom Riddle staring at one of their number for much too long for comfort.

The opportunity came after everyone had finished exchanging their obligatory greetings in the Common Room, thanking so-and-so's mother for their thoughtful Yule gifts on behalf of their own mothers, swapping homework assignments before they were to be handed in during next morning's class, and comparing who had gotten the best Christmas haul. Curfew came and went; First through Fourth Years were made to go back to the dormitories, the Fifth and Sixth Years began peeling off to their own rooms, and a few Seventh Years commandeered the best sofas and broke out the firewhisky to commemorate the beginning of their last school term.

As the resident Prefect, Tom had to chivvy the stubbornest of the younger stragglers back to their dorms, so he was the last to get back to his own. That was a convenience: the other boys were already inside and half-dressed, unpacking their pyjamas and hanging up their cloaks when Tom entered. With a silent wave of his hand, the doors locked behind him.

"Good evening, gentlemen," said Tom, smiling in what he thought was a benign fashion.

Lestrange coughed. Rosier whirled around, almost dropping his armful of novelty Quidditch socks.

"I hope everyone had a pleasant Christmas holiday," Tom continued, looking at each of his subjects in turn. "I myself had a rather interesting one, but I won't hesitate to confess my eagerness to return to Hogwarts. Back to studying, classes, and of course, all of your familiar faces."

He studied their faces: Lopsided Lestrange, his first acquisition, an excellent second in the Duelling Club, ready to do whatever was necessary to buy an opening for Tom whenever they participated in
doubles duels. Rosier, a sporting fellow with a competitive streak, whose wandwork technique Tom had beaten into shape after two years of training. Avery, an unimaginative lump of a boy, a predictable spell répertoire which Tom had taken pains to expand, easily led once the right idea had been put into his head. Travers, gloomy of disposition, lacking the confidence to put full force behind his spellwork, but one who toughened up with a careful application of backhanded praise.

And finally, Nott. Taciturn, a solitary temperament, the keenest mind with a surprising range to his duelling, though it was limited by his conservatism and caution; he out of the whole group was the most resistant to Tom's brand of personal instruction.

His gaze lingered on the last boy. "Nott. I'd like to speak to you. In private."

Nott, buttoning up his pyjama shirt, glared at the floor. "If you can say it in front of me, you can say it in front of everyone else."

"Hmm," said Tom. "You're being very unco-operative, Nott. I thought we had a... an understanding."

"We do," Nott replied, his brow crinkling. "You can't hurt me. That was part of the agreement."

"You know," said Tom musingly, "you ought to look a man in the eye when you speak to him. Look at me."

Flinching, his shoulders trembling with the effort, Nott's chin lifted up by degrees. His eyes, under lowered lids, met Tom's.

Nott spat between clenched teeth, "You can't hurt me—you promised! We had a truce!"

"I can't act against you with the intent to hurt you," Tom corrected him. "Believe me, I don't want to hurt you. But it can't be helped if you try to resist." His eyes locked on the other boy's, reaching into his robes for his wand. He didn't draw it; instead, he focused his will on a single command: Stay still. Don't move.

He doubled the force of his will when he noticed Nott's hand jerking toward his bed, on which had been laid his folded uniform robes, discarded after changing into his nightshirt. His wand sat atop the pile, made of a light brown wood with wavy ripples along its length from being cut along the grain; it had leafy sprigs carved on the handle—a whimsical touch shared with the design of Hermione's wand, which was patterned with curling vines.

The surface impressions were the first things he sensed of Nott's mind: hot spikes of anxiety, the prickle of fear-sweat gathering moist and clammy in the lines of each palm, the itch of standing hairs at the back of the neck, the light-headedness that came of lungs frozen in mid-breath. Nott shuddered as Tom peered closer, a soft wheeze squeezing out from between his bloodless lips.

"Don't worry, this will be over quickly if you co-operate with me," Tom said, allowing him to breathe, before he plunged into the boy's mind—

"—His name is Riddle; he's a Mudblood—"

A rain of dry white powder, white on black wool, like sieved confectioner's sugar on bittersweet chocolate birthday cake icing. It tickled his nostrils; he felt an oncoming sneeze.
—Does anyone else see it? Has everyone but me gone completely mental? Am I the only one?!

A geometric arrangement of shapes, runes, on the crusty surface of hard-packed snow. Lichen on stone that dripped with icicles, the low eaves of a thatched roof heavy with snow and ice, a path in the snow marked out with a double line of tyre ruts, a few stalks of rotting grey flowers held in a gloved hand.

—That's a remarkable claim to make...

Nott moaned, and the succession of images and sounds began to recede, fading into black obscurity. A pinprick of migraine blossomed into existence in the back of Tom's own head, gaining in size and magnitude like an avalanche bearing down to the timberline, drawing more and more material unto itself as it tumbled into a downhill freefall.

For an instant, he saw himself sitting inside a train compartment, levitating an unhappy snake.

"What is this? What is this!" it hissed, and then—

"What's this, Mr. Riddle? What in Merlin's name have you done to yourself?" said the green-robed Healer, bending over him with a shining silver knife, charmed to repel blood as it sliced open his pyjama trousers at the hip. She inspected his wound, then pronounced, "We'll have to perform an extraction before we go any further with sealing this up. Gordon, fetch the forceps—looks like there's something strange stuck in here, lodged in the bone. Right there, the upper ilium—"

And then he was off the operating table and sitting upright in a chair. He was a boy, a young one—there was a dog, a whiskered wolfhound with a golden rune collar, its great shaggy head resting on its paws—they were in a library full of tall shelves and dusty grimoires, and on his lap was a book of wandlore, open to one thick vellum page titled with illuminated golden letters: *Snakewood and Horne of Serpente*.

The images blurred and congealed, and it became impossible to discern where he was, who he was, in the whirling tumult of colour and noise. He was tall, and then he was short; he was young, and then was even younger, and then he was the same as he was now; the view he saw went up and down, dark and dingy one second, then blindingly overexposed in the next. His fingers throbbed where he'd been rapped with a wooden spoon for taking more than his share in the dining hall lunch queue; the pain radiated from the red lines pressed into the whorls of his fingertips where he'd been plucking the metal harp strings for the last two hours—Mother said the callus would come in and then it wouldn't hurt as much; this small suffering on his part was worth it to preserve a historic artform—

He was Tom Riddle, and at the same time, he wasn't Tom Riddle. Time distorted; the years stretched like taffy, drawn in between two disparate lives connected mind to mind, the resilience of two melded consciousnesses searching for parallels to counter the force pulling them between diametric poles.

With the slightest of shifts, the throbbing in his hand morphed into the humming vibrato of a baroque string quartet played over a crackling wireless—the strings of a zither strummed in a harmonic duet with Celtic harp, a dog howling along to a lively folk ditty played for the solstice feast—musicians in white tuxedos warming up on a bandstand, the air hazed with tobacco smoke and the chatter of a hundred guests, while a girl smiled up at him, one hand reaching for his, the other settling onto his shoulder...
More and more familiar images appeared and were soon swept away, replaced by others, linked by a tangential association of sensory context or emotional resonance. They were his memories, and when they weren’t, he saw only blackness: garbled syllables of sound without image, or blurry moving figures divorced of atmosphere and identity. He tried to look closer, but they fled like shadows under a moving beam of light, and when he followed, he found himself pressed against a peculiar wall of resistance, pliant to an extent—but somehow, utterly impassable.

No matter how he pushed, how he grappled and sought for leverage against it, the wall didn't budge; he willed it to move, imagining a spear point gouging into the black wall, like a ballista brought to siege...

"Riddle?"

A distant voice broke his concentration. His mental visualisation stuttered and softened at the edges.

"What's going on?" said another voice. "Riddle? Nott?"

With one disorienting heave, Tom was ejected from the stream of images and back into the physical world, back to the Slytherin dormitory, to the corner of the room where his and Nott's four-poster beds stood closest to the green glass windows. His vision swam like he was looking through the glass, as if he was wearing thick spectacles with each lens ground to a different prescription.

When his vision came back into focus, he saw that Nott had fallen to the floor before him. The boy's silk tussar pyjamas were wrinkled, the lapel on the right side spotted with vivid drops of scarlet blood, the same blood that was smeared across his lips and chin and the back of his hand, where he'd wiped it away with a careless hand.

"What was that?" asked Rosier, bending over to help Nott off the floor and sit up on his bed. "Do you need a potion? I have some hangover potions in my trunk left over from Christmas."

"What'd you do to him?" Lestrange asked, glancing from Nott to Tom, his eyes alight with hungry curiosity. "You didn't even draw your wand! How'd you do that? That was incredible!"

Travers cut in, his voice breathless and awed. "It's Legilimency—it's got to be."

"Isn't that a Dark Art?" said Avery, ambling over and eyeing Nott's rather rumpled form with a look of contempt.

"No," Travers said, shaking his head. "It's restricted magic, though. The only ones who openly use and study it are the Wizengamot courtroom interrogator and his apprentice. And they would never let anyone catch them doing it unauthorised, no matter how much your family offers to pay them for off-the-books tutoring."

"Shame about that," said Avery. "It sounds dead useful."

"I'm right here, you know," Nott interrupted, his voice nasally from where he'd pinched the bridge of his nose to stem the flow of blood. By now, he'd retrieved his wand and had started siphoning the blood from his face.

"It is," Travers agreed. "Wonder who taught Riddle."

At that, all eyes in the room turned to Tom.
"Dumbledore's giving me private lessons," said Tom, with a casual shrug of his shoulders. It was true.

"Dumbledore?" Nott sounded incredulous, although it was hard to tell with his consonants slurred together. "B-bud—you're a Slydderin!"

"I must be special, then," Tom said. "You should be sure to remember that, if we're to get along."

"You're nod making id easy!" Nott grumbled.

"Well, I can't deny having a vested interest in seeing you fail," Tom admitted.

Rosier sucked in a slow breath. "What did you do? You didn't make a wager, did you?"

"Id's nudding I can't handle!" Nott said insistently, glaring at Rosier. "Keep oud of id!"

"We've got to hear this now," said Lestrange. "Come on, Nott—what did you bet on? The winner of this year's Quidditch Cup? The top spot in the Duelling Club? Or who can get up Granger's skirt first?"

"Excuse me," Tom spoke in a cold voice, "what does Granger have to do with this?"

Lestrange gave a derisive snort. "Nott has been tailing her like a little sneak—"

Nott cut him off before he could finish his sentence. "We bed that I could find the Chamber of Secreds by our last day of Hogwards!"

A sudden silence fell in the dormitory, and then all the boys began speaking at once.

"It doesn't exist—"

"—It's just a legend—"

"—Someone would've found it by now—"

"—Twenty galleons on Riddle—"

"Quiet," said Tom.

Silence resumed once more.

"Nott thinks it's real enough to stake a wager on it," he said. "We should respect his decision, and his intention to make good on it, no matter how unlikely the outcome. And fortune, as they say, favours the bold. A little too Gryffindor-ish for my taste, but perhaps one needs some good fortune to track down Slytherin's long-lost chamber. And a touch of Hufflepuff persistence, too—they say that Hufflepuffs make the best finders."

"It is real," said Nott.

"You have no proof," Tom replied, who'd dug around in Nott's head and hadn't found anything but snippets of dialogue and brief glimpses of childhood memories.
"We'll see."

"Oh, will we?"

"I... I think I have a lead."

Tom lifted his wand.

"I-it's not here right now," said Nott hastily. "But I know where it is. I just need to get it."

"Well," said Tom, giving him an unimpressed look, "go and get it, then."

Nott glared at him, but Tom ignored it, unpacking his own trunk and pyjamas. He changed in the bathroom and returned to his four-poster, which was just as he remembered: thick, green enchanted drapes that retained the heat through the coldest nights of winter, embroidered bedcovers and pillowcases, a carved wooden headboard and posts with a fetching snake motif. Except... the bed felt smaller tonight than he was used to, and when he rolled around on his back, then on his side, he couldn't find a comfortable enough position to fall asleep.

As midnight approached, the other boys finished their homework and dimmed their lamps and wand lights. On the other side of Tom's curtains, he could see that Nott's light was still lit.

January passed in a string of cold and sunless days.

Students wore their House scarves to class and meals, instead of reserving them for the outdoors and weekend Quidditch games. They huddled together in the mornings, walking to the Great Hall for breakfast, white clouds of steam puffing out between their chattering teeth. The older students cast Warming Charms on the younger students, and on the owls when they arrived to deliver the morning paper, shedding flakes of ice over the food. Astronomy, taking place on the rare nights clear of heavy stormclouds, had quickly become everyone's least favourite subject.

February came, and with it was the first of the Hogwarts Apparition lessons, taught by a witch with a Ministry badge and a superior air. She held her wand in one hand and a steel ruler in the other, one metre long and marked with lines and numbers; the last foot was lettered in red and said 'ACCEPTABLE EXAMINABLE DEVIATION'.

Tom found Apparition an interesting magical exercise. It being a standard rite of passage for wizarding adulthood, next to one's first drink of firewhisky, information about the theory of magical teleportation hadn't been hard to find in the Hogwarts library. It wasn't even necessary to ask for a note to the Restricted Section to pick out a good selection of reading materials.

(Not that Slughorn would have put much effort into turning him down or re-directing him to more safer subjects of study. He'd signed Tom's Statutory Declaration without reading the text when Tom
had brought it to him after one Friday night Slug Club dinner. Tom had expected to have to do weeks more buttering up to have the Riddle House entered in the Ministry's records; now he had to wait until summer to have the Floo installed, as he couldn't see the maids letting in anyone dressed as wizards usually did, with bathing costumes worn over a cassock, their underwear on the outside, or displaying the greatest moral transgression of all: cross-dressing.)

Apparition was more like Transfiguration than any other magical discipline, in particular, the Switching Spells they'd been tested on in last year's O.W.L.s. Only this was more advanced, as it was not just a switch of two discrete objects—they'd practised in class with two inanimate objects and moved on to small animals—but one living object and a mass of empty air, which caused the distinctive popping sound when it was suddenly displaced.

And, of course, it counted as a human Transfiguration, which meant any mistakes were more serious than when some incompetent student accidentally Switched half their mouse and left the other half on the opposite side of the classroom. With those, one could just Vanish the mess and move on, but here, the whole class was put on hold, and Tom forced to spend several long minutes listening to one of his classmates scream while the instructor and the Hospital Wing's Mediwitch came over to re-attach the splinched limbs and count how many fingers were still presumed missing.

The textbooks, from Tom's professional opinion, were a more time efficient method for learning to Apparate than the official instruction: the core tenets of the discipline were 'Destination, Determination, and Deliberation', which was not much different from what he'd learned in First Year Charms, and still applied to his present classes—Incantation, Visualisation, and Gesticulation. By the end of his first lesson, he'd come to the conclusion that the textbooks had the same information as the Ministry instructor, and the only practical benefit of attending the class was the ability to practice in a convenient location, without having to walk a whole mile out to Hogsmeade, which lay outside the Hogwarts grounds' Anti-Apparition wards.

He treated it as a mental exercise, and after the fourth lesson, had proven himself able to Apparate in and out of the practice hoop at will. The professors had been impressed, Slughorn awarding him twenty-five points for being the first to get it without splinching himself, and even the instructor had come over and asked him to repeat his success just to confirm it hadn't been a fluke.

The trick wasn't just to visualise the destination—the bit of floor within the bounds of a wooden hoop—but to instead visualise the journey. He imagined his body, all of it, every particle, hair, organ, and limb, entering an in-between place where things Vanished after being hit with an Evanesco, and then, once he'd felt the eerie squeezing sensation of his mass being pulled apart and re-distributed, he focused his mind on the hoop, drawing out every single detail in his imagination: every crack and join of the stone floor, the flickering shadows cast by the wall torches, the smooth, polished finish of the hoop, the pattern of wood fibres on its varnished surface.

"Very precise. Commendable effort," said the Ministry instructor, using her metal ruler to measure the distance between his hoop and the two hoops of the students on either side of him, to check whether or not he'd cheated on accuracy by moving the goalhoops. "We offer student group
examinations in April and in August, depending on the month of their birth, and their skill level during scheduled sessions. You've so far showed great aptitude—though I wouldn't have expected anything less for one of dear old Horace's hand-picked Prefects. Will you be registering for the April examination, Mister—"

"Riddle," said Tom, smiling pleasantly at her.

The instructor frowned, and her eyes darted to the Slytherin crest on his robes. "A Muggleborn then, are you?"

"Excuse me, madam!" Hermione interrupted, from where she'd been listening (and fidgeting in consternation) as the instructor had gone down the row to talk to several Slytherin students and heap praise on Tom, all the while ignoring her. "What does his blood status have to do with anything? I don't suppose that question's on the examination, is it!"

The instructor, a thin woman in severe, high-collared robes with a Ministry brooch pinned to her breast, turned to Hermione. "You might find, Miss, that examinations—important as they may be—are not the sole determination of one's ability... or one's future. Decorum is one where many are judged and—" she gave Hermione a sharp top-to-toe inspection, followed by a sniff, "—found wanting. Proper wizarding pride is another. How are civil servants, representatives and functionaries of a wizarding nation, meant to perform their duties if they lack an understanding of their constituents' best interests?"

"Well," huffed Hermione, "that sounds very discriminatory to me! I've never heard 'wizarding pride' used in any other way but to mean wizarding conservatism."

"Pardon me, madam," said Tom, "but if one has, as you call it, proper wizarding pride—and proper decorum, naturally—does it really matter if one is a Muggleborn or a half-blooded wizard?"

The instructor's expression softened as Tom put on his Good Boy face and straightened his shoulders—enough to show his good posture and fine conformation to best advantage, and but not enough to tower over the woman in an intimidating or aggressive manner. There was a balance to it, just as there was in widening his eyes so he looked guileless, but not naïve.

"Officially, it is not in the Ministry's practice to inquire on the parentage of prospective employees and contractees," said the woman, "but unofficially, good impressions and favourable character references count for a great deal. And that is not strictly limited to the Ministry."

She glanced in Hermione's direction and gave a sniff of displeasure.

"As a hypothetical question, and just a small matter of personal curiosity," said Tom. "I've wondered: is it possible to be both a proponent of wizarding pride and social reform? I've nothing against tradition, you see, but... well, I don't know how to put it any better than this: I'm a Slytherin."

Tom gave her a bashful smile and lifted one hand to sheepishly brush against the lapel of his uniform robe, where his Prefect badge was pinned right above his Slytherin crest. "I'm also given to understand that most modern traditions have had to start somewhere, and being a Slytherin—as I presume that you might have been not very long ago, Madam—ambition on the grand scale would hardly be a deterrent to us, would it?"

The instructor (Tom hadn't bothered to learn her name) let off a light laugh and covered her mouth, while Hermione folded her arms and scowled at him; she could tell that he was playing the boyish
charm up so much that it bordered on being a parody of himself. He couldn't comprehend why she was upset about it: this flattery, obsequious or not, had in the past gotten Slughorn to unlock the bookcase in the back of his office after one extended dinner, and from that, Tom and Hermione had had the chance to look at some of the antique potion books in Sluggy's private collection. Old and faded things they were, and locked up for good reason—the recipes were very dark, and as the professor had turned the pages to show off the moving illustrations, Tom had seen one or two ingredient lists that called for human body parts. It was more exciting reading material than could be found in the library's Restricted Section, and Slughorn was quick to claim that he only owned them for their historical value.

"Those who venture into the world of wizarding politics choose their words carefully," the instructor said. "And they learn which ones their audience considers vulgar. The word 'reform', Mr. Riddle, to many ears, is synonymous with radicalism... and revolution."

"I see," said Tom, nodding politely. "It may well work for the rest of Europe, but I suppose Britain prefers to remain above all the upheaval."

"Our Ministry is the pillar of certainty in the midst of chaos and disorder," replied the instructor, her narrow chest swelling with pride.

After a few more minutes of casual exchange about the Ministry and what kind of job opportunities were available for someone enrolled for ten N.E.W.T. subjects, he had the woman well buttered up, and she'd made no more reference or enquiry on the nature of Tom's blood status. Instead, she praised his dedication and ability, saying that it couldn't be clearer proof that he was a 'proper wizard'. Tom had a business card pressed on him, embossed with the seal of the Department of Magical Transportation. Reading the directions listed on the back, he learned that the instructor's name was Madam Elodia Netherfield of the Apparition Licensing and Examinations Office, and her Floo connection call number was M.O.M. Level 6/39C.

"Can I make a copy of it?" Hermione asked, when the instructor had gone to berate a group of Gryffindors who had started playing a game of stick-and-hoop with their wands, having gotten bored with Apparition practice. (It was foolish of them; the Hogwarts lessons were free, and those who failed were expected to come back next year, or pay for further lessons and arrange their own exams during the summer.)

"Why would you want her card?" said Tom, handing it over, whereupon Hermione cast a quick Geminio to duplicate it. "She's a stuffed shirt who wouldn't recognise innovation unless it whacked her off at the neck."

"Tom! Shhh!" said Hermione, looking both ways to ensure the instructor was still busy brandishing her long ruler at the Gryffindors. Dumbledore, the Gryffindor Head of House, just looked bemused by their antics and hadn't subtracted any points. "I've always been interested in working at this particular department, I'll have you know. Maybe less, now that I've seen what sort of people work there, but I can also see the need for fresh ideas. Goodness, a 'pillar of certainty'? I don't advocate for revolution, not the kind of bloody one that Grindelwald espouses, but surely they must see how easy it is to slip into stagnation with that kind of thinking."

"And you think you can fix it?"

"If they let me!" said Hermione. "Though I should at some point like to confirm how entrenched this 'wizarding pride' nonsense goes. It did seem very important to Madam Netherfield, even if the Ministry won't acknowledge it on paper."
Tom shrugged. "It only matters if you give her opinion any weight. Which I don't."

"Well, of course you don't care, it's not like you're a—"

A pink flush stained Hermione's cheeks before she cut herself off abruptly.

"I'm not a—what?"

"A... a witch," Hermione finished half-heartedly. "Men can be career-minded and aggressive about it, you see, and everyone will praise them for how assertive and ambitious they are. But women in the workplace—when we're allowed to take the same positions—will be judged as screeching harpies for behaving in a similar fashion. It's not very fair at all."

"No, it isn't," agreed Tom; for most of his life, he hadn't put much thought into what was fair or unfair unless it applied to himself. But the idea of Hermione, his Hermione, being treated poorly by stupid, parchment-shuffling bureaucrats was, for some reason, personally offensive. "You've more patience for it than I. I don't believe that politics, especially day-to-day office politics, would ever suit me."

"I'd still like to tour the Ministry offices," Hermione mused. "I don't have a family friend who works at the Ministry and has visitor passes to throw around. It's a shame that Hogwarts doesn't do school tours like Muggle schools do—when I was in primary, we visited a steel foundry, although that was more for educational purposes than a vocational introduction. She looked up at him, her eyes alight with sudden inspiration. "Tom, don't you have a Press Badge?"

"Yes," said Tom, who kept it with his bags of galleons in the bottom of his trunk, beneath his collection of spellcrafting textbooks. Not that anyone in his dorm ever went through his trunk to borrow a pair of clean socks; he'd trained them all too well for that.

"Would you consider lending it?" said Hermione. "Doesn't it let you interview Ministry workers?"

"Presumably. But I haven't ever tried it."

Tom's limited experience with "journalism" didn't involve reporting news, interviewing important personages, or discussing the personal lives of politicians or the few celebrities that existed in the wizarding world, which was limited to professional Quidditch players, their spouses and managers, stage actors, and the spokeswitches for various garment and cosmetic brands. He'd made it a solitary job, his only point of contact with another person being his editor, who asked for more or less content depending on how many pages they needed to fill for the next issue, and forwarded his fan mail when it began to overflow his London post box.

"Well... do you mind if I borrow it sometime—if you're not using it yourself?"

"I suppose I wouldn't mind..." said Tom.

"Thank you, Tom, you're the best," Hermione said, and then she rushed up and threw her arms around his middle.

"Of course I am," said Tom, resting his chin on top of Hermione's fluffy hair. "You should tell me when you want to visit, in advance. That way we can arrange a time to go together."
He enjoyed the feeling of having Hermione so close, which he had missed in the weeks since Christmas holiday. Their brief moments together were nice, but it always felt like a shadow of the real article, the way a Conjured object was a transient imitation of something grown out of the earth and worked by human hands. The inadequacies could be overlooked for the first minute or so, but the more time one spent scrutinising and comparing the two articles, the greater and more irrevocable the differences seemed to be.

A few seconds later, Hermione's arms dropped from his sides and she made to step away, but couldn't, because Tom was still holding on.

"Tom?"

"Hermione."

She let out a heavy sigh. "You do this every time."

"And you know that I'll keep doing it."

"But we're supposed to be practising Apparition!"

"We can practise Apparition like this," said Tom. "Just stay still."

"What are you—"

Tom's arms tightened around Hermione, his eyes narrowing as he focused on the hoop a few feet away. He'd Apparated without splinching, and that was due to having a clear visualisation of himself, before imagining the transition to nothingness and then out the other side. It was a bit tricky to add Hermione's mass to his visualisation, but he was beyond passing familiar with her size and shape.

*Pop!*

The sensation, as usual, hadn't got any more tolerable the more times he'd Disapparated. If he had to describe the feeling, it was like passing through a turnstile gate while someone else was trying to get through from the other direction at the same time, pressing the bars down on him with more and more force to barge their way past, while another set of bars at his back dug into him like the springs of his orphanage mattress. It was uncomfortable, but when he considered it, it wasn't as disorienting as living in two bodies simultaneously, or returning to his own body after accustoming himself to having eight segmented limbs.

This pain—no, not even pain; he'd learned what true pain was over Christmas holiday, and this was simply a mild discomfort—was short-lived and worth suffering, for the speed and convenience it gave to magical transportation.

Hermione staggered and tripped on the edge of the hoop—which wasn't meant to fit more than one person—but Tom caught her until she'd found her feet.

"Tom!" Hermione cried, looking slightly green, and to his pleasure, she'd resumed her hold around his waist.

"As you said, I *am* the best," said Tom.
It seemed that Slughorn agreed with him, for Tom was soon awarded another twenty-five points for a successful Side-Along Apparition. It wasn't tested on the examination, but it was a fair indication that one had mastered Apparition. For his demonstration, Madam Netherfield gave Tom an approving nod and wrote him a note that excused him from the rest of the student practice sessions up to the group exam date set for late April.

At the end of the lesson, both Hermione and Nott had managed to Apparate without splinching, which won ten points each for Ravenclaw and Slytherin.

The textbooks said that prior experience with Side-Along Apparition made independent Apparition easier for the student trainee; passengers felt the squeeze of the transition just as strongly as the navigator, and learning to grasp that peculiar phase of "non-being" as required was the whole purpose of their Ministry-overseen lessons. Tom was pleased to note that his own practical experimentation had culminated in Hermione's own success—though he kept the information to himself, not wanting to dim the delighted grin that had spread over her face once she'd landed in her own hoop for the first time.

Nott, he assumed, had prior experience Apparating with his house elf servant, that wrinkly little thing he'd seen in the hospital foyer that resembled a hairless ladies' lapdog, only overgrown and walking around on two legs. It even had a dog's collar, which matched the one he'd seen in Nott's memories, golden and imprinted with runes, sealed around the throat of the grey hound with a longer coat and sturdier build than the one his father owned.

Had owned, rather.

The memories that he'd gotten from the boy were still confusing, even weeks after their confrontation. It was unlike the times he'd delved through the Acromantula's mind, or even his father's; afterwards, he'd gone back to the room in the dungeons where the spider had been locked up over Christmas, and tested his skill on it, and he'd found that, no, it hadn't deteriorated over the break, and he could rummage through the monotonous internal routines of sleeping in a wooden box and eating melted chicken, just as he'd done months ago.

Nott was the anomaly: he'd resisted Tom's power. Not entirely—Tom had seen him, seen his mind, been him, in that short time he'd had access to the boy's mind. But it hadn't been free access, had it? Half the images he'd seen were from his own memories, and the ones that weren't, the threads of colour and sound that he'd tried to catch and follow to their source, had been barred from his reach. He'd been told that mind magic was a rare and restricted art; Dumbledore had lectured him during their teatime conversations, giving a stern warning on the value of discretion and prudence when it came to exercising his talents outside of the professor's office. If he hadn't been told, Tom would have suspected Nott of performing basic Occlumency.

It was curious, especially as the first time he'd really used his powers to delve into a human mind, it had been Nott's mind, in the dormitory bathroom over a year ago. Nott had tried to resist then, and their connection had snapped after he'd broken off eye contact. It bore further study, as the most interesting things he'd seen this time around were scenes of Nott's childhood. They were as interesting as watching Hermione's owl, Gilles, devour garden voles on his bedroom windowsill—educational, surely, and entertaining if there weren't any orphans in dire need of disciplinary reinforcement, but in the end they hadn't provided him with the answers he'd been seeking.

They hadn't given Tom anything incriminating.

What, for instance, was the nature of Nott's peculiar relationship with Hermione Granger? There
was no trace of her in his memory. Why would Nott risk his life on what Tom had assumed was a bluff? *Was it even a bluff?*

He was absolutely certain that Nott was guilty of something—it was just a matter of finding out what it was.

The truce they'd made wouldn't stop him from looking for an ulterior motive. It would be foolish *not* to look deeper, because people didn't chase wild geese for no reason. They did it because they believed that those geese were real, and were capable of laying golden eggs.

No one sought the Fountain of Fair Fortune unless they had a magical wish for which they'd risk the journey. To his detriment, he knew the story that Nott had mentioned, as it had been a stage play put on a few years ago by Professor Beery and a dozen students who'd stayed at the castle for Christmas holiday. Tom had also looked up the Hallows in the library card catalogue and had been directed to a tatty old children's book in the wizarding literature section, a shelf that contained many romance novels with titles like *The Landgrave of Castle Cöpenick* or *The Mysterious Mister Maximilian*, adorned with lurid frontispieces of pale-faced young men with severe widow's peaks, frothy lace cravats, and extravagant frock coats. (He assumed that this was the type of literature that was written for an audience of young witches, the same way *Le Jardin Parfumé* was prized by young wizards.)

Those who hunted the Hallows were the same sort of person, who, in the Muggle world, would have been after Excalibur, the Holy Grail, or bits of the True Cross. These people were under the mistaken impression that uniting these historical relics would make them the Rightful King of England, or the next Pope, or grant them divine powers—and that last one was ridiculous to Tom, who knew that divine powers were a question of birth, not bequest. Collecting magical sticks wouldn't make Muggles magical, even if they'd once been owned by the likes of Jesus Christ or Garrick Ollivander.

Nott wanted to find the Chamber of Secrets.

This was a topic not so easily found in the Hogwarts library, falling as it did in the murky area between wizarding history and magical folklore. Tom knew, as every junior Slytherin did, about the history of their House's founder, Salazar Slytherin. It had been a story the Prefects had told by the Common Room fireplace back in First Year, and it was taught more as a moral lesson than an objective recounting of historical fact. Slytherin had been a great wizard; he'd quarrelled with his co-founders; he left the castle but was remembered to this very day by his proud successors, which included this year's intake of Firsties, yes indeed...

Tom, listening to the Prefects, had taken it as an origin story, and like most origin stories—especially ones imparted to young children—had soon relegated it in his mind as blatant propaganda at worst, and inconsequential trivia at best.

Who cared about Salazar Slytherin? Hogwarts was the man's greatest work, and he had been so unwise as to argue with his collegues three against one, instead of cornering them one-by-one and persuading them to his side in slow increments, starting with Rowena Ravenclaw. (She seemed like the most sensible and pragmatic of the three.) That was the real lesson there, that sometimes one had to compromise, or at least pander to the audience, to get what one wanted from them.

(The most sensible decision, as Tom had deduced after hearing the tale, had been for Slytherin to outwardly agree with the other founders, while keeping his personal experiments and ideals a secret. Tom had read in *The Times* about the concept of the 'Fifth Column', an infiltrator who undermined a group from the inside, and thought Slytherin could have made a good Fourth Column had he been
more inclined toward subtlety.)

The weeks passed toward April, and Nott set about uncovering more information on the Chamber, while Tom maintained his distance, indifferent to the prospect of contributing to the quest. There were other things to distract him: Apparition lessons were no longer on his agenda, but the end of Sixth Year was drawing close, and with it came Hermione's stressing about the N.E.W.T.s, looking into career opportunities after school, and her ever-present anxiety about the state of the war. London and the Home Counties were still being raided by the Germans, and on the Continent, it didn't look as if the volunteer resistance against Grand Minister Grindelwald was making much headway.

The Muggles had made some efforts into liberating Southern Europe, but on the magical side, Grindelwald still had a strong core of support in occupied Scandinavia and central Europe. Wizards on the Continent didn't pay much attention to modern political borders, but language and social class were a uniting factor, and members of the monied classes of each magical nation—those who were both influential and well-placed—had in recent months become targets of conversion... or destruction.

Hermione had been upset about this, reading the newspapers forwarded to her from the underground press in Leiden. She compared them to the headlines of The Daily Prophet she'd borrowed from Clarence Fitzpatrick, which relayed the usual procession of Quidditch scores, human-interest stories, and gaudy moving photographs of the latest society birthday or engagement announcement.

"We ought to pay a visit to the Ministry before the holidays," she said. "You're a journalist, Tom! If anyone could find out what the Ministry of Magic is suppressing, it's you."

"I'd never be able to publish anything classified," Tom pointed out. He doubted his readership, who had minimal patience for things that couldn't improve the quality of their daily lives, would find anything of interest in international news.

"No," said Hermione slowly, "but it'll be worth it to know if the Ministry is even doing anything about the war. And if they're not..." She trailed off, her lips pursing and her expression twisted into one of conflicted apprehension. "Well, we're both adults by wizarding standards now, so I can't stop you from thinking about an Order of Merlin, since I know you well enough to suspect that not bringing it up in conversation all the time doesn't mean you've forgotten about it..."

"I haven't," Tom confirmed. "But I'm surprised that you aren't trying to dissuade me."

"To be truthful," said Hermione, "I don't think I could. But I know that if I told you to be careful and think through your decisions—instead of being impatient and greedy—you'd listen to me."

"The fact that you don't believe it when I say that we were meant for each other," said Tom, looking so intently at Hermione that she looked away and down at her hands, "astounds me."
Another unnecessarily long chapter of delusional Tom being delusional. If this version of Tom was a Muggle millennial, he'd be the bento box lunch making husband who shows up at workplace barbecues with duck confit and a homemade lattice top pie and makes everyone jealous of how Instagram-perfect he is at everything.

"There is no good or evil, only legitimacy and those who lack the foresight to seek it," is a play on a classic Voldemort quote. It's a sign of how much development Tom's character has undergone in that he recognises there are other types of power than pure magical prowess. However, he still doesn't recognise conventional morality.

Credit for the Department of Magical Transportation logo goes to the movie graphic design team, Mina Lima.
The concept of 'Slytherin politics' was a blatant misnomer.

First of all, it wasn't anything close to real politics, which was a game of grand visions backed by gunboats, velvet gloves, vested interests, and demographic solicitation.

Real world politics had costs and consequences, and a reach far greater than the population of one rambling castle in the Scottish highlands. The 'politics'—if such a word could be applied to Hogwarts—was not much different to that of Hermione's Muggle primary school; it consisted of a handful of notables who climbed their way up by cultivating an arbitrary list of personal attributes, the most important of which was their popularity amongst students and teachers.

And secondly: politicking wasn't limited to Slytherins.

Members of any House could be popular, or be desirous of popularity. Tiberius McLaggen, of the Grandtully McLaggens, was a Gryffindor and a blusterer; instead of changing into his uniform in his locker room or dormitory after practice like every other member of a House team, he wore his Gryffindor Quidditch robes to meals, sweaty and windswept and rougishly dishevelled. Bernard MacMillan of Hufflepuff, cousin-by-marriage to Head Girl Lucretia Black and the Fifth Year Slytherin Prefect, Orion Black, made that fact—along with his other connections—clear from first introduction; he introduced himself to as many people as he could for this very reason.

But whatever Hermione personally made of it, it was undeniable that Tom Riddle was the most popular student at Hogwarts, favoured by most of the professors and well-regarded by his classmates and peers, as an "Alright fellow, for a Slytherin", a compliment made even greater by the lack of any vocal disagreement. Among Slytherins, Tom was much esteemed; he'd soundly beaten everyone his own age in academics or duelling, and assisted all those younger with schoolwork or exam advice as part of his Prefect duties. Popular consensus had firmly decided that he would be next year's Head Boy, and when asked about it during his weekly Slug Club dinners, Professor Slughorn's typical response was to wag a sticky, sugar-dusted finger and drop a meaningful wink.

Among Slytherins, Nott was at the lowest rung of popularity for their year, which Hermione had thought odd for someone with a close connection with the infamous book, The Pure-Blood Directory. But as she'd grown to know him, Hermione realised that he lacked the social dexterity to massage his own reputation, as Tom would have done, had he been such a figure of notoriety or controversy. Beyond that, Nott was supercilious to a fault: where his father had alienated a number of wealthy, prominent pureblooded families—the Diggories, the Potters, the Smiths—for their political leanings, Nott dismissed anyone he believed to be unworthy of his time and association, which appeared to include just about everyone at Hogwarts.

It would be unusual—remarkable, really—for Nott to associate with other students for anything other than academic obligation. For many years, this aloofness had served him well; Hermione had reason to think that Nott enjoyed being distant and unapproachable—which Tom was too, but he, in contrast, had constructed an impression of cool dignity rather than Nott's sullen arrogance. And just as Nott avoided other people, everyone else in turn had enjoyed not having to deal with him. But now, under the pressure of a time-limited task, it was interesting seeing Nott try to scramble for
Hermione had gotten into the habit of staying at the library until the librarian extinguished the lamps at eight in the evening. She knew that Tom would invite her to dinner with Professor Slughorn on Friday nights, and those went on past ten o'clock before Slughorn finished passing around the cheese platter and had taken a look at his hourglass. Since she, Tom, and many of their fellow Sixth Years had observed their seventeenth birthdays in the past half year, Slughorn hadn't hesitated to break open the wine and his favourite oak-matured mead, and it was due to this that Hermione had taken to writing off Friday evenings and the following Saturday morning when it came to her homework schedule.

She was in the library one Thursday evening, not long after they'd had their first Apparition lesson with a Ministry representative. She'd been frustrated at how difficult it had been to Apparate—she'd expected to succeed by the end of her first lesson, in the same manner that she always understood a new concept or mastered a new technique by the time the professor called an end to the day's class. She hadn't, and it was extremely frustrating; she'd decided to read over all the textbooks that the library could offer on the subject. Perhaps her lack of proficiency had been due to the Ministry instructor not explaining Apparition well enough. If that was the case, then it was better to get a second, third, or fourth opinion from multiple other sources.

That was where Nott cornered her, a heavy parchment folio clamped under his arm.

"I've found some more information on the whereabouts of the Chamber, Granger," Nott announced, striding up to her table without wasting time on a greeting. "You have to look at this!"

He slapped the folio down over her open textbook, scattering quills over the table.

"You're dragging me into this?" Hermione said, sliding her inkwell over to the side before it could be tipped over by Nott's stack of musty parchments. "You were the one who made the deal with him—without giving me a word in advance, thanks."

It was that to which Hermione most took offense; she made sure Nott could not mistake her tone and bearing for anything other than displeasure.

"It has everything to do with you," said Nott, not put off by Hermione's stiffly folded arms and refusal to budge over to one side of the desk. He summoned a chair from another table across the aisle and slid it right next to hers. "You're the one who said that Tom Riddle deserved a useless courtesy title in lieu of his misbegotten uncle, Morfin Gaunt. This is how he's going to get it, don't you see? The true Heir of Slytherin is the wizard who can open the Chamber of Secrets."

"And you think you can make yourself the next Merlin?" said Hermione.

"What are you on about?" said Nott. "Only Riddle is so arrogant as to think something like that."

"The Chamber—the quest for the true Heir!" cried Hermione. "By tomorrow, you'll be looking for stones to hide swords in."

"Oh, Granger," said Nott, giving her a sharp look, "you make it sound so blunt and unflattering. But I do see what you mean. Riddle, as much potential as we both know he has, is a newcomer to proper wizarding society. Old lineage or not. Can't be helped, but it can be countervailed. Riddle, if he wants to get anywhere, needs a guide. A mentor. An advisor to show him the way things are done here."
"Professor Slughorn has been willing to take him on since First Year," Hermione pointed out. "Why would Tom listen to you?"

"Old Sluggy wants Riddle to join the Ministry and make a respectable man of himself," Nott scoffed. "As respectable as a man can be when he's the Undersecretary's junior filing clerk and glorified tea boy." He leaned in closer to Hermione, his pale eyes flinty under the glow of the desk lamp. "He's better than that—I know it, and you know it. Riddle'll know it too, once he sees and recognises his true heritage. I know what he's like—too much for comfort lately—and he'll come around when I show him that the Chamber is real. What it means. And what it's capable of."

"I don't know why you keep saying it's real."

"It is!" said Nott, pushing over the folio to her side of the desk. "I've dug out some new information—here."

Reluctantly, Hermione opened up the front cover, revealing a stack of crinkled papers, spotted along the margins with inkbLOTS and red smears that looked to be strawberry jam. There were even little strawberry seeds stuck between the pages.

The pages, once she began to read them, were in Nott's neat handwriting; it contained a list of entries that together formed a rough timeline of the Gaunt family. Line after line of genealogical charts, beginning in the fourteenth century, the Early Modern English almost impenetrable to her contemporary eyes. The family of Gaunt had planted its roots in Ireland, had branches written out on half-sheets stuffed in between, forming appendices that listed off-shoots of the family, and showed a trail of documentation that had petered off by the mid-nineteenth century.

One of the last entries of the eighteen-hundreds—and the most detailed one of that century—was a bill of transfer copied from the Department of Administrative Registration, notifying the Ministry of a change in status of an Irish wizarding residence. The property had been formerly registered to, as the document proclaimed, "The Family of Gaunt"; the lines of tiny text at the bottom revealed that it was now de-listed, with no new residence recorded under their name, and any administrative fees for that property would be charged to a new account. There was no name for the new owner, only a Gringotts vault number and a reference to a Goblin's name, followed by a line of symbols written in Gobbledygook.

"This was all the publicly available information I could get on short notice," said Nott, watching her go through the papers. "The Ministry will let you apply for personal records through owl enquiry as long as they're defunct—the Gaunts don't own that property anymore, but they'd refuse my request if I asked for the current registration records on Malfoy's house."

"Publicly available," Hermione paused, sifting through his words to find their meaning. She'd used that phrase herself before, and while it came off as forthright to any casual listener, the implication was obvious. "There's more information, isn't there?"

"I knew you'd understand," said Nott, nodding in approval. "If there's anything that Ravenclaws are good for, it's word games."

"What is it that you're looking for in particular?" asked Hermione. She wasn't going to tell Nott that she was going to fall in with his plan, but there was nothing wrong with hearing him out first. She'd heard enough of Tom's ridiculous plans in the past, including an absurd one to lure Professor Dumbledore's pet phoenix out of his office with lemon caraway tea biscuits, then trim its tail feathers
for potion experimentation. "It's got to be something that you think I can find, and you can't."

"Information on the Gaunts. Corvinus Gaunt, to be precise," said Nott. "I've got a copy of his basic biography in my family's library, but the Ministry has an archive with more information than his date of birth and death, his bloodline, his wife's bloodline, and the number of sons he sired on her. Corvinus was one of the last generations of the Gaunt family to have attended Hogwarts, and after graduation, served as a member of the Hogwarts Board of Governors. The Ministry of Magic's private archive ought to have a record of motions he'd brought up to the Board, and what funding the Ministry approved in his name.

"I've a theory that the Heirs of Slytherin—the scions of the Gaunt line—must have known where the Chamber of Secrets was hidden. You've said it yourself that people have gone looking for it over the years, and found nothing at all... But I think it's more likely that people have found it—how could any modern wardmaster not notice strong magical distortions around a concealment ward? Magic, especially great magic, leaves traces! But no one's said anything because there's been a conspiracy to keep it covered up—"

Hermione coughed.

"Sorry," she said, pressing one hand over her mouth, the other waving at him to continue. "Go on. I'm listening."

Nott shot her an irritated glare. "The castle of today isn't the same castle that the founders built a thousand years ago. Headmasters of the past have had construction wizards in and out of the grounds—professional draughtsmen, enchanters, and artificers—to renovate sections or bring them up to modern standards. The clock in the Clock Tower was put in two centuries after the founders died; before that, they had a bell to mark the hours. The giant orrery and telescopes in the Astronomy Tower were brought up in pieces and installed four centuries ago. Before that, a student who wanted full marks in Astronomy took a Supersensory Potion to improve their eyesight for an exam; they went blind with a bad brew so the Board had to do something when the parents complained."

"That wasn't in *Hogwarts: A History,*" remarked Hermione, pursing her lips as she tried to remember the chapters dedicated to the construction of the castle. Building the castle had been the work of decades, and the village of Hogsmeade had grown around it, housing and feeding the earliest students when Hogwarts had been one central keep containing the Great Hall and the founders' original scriptoria, instead of a proper live-in boarding school.

She recalled the few paragraphs saying that Hogwarts had once had a chapel on the grounds, but it had fallen out of favour not long before the Statute, and students dedicated to their faith had been escorted to the nearest Muggle village, Dufftown, twenty miles away for their Sunday services. The Hufflepuff House ghost, the Fat Friar, had once been a school chaplain in the old days when that had been an official title.

But the book, published this century, had spent more time describing changes made this and last century than anything older. The biggest change, of course, had been the construction of Hogsmeade Station to accommodate the Hogwarts Express. That had been followed with the enchanted carriages and the boatshed; the boat ride into the castle had become a First Year tradition, when before that, parents brought their children straight up to the path by the front gates, under the watchful eyes of the winged boar statues.

"Everything's kept in the Board of Governors' records, my father says. He isn't a member, but his
great-uncle was, last century," said Nott. "There was also a big furore back then about the kitchens—students wrote their parents about the lack of variety in the meals, always frummenty for breakfast, pease and pudding for dinner, and roasts each feast. They wanted pasties, white bread, and sweet risen cakes like they got at home, or could buy in Hogsmeade. The Prophet ran the story, Howlers were passed around, and the Board eventually put a motion in their monthly panel.

"Obviously," Nott continued loftily, lifting up his nose, "it was really a matter of traditionalists who thought students should have the same things they got when they were in school, and the modernists who wanted Hogwarts to match up to the standards of the other European schools—the French one had been selling itself for years on the quality of its dinner menus; they even served a homemade wine vintage for the older students. As far as I know, the vote came in close, the modernists on the Board won, and they had wizarding artificers in the next week to replace the old roasting racks with new ovens."

Hermione found the history of wizarding culture a fascinating anthropological study, whereas Tom had always been ambivalent about it; he had little interest in the lives of dead wizards unless they'd invented or done something that he could use in his own magical studies. Nott, on the other hand, appreciated history, and although Hermione thought his reverence for wizarding tradition was taken to an unhealthy extreme, his scholarly enthusiasm was genuine.

"So," Hermione ventured, "you're saying that the Chamber of Secrets is hidden in the Hogwarts kitchens?"

"No," Nott said, his tone short with impatience, "I'm saying that the Board of Governors records each motion proposed and passed by its members. Officially, they want to keep a record for posterity, but the real reason is to check the minutes if it turns out a member was using school funds to invest in his own business—it wouldn't be fair on the other members if they didn't get a cut too, so they enforced accountability on everyone. But we can use that: Corvinus Gaunt's voting record is on file in the Ministry, kept in the archives under the aegis of the Department of Magical Education. If there's anything he tried to cover up during his stint on the Board, it has to be there."

"I suppose it's not the worst place to start," Hermione conceded. "Why haven't you gotten the information yet? I don't approve of the deal you made with Tom, but you did agree to it, and there was a time limit involved. Surely you haven't been sitting on your hands this whole time."

"It's not that easy to sneak out of the castle and back without being noticed," said Nott, scowling. "You'd have a better go of it than me, with your Prefect badge and do-good reputation. If there's anyone else that the teachers fawn over more than Riddle, it's you."

"Thank you," said Hermione, who had almost gotten used to Nott's habit of sprinkling his compliments with unsubtle criticism. "But I can't help feeling that you're only saying it because you want me to do something."

"Cover for me on the day of the Apparition examinations, so I can get to the Ministry and back before dinner. That's the best date to do it: the Heads expect the Sixth Year Prefects to be taking their exams and won't assign any patrols on that day, while all the teachers'll be busy ensuring that no one dies of splinching."

Hermione frowned. "Why do you need me to cover you? If you're earnest about collecting information to fulfill your side of the deal, then Tom could do it in my place. He is a Slytherin Prefect."
"Because he'll want to come with me," said Nott, his jaw tightening. "And I prefer to work alone."

"You're working with me!"

"Not because I want to, Granger," Nott retorted, brushing aside her indignation with a dispassionate shrug. "And because anything is better than having Riddle breathing down my neck."

"It's really not that bad," said Hermione defensively—without considering her words. She hadn't minded the feeling of Tom's breath on the back of her neck. She quite vividly remembered the Tom of the holidays who was prickly when he hadn't taken his medicine, but very affectionate and tactile once he had. It had taken some time to get used to it, but it hadn't been an unpleasant experience to wake up in the morning with his arms holding her in an intimate embrace.

(She could see why Tom would be so partial to it, and prefer that it not be limited to special occasions like birthdays or Christmas, but Tom's fumbled justifications on the value of "convenience" had not endeared the idea to her.)

Nott would have no idea about that, of course, but he seemed to discern the true meaning of what she'd just said; his eyes widened and his response was cut off by a loud choking sound.

"You'd know better than I, wouldn't you?" was his eventual reply, words spoken with a tinge of startlement. Nott cleared his throat and proceeded, this time in a cool voice, "Well, out of the two of us, I have too much dignity than to let Riddle fondle me whenever he pleases. That's why I need a way to leave the school grounds alone, without anyone—especially him—noticing that I'm gone."

"I... could pretend to catch you out past curfew and get Hipworth to assign a detention on that day," Hermione put forward, hesitating. "Or I could go with you. I've never been to the Ministry before—I didn't even know they had an archive—"

"Unnecessary," said Nott quickly, cutting her off. "You don't know your way around, the people have never heard of your family name or connections, and you'll only get in my way."

"I know how find my way around a library," Hermione said. "And I'm faster at using the card index than you are!"

Nott gave no acknowledgement of her argument, continuing on obliviously, "It's more trouble than it's worth. You don't know how to find the archives, let alone get in and out. You just said you've never been there before—"

"Well, you can show me. I'm sure I'll catch on quickly."

"I'd be in and out faster if I didn't have to drag you along."

"Then it sounds like you can do perfectly well without needing my help," said Hermione, sniffing and turning away. She closed the folio over the stack of parchments and shoved it back to Nott.

She'd appreciated that Nott was relatively straightforward when he wanted something, but when he wanted to be sneaky, he became infuriating beyond belief—not because he was feeding her lies, but because he had a way of deflecting closer scrutiny through minor personal insults. She was torn between assuming they were his genuine thoughts and what he exaggerated to fan the flames of reactionary outrage.
Having figured out what Nott was doing, and aware that he was likely doing it on purpose, Hermione still couldn't quash her instant affront, artificially engineered or otherwise. He wanted her to object to his rudeness—he had little tact, but she'd observed in the past that he had more than this. He wanted her to go along with his plan—intrigue her with a taste of information that he'd waved under her nose—and reject the opportunity to spend time with in person, after giving her a taste of the low-level antagonism that she could expect if she did attempt to accompany him on a clandestine journey off school grounds.

It was crude, and it reminded her of the ham-handed habits of little boys on the playground when they thought one of their female classmates was pretty. They had no other way to articulate their admiration, other than to make comment on her appearance or mannerisms in a disparaging fashion. Hermione, however, refused to entertain the notion that Nott admired her; over the course of the year that she'd known him, she'd heard his petty insinuations multiple times, and had formed a solid impression that his words had nothing to do with amorous incompetence, and more to do with his own unmannerly nature. He didn't consider her a proper lady, therefore there was no reason to act a proper gentleman.

(One of the things she'd liked about Tom Riddle upon first meeting him was how he never made reference to her appearance. When he argued with her, trying to counter her points of debate, he countered them in discourse, without having to resort to discrediting her as a person. He didn't try to be kind about it, especially when he thought her ideologies too soft to be applicable for the real world, but at least he understood the workings of proper rhetoric.)

Well, then, she thought. *Let Nott try and make plans around me if he wants to. It didn't mean that I have to go along with them.*

She was still frustrated with Nott's plan to unseal the Chamber of Secrets, and draw Tom into it by baiting him with his own greed. Through that, she had been made aware of the reasons why Nott had been so interested in the lineage of Morfin Gaunt in the first place, and beyond that, how much information he'd been keeping close to his own chest. This whole time, she was fully aware that she hadn't told Nott the full extent of her own knowledge... but that was completely different.

"And if I'm so much of a bother, then I suppose I'll stop bothering you now," she spoke in a clipped voice, swinging the strap of her bag over her shoulder. "Have a good evening, then."

Hermione drew her wand from her robe pocket and Banished her textbooks to the correct shelves, gathering her stationery and dumping them into her book bag. She stood up and pushed her chair back from the table.

Nott was struck silent, gapping at her for a few seconds, before he collected his wits and scrambled after her, chair scraping over the floor, parchment folio jammed under his arm.

"Granger!" he cried, "Granger, wait!"

Hermione left him at the returns desk, where he'd been stopped by the librarian and berated for yelling in the library. He was bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet in his impatience to get away, but her view of him was soon obstructed by the closing of the library door.
The seeds of Hermione's plan had formed during an Apparition lesson, right after the Ministry instructor lectured them on the format of the final license-approval examination. The woman had wandered over to judge Tom's progress as one of the few students who had made some strides in successful Disapparation, and after their conversation about career opportunities at the Ministry of Magic, Tom was given a card with the woman's office and department directions.

Elodia B. Netherfield  
Senior Instructor and Examiner  
Apparition Licensing and Examinations  
Office and Floo Network No. 39/C  
Ministry of Magic Level Six

The Ministry of Magic was just like any government institution, Muggle or Magical: its primary purpose, as elucidated by Madam Netherfield, was to serve its constituents. As of last September, Hermione was an adult witch, a member of magical society with a wizarding home registered under her name. She'd looked it up, and had seen that she was afforded certain rights, including the ability to petition the Chief Warlock, or request a trial under the full Wizengamot if convicted of a crime.

She didn't need Nott to get into the Ministry, did she?

Not when she had a goal (the Ministry archives) and a reasonable excuse to visit the Ministry (an inquiry about licenses and career opportunities in the department). Large institutions had much in common with one another; at Hogwarts, she had seen Tom wander about the castle, and as long as he walked with a purposeful stride and had an excuse prepared about doing this or that favour for Professor Slughorn, the Head Girl couldn't push him into overseeing a detention in her stead, or tutor a struggling Fourth Year student for next year's O.W.L.s.

Though Tom was better at "fact interpretation", a euphemism he used when he wanted to fluster her in public, Hermione disapproved of the way he saw fit to reinterpret facts for any and all occasions. She couldn't, however, deny its utility in the right circumstance. The "right" circumstance wasn't frivolous, like Tom fabricating an explanation for why he couldn't undertake a menial task involving busywork or younger students. The right circumstance, Hermione had concluded, involved things greater than one's personal leisure.

She'd made up her mind to visit the Ministry of Magic by the end of the Apparition lesson, and Tom had made up his mind to accompany her. It had made her somewhat apprehensive—not for the same reason as Nott's unease—but because the Gaunts were tied up with the Slytherin lineage and the Chamber of Secrets, and it was a precarious position to be in where discharging the life debt meant revealing the facts she'd discovered in the past year since she'd first met with Nott under the shadow of Hipparchus the Stargazer.

But once the plans were made and the date was set, there was no way to delay them.

The Twenty-Ninth of April, a Saturday, was the date of their Apparition examinations. Hermione was nervous about taking them—though not as nervous as she was about sneaking off Hogwarts
grounds without permission from her Head of House, despite being an adult and knowing that such
permissions were a courtesy rather than a legal requirement as the Hogsmeade forms were treated
with the Third Years. Nevertheless, the teachers had a responsibility to care for the welfare of all
students, even the adults, and Hermione felt a pang of guilt at shirking it when they had trusted her
enough to award her a Prefectship.

Tom, on the other hand, was excited; he kept glancing over to the Ravenclaw table from where he
sat with the Slytherins of his year, most of whom were nervously going through their notes or
scribbling helpful hints on their hands with indelible ink. The Apparition exam was a practical test
without a written portion (a shame, as Hermione knew she would have excelled at it) and thus it was
acceptable, if rather gauche, to bring one's study materials in front of the examiners.

(On the other hand, Apparition was all about a wizard's confidence, and seeing students shuffle their
note cards was a cue to the Mediwizard that he should prepare himself for an imminent splinching.)

The exam was simple: Apparate into a circle painted on the floor while a Ministry examiner
officiated, then Apparate again into another circle hidden behind a folding screen. Afterwards, there
was a form to fill out for the license itself, of which she got a copy to keep. Hermione was told to
keep the license on her person at all times, but in the many times she'd passed through the alley
behind the Leaky Cauldron or the village square of Hogsmeade, she'd seen plenty of wizards and
witches Apparate in her presence, but no one had ever been asked to present their qualifications.

Hermione and Tom had volunteered themselves first, with a string of volunteers following after
them, consisting of around a dozen students. Most of them were Gryffindors; the rest were a handful
of Seventh Year students who had failed or deferred the exam the previous year and preferred to take
it with the Sixth Years, as an alternative to going to the Ministry and paying the fee to take it during
the summer.

After receiving their licenses, they had the rest of the day to do as they pleased—everyone else in
their year would be too busy preparing or taking their own exams to look for them. As the first to
complete their exams, they were just in time to slip in with the stream of students heading into
Hogsmeade for the weekend.

Hermione wore her Ravenclaw school robes over a plain blouse and skirt, instead of her full
uniform; Tom wore the same.

Gesturing at her to follow, he led her to The Hog's Head, then behind it to the deserted stableyard,
where they stuffed their robes into their bags, removing their school ties and badges to look like
normal wizarding adults and not Hogwarts students. Tom knotted one of his Muggle neckties under
the collar of his uniform shirt, then threw on a basic black robe to cover it; it was undecorated apart
from a fastening pin in the shape of a silver snake with eyes of jet beads.

Hermione had on a modern witch's coat over her blouse, bought from the discount rack at Gladrags'
the other week. It was a tad heavy for the season, boiled wool in mustard yellow with a quilted
lining, a last remnant of the shop's winter line, but it looked "adult". The lapels were sharp, the
buttons carved horn, and the waist darted in tightly to give it a shape that the school uniform robes
lacked—both boys and girls were sold the same Hogwarts uniforms, with no distinction made
between gender, only size and seam length.

On a Saturday morning, Hogsmeade was bustling, and the regular patrons of The Hog's Head had
already begun drifting in. Hermione had seen few people venture into this pub during the times she'd
supervised Hogsmeade trips as a Prefect, as most preferred the atmosphere and menu quality
delivered by The Three Broomsticks, located just up the road. She wasn't surprised by the quality of
the regulars today; from a brief glance, she'd seen that none of them cared about good food or a
welcoming ambience. Tom wasn't surprised either; he threw a few looks over his shoulder to the
bar, where the publican was wiping down the counter with a dirty rag, but made no comment as he
ushered her over to the fireplace.

She would have expected Tom to have plenty of things to say about "peons", and the inherent
weakness of character that led to their succumbing to such common displays of degeneracy. But he
kept his mouth shut, stepping gingerly past the occupied tables and wincing when a patron let off a
gassy belch in his direction. He only paused when they got to the fireplace, its bricks blackened with
soot and a strange chunky stain on the hearth, brown with yellowish splatters and sparkling where it
caught the lamplight.

*Spilled Floo powder*, she assumed, but refrained from thinking more deeply on it as Tom reached up
to the jar on the mantel, and enunciated in a clear voice.

"Ministry of Magic, London!"

Hermione uttered the same location, tossing in a handful of glittering sand, and followed him into the
roaring green flames.

Similar to Apparition, there was a sensation of compression, a disorienting green swirl of images, as
if someone had dangled her upside-down out of a train window, while it was zooming at fifty miles
per hour past a thick woodland in full spring leaf. She was blasted by a great bellowing wind from
all sides, with as much force as standing at the prow of a ferry in a high squall; her ears popped, and
her sensible leather school shoes slipped and skidded as she was tossed out of The Hog's Head
fireplace, pressed through a narrow space like cream frosting in a piping funnel, then spat out the
other end, onto the smooth glazed tile of the Ministry of Magic’s atrium.

On a Saturday, the Atrium was deserted of its usual crowd of guests and workers; there was no
queue at the fireplace like she’d seen in the Leaky Cauldron's public room when she'd visited Tom
during the summer. From here, she could see to the far end of the Atrium, a furlong of polished dark
wood that reflected the light of dozens of gilded lamps, up to a gilded golden gate at the far end of
the hall. Her view of the gates and the security desk guarding it was interrupted by an ostentatious
fountain, the central water feature shaped like larger-than-life figures standing around a proud,
bearded wizard holding an upraised wand.

"Come on," said Tom, drawing his wand to clear off the soot stains on her coat. "We should see
what that's about."

The security desk in front of the closed gates was occupied by a witch in brick-red robes, her sleeves
impractically long and flowing. Her lipstick and nail enamel matched the exact shade of her robes,
and she was using those painted nails to flick through the bright, glossy pages of a magazine.

"The Ministry of Magic requires wizards and witches to state the purpose of their visit and submit
their wands for inspection. Any visitors presenting themselves for court trials, matrimonial,
Animagus, or residential registrations, international Portkey applications, examinations, or license
renewals must lodge their appointment slips during weekday working hours," she recited in one
breath, not lifting her eyes from the pages of her magazine. "If an appointment has not been booked
in advance, the reservation desk opens at nine on Monday morning."

Hermione stepped up to the desk, which was annoyingly set at such a height that she had to crane
her neck to look at the witch sitting behind it. "Reason for visit: to access the Ministry archives."

"The archive is closed to unauthorised visitors on weekends," spoke the receptionist in a bland voice, giving her a quick glance, and after noting nothing of great interest in Hermione's appearance, had returned to her magazine with a resigned sigh. "You may mail your requests for official documents, reports, certifications, and court logs to the Department of Administrative Registration, and they'll send an answer on Monday."

"Wait—what about authorised visitors?" asked Hermione, who'd had more than enough of the wizarding world's habit of staffing front desks with unhelpful receptionists. The one at St. Mungo's had been just as annoying.

"Employees of the Ministry of Magic can go through there." The witch gestured at the golden gate behind the desk. "If you're not an employee, then you'll have to make an appointment on Monday, in person or through owl mail. Sorry, dear, but those are the rules."

"I have authorisation," said Tom, speaking up for once. He approached the desk, sliding in front of Hermione and propping his elbows on the surface, which caused the receptionist to draw herself back in surprise.

She lifted an eyebrow at him. "You're very young to be a diplomat or an international Auror."

"I'm neither."

"Sorry, doll, but you'll have to—"

Tom reached into his robe pocket and placed something flat and silvery on the security desk. "Wizarding Britain Society of Journalists official press badge. Does that count as valid authorisation?"

The receptionist frowned. "Yeees. But only if it's the real thing. May I?"

"Please."

She slid her wand out from the voluminous sleeve of her robes and tapped the surface of Tom's badge, which lit up and began to glow a ghostly blue-white. "It's real. Very well, then. I'll need your wands and your names for the records."

Tom, rather reluctantly, handed his wand over to the receptionist, and never took his eyes off her as she laid it on a scale and peeled a strip of parchment from a slot at the bottom. Tom nudged Hermione, and she surrendered her own wand, which underwent the same procedure of weighing, watching, measuring. But it was over soon, and their wands returned, along with a pair of cards on a length of cord to hang about their necks, printed with the words AUTHORISED VISITOR.

"Your names, sir and madam?"

"Thomas Bertram, journalist. And Hermione... Riddle, editorial assistant," Tom enunciated clearly, and he seemed perversely pleased at watching the receptionist's quill falter and her hand shake as she recorded their names into her log book.

"Thomas B-Bertram?" she spluttered. "The Mr. Bertram?"
"I wasn't aware there was any other," said Tom.

"You look nothing like I imagined," said the receptionist, sounding very out of breath.

"Is that a bad thing?" Tom asked.

"No!" the receptionist said hastily. "No, of course not. You're just so... so young!"

"Thank you, I suppose," said Tom. "I find that taking care of oneself is good advice to heed."

"Ah." The receptionist scrambled to find a spare bit of parchment, picking up her quill and dipping it into her inkwell, before she hesitated and said, "Do you have any tips for looking younger, sir? You have very nice skin—it's so smooth, not even a single wrinkle!"

"Hmm," said Tom, glancing over at Hermione, whose expression was torn between a mix of impatience and amusement. "You might try brewing a weekly poultice to enliven the skin. A base of lanolin, mixed with the following ingredients: powdered arnica leaf to reduce reddened or swollen skin. Dried kelp soaked in the juice of a medium Bouncing Bulb to firm and rehydrate—slice it lengthwise and push through a colander with a wooden ladle to get the most out of it. After epilation, use pulped Knotgrass with stems of Motherwort to reduce re-growth and smooth the skin. I recommend a substitution of Motherwort for nettle oil if you're brewing in winter; it isn't as good as fresh Motherwort, but its preserved form is available year-round, and it keeps better."

The witch behind the desk scribbled furiously to keep up, spattering ink over her parchment and the sleeve of her robe.

"Simmer the mixture to bubbling—don't let it boil over—until the oil is infused, then pass through a cheesecloth to filter out the particulates. You should use it while it's still warm, after cleansing your face with a steamed towel; the Super Steamer spell would be appropriate here. Any extra poultice should be stored in standard potion vials, or in jars with the food preservation Stasis Charm I wrote about a few issues ago."

"Issue Thirty-Six, the one with the Kneazle personality quiz," spoke the receptionist eagerly. "I have a copy of it with me."

"That's the one," said Tom.

"Do you mind signing mine?"

"For a loyal fan?" Tom inclined his head. "I would be happy to."

The witch dug around under the desk, and after a few seconds of rummaging, dropped a magazine on the counter. She then slid a quill over, which Tom picked up to scrawl his "signature" over the front cover of the magazine, which depicted an animated portrait of a housewitch in an apron, floating dishes and cutlery around her head with her wand. At her feet, a fluffy ginger cat batted at a glistening stream of soap bubbles.

"No one will believe that I met Thomas Bertram," said the witch in a breathy voice, fanning herself with her magazine, after Tom had signed his 'name' on it.

"If they won't believe it, then I'll add a dedication in next week's correspondence column. To my best fan, Miss..." Tom paused, looking meaningfully at the receptionist.
"Miss Leonora Gardiner," she squeaked.

"Of course," said Tom. "To the most helpful Miss Gardiner; how about that?"

"Oh, I can't wait!" she giggled, reaching for the golden lever by the front desk. "You can go through the gate now. Down the hall to the lift, press Level Nine for the archives. Take the fourth left fork, count three doors left, five right, and you're there. Do come back anytime, Mr. Bertram!"

Passing through the gates—when the receptionist was out of earshot—Hermione whispered, "Well, that was disturbing."

"I found it interesting," said Tom, tilting his head back to peer at the high ceiling, a dome of peacock blue glass panes set in a golden frame, glittering with alchemical symbols and runes that drifted along like a spiralling galaxy of stars. It wasn't as grand a display of magic as the Hogwarts Great Hall's ceiling, but it had a sense of grandeur that Muggle buildings failed to capture, with their fashion of painted frescoes that only created an illusion of depth.

"I had the one badge," Tom continued, his voice pitched to keep it from echoing in the empty hall, "but she let us both through. I suspect it went against policy, but she was too flattered to stop me."

At the end of the corridor was another golden gate, this time smaller and single leafed; behind it was a square black pit, with a pair of silver chains in the centre ascending into darkness. Beside the grille was a brass panel with ivory buttons, painted with an arrow pointing up, and an arrow pointing down.

"I didn't know wizards had lifts," Hermione remarked, finger hovering over the buttons, before she pressed the down arrow. "You'd think they'd use something more magical than this."

The lift gave off a chime. The chains rattled and clinked; they felt the rumble of something approaching from the shaft beneath their feet.

With a second chime, the golden grille slid open to reveal a spacious square box with a domed roof that matched the Atrium ceiling, and a floor tiled in a design of a large $M$ with sparks shooting out of the topmost points. There was a panel on the inside with buttons numbered One through Nine, which Hermione pushed down, before the grilles slid shut without warning, and the lift jerked into motion—

—Sideways.

Hermione was thrown off her feet, into Tom's chest; he, in turn, was tossed back against the wall, one hand grasping for his wand, and the other scrabbling for the railing bolted to the side.

Just as she'd grabbed hold of Tom's sleeve, the elevator dropped down, then shifted to the opposite side, then up, then to the side again, before it stopped dead and gave off a cheery little ding!.

"Level Nine, Department of Wizarding Administration, incorporating the offices of the Wizengamot Representative Council, the Wizarding Examinations Authority, the Ministerial Committee for Experimental Research and Magical Patents, and the Administrative Archives."

The grille slid open.
Hermione picked herself up from where her fall had been cushioned by Tom's chest, clearing her throat and averting her eyes from his. She offered him a hand to help him up off the floor, then proceeded to smooth the creases out of her coat.

"Alright," she groaned, making sure her own wand hadn't fallen out of her pocket, "I rescind my prior statement. That was magical enough for me."

"That was interesting," said Tom, who didn't look like he had minded being used as Hermione's pillow.

(Thinking back to their Christmas holidays, she couldn't recall him complaining about it then, even though he'd winced every time he jostled his hip going up and down the stairs.)

"There must be Extension Charms built into the structure if the lift was taking us sideways. I'd known for years that the Ministry was built under the City of London, but it makes sense that they built down and expanded the space—there's not enough room at the surface to fit as much as they need to administer the whole of the Isles; Diagon Alley is crowded enough as it is."

Level Nine wasn't as ostentatious as the Atrium, but it did look as if Tom's guess on the Ministry's use of Extension Charms had been correct: the hall was bare, with tiled walls and a plain carpet under their feet, a long runner rug that extended from the lift and went on and on, the vast passageway interrupted every few feet by a door set with a little brass plaque. The plaques were engraved with the name of each minor sub-department and office owner; Hermione wouldn't have been surprised if each of the Wizengamot's fifty-odd members had an office on this level, even if most of them skipped out on the weekly proceedings and voted on them in absentia.

(For the last few birthdays, Tom had gifted her a year's subscription to the Wizengamot's newsletter, a transcript of meetings held in the last month. Upon reading them, she saw that there was only a handful of regular speakers who proposed changes or brought up charges, and when it came to voting on things like licensing restrictions for cross-bred magical creatures, the majority of votes were absentees and abstentions. To see citizens so passive about their own government was a singularly vexing experience, a feeling that grew when Hermione checked the Daily Prophet the next day and saw nothing but a two line description of the new laws, buried on Page 23.)

Now and then there was a branch in the corridor, labelled with a sign shaped like a pointing hand, and it was one of these that bore the words: Ministry of Magic Administrative Record Repository and Archive.

Behind the door was a long, balustraded gallery of iron fretwork, and from it, a spiral staircase descended into a dimly-lit expanse of tall columns. The columns weren't structural; each one was around ten feet tall and didn't reach the ceiling, the surfaces honeycombed with little slots that contained a sheaf of paper or a roll of dusty parchment fastened with a ribbon. Looking at them from above, Hermione thought it resembled a field of upright ears of corn.

The tops of the columns were flat, round circles, marked with faintly glowing letters. Where they stood, looking down at the centre of the archive, the letters were marked J-1, J-2, all the way down to J-10, where the next row of columns began with K-1 through K-10, followed by L, M, and N. It was an alphabetical organisation system, a simple method for the archivists to store and label records, but she couldn't commend it on its ease of use—it didn't endear itself to any users searching for specific names or terms.

"If you start over there, with the A's, they'll probably have a record for the Aurors," Hermione
suggested, peering down from the gallery. "I do hope they have some sub-system for sorting records by date of entry. The Ministry's been around for over two hundred years, and wizards never throw anything away if they can help it. If not, Auror reports might be under $D$, for the 'Department of Magical Law Enforcement'—would that be under 'Magical Law Enforcement'? Or just 'Law Enforcement'?" She let out a short huff. "I wish there was a guide for using this system."

"I imagine that most people avoid this place if they can help it," said Tom, swiping his finger along the iron railing. His finger came away coated in grey dust. "Where will you be going?"

"G, for 'Grindelwald'," said Hermione, pointing to the row of shelves somewhere closer to the middle. "He's not a British citizen, but he's got to be important enough that the the Ministry has a file on him. Legally, he's the foreign equivalent of a Minister of Magic, no matter how he earned that title, so the Department of International Magical Co-operation must keep track of him, for diplomacy's sake."

Tom cocked his head, his expression sceptical. "I suspect that whatever's on public record will turn out to be rather sparse. When it comes to internal reports on important political figures, they'd only pass the good stuff around the desks of the Minister and Department heads, and not leave them where any common parchment pusher can find them."

"Something is better than nothing," said Hermione. "As dull as a financial report can be, you can use it to fill in the bigger picture if you know where to look. For instance, the occupied Norwegian Ministry importing Jobberknoll feathers in bulk is a sign that someone up the line is planning on brewing a big batch of potion. Jobberknoll parts have few other uses outside of potions."

"Flight feathers for memory potions, and down plucked from the breast for truth potions—no substitutions, unlike most vegetable ingredients in common potions," said Tom in a thoughtful voice. "Alright, I see that you have a point there. Shall we go down?"

They descended the spiral staircase to the archive floor, drawing and lighting their wands to combat the darkness. The air was still, stale and dustier than it had been on the gallery, by the entrance, and Hermione felt a pang in her chest to see a library like this in such a state of disuse.

Holding her wand before her, she noted that the wooden floorboards were inlaid with letters that matched the alphabetical designation for each row of shelves, and by following them, they could find their way around without having to climb back up the stairs to look at the columns from above.

"I'll start on the left, then," said Tom. "If I finish first, I'll throw up a sparkler. If you see it, then send up your own, so I know where to find you."

Exploring the Ministry of Magic archive was a different experience to browsing the stacks at the Hogwarts library or Flourish and Blotts. The latter two were welcoming places, with helpful staff and thousands of books on display with their spines out, the titles of each book foiled in gold leaf or embossed in silver, ready to catch her eye and loosen the strings of her coin pouch. This place, the dusty departmental archive, wasn't a place that availed itself to browsers; the individual niches were barely organised, stuffed higgledy-piggledy with scrolls a dozen deep so that when she tried to draw out a single scroll, the rest of them came out too, flopping at her feet like a brace of fish.

She smoothed them out, re-rolled them, and returned them to the niche in a better state than they'd been in before, but it was a slow process to work her way down from the very top compartments, starting from Gabener, to Galbraith and Gamp. Out of curiosity, she spent a few minutes scanning through those files, knowing the history of the Gamp family as one of great scholars and renowned
academics, and that Nott was an offshoot of the branch by way of his mother. She had to tear herself away after remembering that they only had a limited amount of time before the professors at Hogwarts would begin to look for her and Tom. With reluctance, she was forced to put them away and resume her search.

Finally, she found what she was looking for at the bottom of the shelf, tucked so far away that she had to drop to her knees and scrape her elbow over the dusty floorboards to peel out the scrolls: Gaunt.

The file was thicker than she thought it would be, slotted in between Gatwick and Gavroche. Nott had showed her the Gaunts' entry in The Pure-blood Directory, and it had been a sparse few pages.

The Gaunts, according to the book, were a small and obscure family that had lingered on the edge of extinction for decades, if not centuries. They'd placed a stricter emphasis on purity than the rest of Britain's pureblood society, who'd made it a habit to seek wives of foreign blood if the current crop of British débutantes were closer than second cousins. And on top of that, unlike many great British families, the Gaunts had no list of modern achievements to add to the prestige of their name: Arcturus Black, father of Orion, had an Order of Merlin awarded to him a few years ago; Edmond Lestrange's great-grandfather had been the fifteenth Minister for Magic; Cantankerous Nott curated Britain's largest private collection of genealogical records, and was frequently consulted by families whose children had reached marriageable age.

The last living member of the family who bore the name, Nott had said, was Mr. Morfin Gaunt, a man whose seniority gave him better claim to the title 'Heir of Slytherin' than Tom Riddle. Tom was a half-blood, his claim through the matrilineal line, but his power and abilities all but proved his legitimacy.

With shaking hands, Hermione slipped off the ribbon enclosing the roll of parchment sheets, then spread them open on the dusty floor.

She'd expected ancient, crackling parchment, and spidery sentences written in archival ink, filling the air with the metallic reek of oxidised iron-based pigments. What she hadn't expected was a thick roll of parchment, the outer layers consisting of smooth paper with ruler-straight edges, with none of the yellowed, hand-cut deckled edges she'd seen at the antiquarian bookshop. The outermost page was a coversheet bearing the insignia of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and within it was a witness testimony form filed by a member of the Law Enforcement Patrol. Following that was a record of the conviction and sentencing of one Morfin Gaunt.

2 September, 1925

DMLE routine patrol sent representative to wizarding residence in North Yorkshire to deliver hearing summons to Mr. Morfin Gaunt. (Archive reference no. 4813967; Breach of Statute of Secrecy by Adult Citizen, Muggle Baiting, cross reference file no. 3957523 with Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes.)

Representative B. Odgen was assaulted with magic by Mr. Gaunt in presence of two Muggles. Reinforcements were requested to appear at site to subdue and detain Mr. Gaunt, and Obliviate Muggle witnesses. Mr. Gaunt was hostile, resisted arrest, did not co-operate with interrogation by DMLE officers, and was placed in detention to await
sentencing until date of his hearing on 14 September...

On the parchment under that:

**Certificate of Death**

**Name of Deceased:** Marvolo Gaunt  
**Date:** 12 March 1926  
**Place of Death:** Azkaban Prison  
**Cause:** Exposure, Infirmity

**Sentence:** 6 Months  
**Prior Residence:** Gaunt House, Little Hangleton, North Yorkshire  
**Next of Kin:** Morfin Gaunt (Presently Incarcerated)

**Further observations:** Due for release in less than two weeks, but poor health and advanced age reduced natural resilience to Azkaban atmosphere. Remains burned and buried on island; personal effects held in escrow until next of kin's date of release (October 1928).

There were pages and pages of this, official reports spanning from the years of 1925 to 1928, when Morfin was released and put on a warning list for those who would not be treated with lenience upon committing any further offenses.

Hermione dug through the papers, peeling back the years to glean an outline of a story told by these reports. The male members of the Gaunt family had been arrested and sent to prison, the Muggles they'd abused Obliviated and sent on their way, while Merope was left alone in their little cottage. Morfin had called her a thief; Merope must have taken the family silver and left home, eloping to York with her Muggle paramour, Mr. Tom Riddle.

*Tom's father.*

And the two convicted criminals, Morfin and Marvolo Gaunt, were Tom's uncle and grandfather. The reports lodged by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement were as dry and impassive as all official documents were, but the list of crimes spoke for itself. Hermione wasn't surprised, having met Morfin herself; skimming over the multiple counts of Muggle baiting and abuse in broad daylight, and an attack on Ministry employees, it was hard to believe that these were the in-laws of the wealthy and refined Riddle family.

She tapped her wand to the parchments, and to her satisfaction, found that they hadn't been jinxed to prevent duplication like the offerings at Glimwitt's Antiquities or the Hogwarts library. It made sense: this was a bureaucrat's archive, not a personal library. These files were a reference collection used by the administrative functionaries of the Ministry of Magic, not some private collection to be squirreled away in a family manor.
But for now, she had other things to do. As interesting as this was, this was merely an *apéritif* to the main course. She could read this in her dormitory at Hogwarts, on her own time.

At the bottom of the stack, she found what she’d come for, tied up in a separate ribbon that was sealed with a piece of wax stamped with the logo of the Department of Magical Education.

Corvinus Gaunt. Born 1746, place of residence listed as the wizarding settlement near Dunshaughlin, Ireland. His name had been entered into the roll kept by the Department of Magical Education in 1783, as one of the twelve members of the Hogwarts Board of Governors. During his term as governor and, later, chairman of the board, his greatest contribution to Hogwarts was...

*July 1788 Board Assembly — Motions Passed.*

> Mr. C. Gaunt, Chairman of the Board, is pleased to announce the disbursement of funds from the Hogwarts Endowment Reserve for the following undertakings:

For personal convenience: installation of new bathing and hygiene facilities. Facilities shall be implemented in individual dormitories, staff quarters, Quidditch dressing rooms, and senior student commons.

For greater public health and well-being: installation of foundational operative structures, linked to sanitation apparatus dispersed across selected locations on each floor.

For the modernisation of an historic institution: accommodations shall be made to raise Hogwarts to a modern standard for the advantage and practical benefit to students; care shall be taken during installation for the conservation of significant architectural arrangements, for we aim to preserve and ensure all aspects of the Hogwarts education are of the highest calibre, now and into perpetuity...

It was far from the most entertaining read, but Hermione had slogged through textbooks of wizarding law in the past, and she quickly got to the main point of the governors’ announcement.

If there *was* a Chamber of Secrets, and if Corvinus Gaunt had conspired to hide it, then all evidence pointed toward its being hidden in a Hogwarts water closet.
Amidst the maze of shelves, it was an easy task for Tom to slip away from Hermione and go his own way.

Tom had never seen libraries the same way as Hermione did. A library, to him, was a collection of information; a library possessed a certain breadth and convenience that wasn't offered by the Hogwarts professors, or at least the ones who'd posted a list of office hours and refused to answer their doors when students came calling outside of them. (Perhaps this was a good thing; most Friday evenings, Slughorn had himself a tipple with the weekly Club dinner, and any question asked of him was answered with a rambling anecdote, on subjects ranging from the latest *Daily Prophet* editorial to last summer's Ostrobothnian sweat lodge holiday tour.)

A person, an academic mind, a published work—they were merely tools, and he treated them like so. But Hermione, always an amusing contradiction, treated them with *veneration*.

Tom thought it rather strange; he considered few things on this Earth worthy of veneration, and a person least of all. Most people he'd met over the course of his life he could immediately class as inferior, and anyone that he didn't would inevitably be found disappointing. This had been a rule for him, with only one or two exceptions, and as he browsed through the archives, he happened across one source of fresh disappointment.

Someone, held in high esteem, was proven to be undeserving of it.

How delightful.

On his search for the archive section dedicated to the DMLE, Tom noticed the name *Dumbledore* affixed to the side of a niche. Looking into it, he'd expected to see nothing but copies of commendation certificates from the Department of Magical Education, congratulating a certain professor for his thirty years of tenure, or his Medal of Magical Merit. Banal, everyday paperwork, the sort of thing that could be framed for an office wall and declaimed as an accomplishment by an insipid character who believed in such madesses as the inherent virtue of the human spirit, or paisley as the height of modern fashion.

Tom hadn't expected to discover information that thoroughly soiled his Transfiguration teacher's reputation of being a benign, if brilliant, old man. It appeared that Professor Dumbledore's eccentricities were hereditary, and far from harmless.

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**Certificate of Death**

*Name of Deceased:* Percival Dumbledore  
*Date:* 18 November 1896  
*Place of Death:* Azkaban Prison
**Cause:** Exposure, Infirmity

**Sentence:** Life

**Prior Residence:** Mould-on-the-Wold, Gloucestershire

**Next of Kin:** Kendra Dumbledore (Wife), Albus Dumbledore (Son)

**Further observations:** Dangerous inmate convicted for attacks on four Muggle children, resulting in grievous injuries and one death. Refused to explain motive during court interrogation. Family petitioned to visit after sentencing; Wizengamot jury ruled that inmate was unfit to appear in presence of children. Wife permitted supervised viewing sessions twice per annum.

Oh, the nerve of the man!

Dumbledore could lecture at Tom—and he had done so for years—on the subject of his utopian fantasies, this fanciful idea of harmony between all things Muggle and Magical; he could—and had—advised Tom to love his Muggle guardians, be they government caretakers or paternal grandparents. Dumbledore could say that being a wizard did not preclude Tom from treating the Muggles as his equals, as family. As fellows, in blood and in spirit.

And then the man's own father had attacked and murdered Muggles!

The sheer delusion astounded him.

How could Dumbledore expect wizards and Muggles to get along when the separation of their respective worlds wasn't a matter of personal choice, but enforced by the magical government? Mr. Percival Dumbledore had been sentenced for assault, manslaughter, and breaching the Statute of Secrecy. His victims, according to the DMLE's paperwork, had been healed, their belongings repaired or replaced. They'd been Obliviated of their traumatic experiences—for their own good, of course. The dead boy's parents had quietly been made to forget they'd even had a son; the Ministry had paid out a handsome compensation in pounds sterling, disguised as a winning lottery draw.

If Tom knew that his neighbour had the power to re-write his memories, alter his entire identity at their whim, he'd never trust them. He could see no way that Muggles, understanding the full potential of magic, would ever treat a wizard as an equal. Doctor and Mrs. Granger, model examples of what Muggles ought to be, were nonetheless wary about magic, and set strict rules to its use in their home. (No magic in the front rooms that faced the street, wands away during dinner, all lights out after eleven o'clock. It was unfair! They would never have applied such restrictions to a visiting Roger Tindall!)

The next items he found were not quite as scandalous: an official caution issued a decade ago to Aberforth Dumbledore, on his use of experimental and "inappropriate" charms on goats, and an order from the DMLE to the Department of Magical Transportation to watch and log the use of a Floo Connection registered to Dumbledore's home in Godric's Hollow. And a copy of an internal memo from the DMLE ordering a rejection on any Portkey applications made by Albus Dumbledore. There was a listed cross-reference to a File #PK-42945 at the bottom of the parchment, which Tom tapped with his wand; it revealed a block of tiny print on the back of the form:
Tom found this interesting, as surveillance of Floo Connections was in many ways equivalent to the Muggle wartime government's enthusiastic interference of private communications. The British government openly censored wireless broadcasts and newspaper articles for subversive elements, or anything damaging to the national morale. And not so openly, they monitored private correspondence: post, telegrams, and telephone calls. During his stay at the Riddle House, Tom had seen a few Christmas letters passed around between the servants, and the envelopes had large stamps indicating that they'd been inspected by the Ministry of Information.

(Tom had been glad to be a wizard then. He had owls to deliver his mail; let the Ministry of Information try to catch one and censor his correspondence! If he'd been a Muggle, someone would be reading all his private letters, and the idea infuriated him. He hadn't liked the idea of the other orphans looking at his things while he was away at school; he liked even less the idea of a government official, some frumpy secretary in a department store twinset and boiled liver-coloured stockings that she was hoarding ration tickets to replace, looking at the thoughts he saw fit to share with Hermione.)

This was proof that the wizarding government was doing something about the European unrest, although Tom wasn't aware how effective surveillance was, especially when the Ministry's net was so large as to put a whole continent's worth of people under suspicion.

He knew that as a native Briton and a Hogwarts student who had reached his majority a few months ago, he himself was above suspicion. Not until he'd earned some level of notoriety. But that designation of "Undesirable", whatever that meant, was so loosely defined. How exactly did one earn it? How often did the Minister for Magic decide to stick someone with that label? Did it expire after some time, or did it last forever?

Albus Dumbledore, for some reason, had earned that title for himself. Tom couldn't imagine the man making himself complicit in criminal activities, even if the late Percival Dumbledore had indulged in Muggle mayhem. Albus Dumbledore had spoken of Muggle-Magical harmony, but after all the tea invitations Tom had accepted over the years, it had only been that—talk and nothing else. Dumbledore had spoken a lot (almost as much as Slughorn) about the state of affairs, both cultural and geopolitical, and about the numerous branches of magic that existed outside the Hogwarts curriculum, but he'd made no efforts to enact change. The most he'd ever done was gently steer Tom away from inquiring about the theoretical potentials of Occlumency, and back to the humdrum topic of N.E.W.T. level Transfiguration.

In a pensive mood, Tom rolled the parchment back up and made to return it to its niche, but hesitated for a moment. He doubted he'd have a chance to come back to the Ministry before the summer holidays, so it was best to make use of this opportunity while he had it.
"Geminio," he muttered, and a second parchment appeared by the first, identical to the last wrinkle and bit of splattered ink.

He slipped the duplicated parchment into the niche and tucked the original into his robe pocket.

Good, he thought, satisfied by his handiwork. They haven't jinxed the parchment to repel Duplication Charms; I hate it when they do that.

He wondered what else the archive administrators had done to make this a useful resource, instead of a dumping ground for centuries of bureaucratic refuse.

"Accio File D.I. Six-Eight-Two," said Tom, reciting the reference number written at the bottom of his scroll.

There was a rustling noise, like the hush of dirty straw being raked over a stable floor, and half a minute later, a tightly furled roll of parchment came flying out of the darkness and into Tom's waiting palm.

When he opened it, he saw the DMLE insignia over a long list of odd-sounding names, arranged by a sequence of dates.

**Sonia Zhitnaya (matric. 1919)** — Applied for import license of Class B tradeable materials on 7 September, 1938; 9 January, 1939, 29 June, 1940.

**Oleksiy Kharkovsky (matric. 1924)** — Registered wizarding residence 22 November, 1939.

**Pertti Lehtinen (matric. 1923)** — Applied for apprenticeship position in Ministry Level 10 on 6 April, 1940.

**Kazimierz Grozbiecki (matric. 1927)** — Registered for N.E.W.T. examinations in Charms, Astronomy, Ancient Runes, and Divination on 14 April, 1940.


**Cornelis Vonk (matric. 1930)** — Submitted formal complaint regarding Breach of Statute on 30 March, 1941.

**Steffan Albers (matric. 1929)** — Fined for possession of restricted materials on 29 July, 1941.

**Salome Kopácsy-Marszalek (matric. 1935)** — Registered marriage certificate on 8 February, 1942.

**Edvin Lindstrom (matric. 1934)** — Applied for Apparition license on 17 August, 1943.
The list went on and on, down two feet of parchment and continuing on the other side.

Next to each name was a column of various dates, and in another column, a list of addresses. This must be their Floo Connections—what the DMLE was monitoring in the name of national security.

'Metric'.

Tom wasn't sure what that meant, but assumed it was short for 'matriculation', a student's date of enrollment. To Durmstrang, as Mr. Pacek's name was on the list, and the Durmstrang Institute had been his alma mater. Or one of his two alma maters; Mr. Pacek had done his apprenticeship in Prague, but when referencing his qualifications, he'd always used his date of certification, not matriculation.

This must be a collection of information on every European émigré who'd gone to Durmstrang and used Ministry of Magic services in the last few years. In contrast to what Tom thought they'd been doing (which was nothing) this was a decent effort put on by the Ministry. A decent effort, but he doubted it had produced much of a result. There were just too many names, with no further distinction to explain why these people were of particular interest. Perhaps there were one or two of them who were subversive elements involved in espionage, but Tom was sure that most of them were not.

Mr. Pacek had been on the list. Tom knew him as a man who had studied Grindelwald's writings—even heard his speeches in person, spoken in their original German—and had kept in contact with his old friends and classmates in Europe. But he was one so disinterested in the political climate of his home country that he'd chosen to leave rather than align himself with one side or the other. His political apathy was proof of a deplorable lack of resolve, but Tom could not fault the man for his interest in self-preservation.

He wondered if Mr. Pacek knew his name had been put on a list, or if he recognised any of the names. Most of them were Durmstrang graduates of the present century, and if the school had a seven year curriculum like Hogwarts, then a few of them would have been studying at the same time as he had. Even if they had not been close associates, there should be a familiar name or two.

Tapping his wand against the parchment, Tom made a copy and dropped it into his pocket.

He admitted to being somewhat disappointed that this was the Ministry's reaction to the Grindelwald issue. Grindelwald, unlike the Muggle armies of the Continent, had not attacked British shores, but he had deposed several ministers and imposed his own regime upon them. Surely it was only a matter of time before he would turn his eyes to Britain. Tom had not seen much for which to praise the British Ministry of Magic, but he didn't like the idea of a foreign interloper taking over, even if Grindelwald had come up with some halfway decent ideas about how the world should be run, and what ought to be done about the Muggles.

At the age of fourteen, Tom had admired the simplicity of a world without the Statute of Secrecy, as it meant no more Restriction Against Underage Sorcery, the bane of every child who spent their school holidays bumping elbows with Muggles, their wands locked away and out of sight. The world that Grindelwald had so persuasively illustrated in his pamphlets had been one of freedom and order: freedom to all wizards who chafed in hiding what they were, and a natural hierarchy for those with talent and power.

At the age of seventeen, Tom knew he had talent and power; he knew that he needed no foreign or external confirmation of his natural ability. Some tiny, insignificant part of him had also realised that
the wealth and privilege that been bestowed upon him for being born a Riddle would mean nothing in Grindelwald's vision of utopia. If Tom had not met his grandmother and been informed of his ancestry, some militant revolutionary, a pointy-hatted German Robespierre, might have seen the house on the hill and wanted it for his own, and would have felt nothing about removing the Muggle inhabitants and taking it—the manor house, all the motors and horses, the conservatory and gardens, for himself.

It was what Grindelwald meant by wizards taking their rightful place in the world, instead of living in the shadows.

Tom wasn't sure that he agreed with that. Of course he knew that he was meant for greater things, a higher destiny than other people, but he wasn't fond of the idea of every wizard being afforded this status just for having magic. And being able to claim whatever piece they liked of the reformed wizarding world—that seemed wrong, for reasons he couldn't articulate; he felt that it was acceptable to reform the wizarding world in accordance to his own preferences, but he couldn't abide the thought of anyone else being obliged the same privilege.

(And he definitely felt no loyalty to his Muggle grandparents; they were a vehicle to granting him wealth and status, and that was the source of his appreciation towards them, nothing else.)

There, in the dusty stacks of the Ministry archives, Tom decided that his and Grindelwald's political visions were not aligned, even if they had more than a few things in common in terms of personal ideology. Tom saw more benefit in upholding the Statute of Secrecy than doing away with it for good: The British Ministry of Magic had enough on its hands trying to govern a population of ten thousand souls; he couldn't imagine what heights of incompetence a wizarding government would reach trying to administer fifty million Muggles in the British Isles, and five hundred million across the entire British Empire.

The British Muggle government had reformed itself for the war effort, and it was an immense logistical task to calculate ration allocations for each household in the nation, and not only that, but deliver the brown loaves, margarine, salt pork, and potatoes so that everyone got a fair portion—or enough that they could work an eight-hour shift at a munitions factory without fainting. Tom himself couldn't recall too many instances of true, aching hunger: he had never had as much food as he'd liked, or of the type he liked (barley, rye, and oats were cheaper than his favourite puffy white rolls, and he'd become, quite against his own expectations, a connoisseur of goat milk). If he had gone without food, it had been in the earliest years of his childhood when no one, in or outside of Wool's, had had much of anything.

The Muggle government had fed him, housed him, clothed him from birth, then sent him to primary school. The Magical government hadn't known he'd existed until he'd been eleven-and-a-half years old.

Tom wasn't one to indulge himself in excessive nostalgia, but the differences were stark. Muggles were common, ordinary. They bred like insects. They had no great destiny waiting for them; the extent of their ambitions amounted to nothing more than having enough money for a pie and a pint at the end of the week.

But... the Muggles did know how to get things done. They possessed a valuable sort of efficiency, one where Tom would never have to involve his own person in the laborious act of acquiring results. (It hadn't taken him long to tire of dull bureaucratic legalese after an hour of navigating the archive.)
Muggles, Tom had observed, were also more susceptible to mind-altering magics. His past experience had shown him that those who knew about magic had proven annoyingly resistant. His father, for instance, knew after too many shoddy Obliviations done by his dead mother. Nott, raised in a wizarding household, could defend himself when under attack by a mental probe.

For now, he concluded that the convenience of the Statute of Secrecy outweighed its limitations to his personal freedom. Anyway, enforcement was reliant on the discretion of the Ministry of Magic, and it wasn't as if Tom didn't know how to be discreet.

Over the next two hours, Tom rummaged through the archive, looking for any mention of Grindelwald or Dumbledore, and duplicating files whenever he saw one he wanted to read later. His pockets filled up; he sliced through the lining of his robe to create more space to store them, filling that up too until he rustled when he walked.

*It was worth it.*

It was gratifying to know that beneath Dumbledore's masquerade of eccentricity and academia, his tasselled pointy slippers, spangled robes, and a penchant for the common sugary lozenges sold by the scoop at every corner chemist's, there was a known Undesirable with a record of suspicious behaviour stretching back twenty years and more. The evidence hadn't been solid enough to convict Dumbledore of anything (*what a pity,* Tom thought) but the Ministry had labelled him an *agent provocateur.* An instigator, an associate of the true subversive elements. Connections, present and former, with members of law enforcement who had participated in capturing Grindelwald in various overseas operations—and, most importantly, *had allowed him to escape.*

Much of the information he'd found were copies of copies of mission reports and official debriefings filed by workers who were told to keep some details off the public record. Tom could only assume the vagueness was an intentional choice; it was clear that a logbook entry along the lines of "*September 1927: DMLE officials questioned A. Dumbledore on nature of his companionship with suspect G. Grindelwald*" was more than it appeared on paper. It was disappointing that they only delivered the bare bones when Tom wanted the meat; he concluded that any information more recent, accurate, and substantial must be kept locked up in the Aurors' offices several levels up.

When he and Hermione left the archive an hour later, Tom was still thinking about Dumbledore.

The man had been officially acknowledged as a powerful wizard, one of the rare true warlocks whose ability made him an equal and contemporary of Gellert Grindelwald. And yet he had done nothing to aid the Aurors. Not then, twenty years ago, when Grindelwald was a rising demagogue with a handful of loyal followers. Not now, the modern day, when Grindelwald had toppled several legitimate Ministries and his followers were the citizenry of whole nations.

What was power when one did nothing with it?

What was potential for greatness when one squandered it?

Tom was disgusted by it, and he had always thought himself as possessing a strong stomach. He hadn't felt this way since he'd learned of his mother, a witch of inborn talent who had chased a pretty man, gotten a child by him, then died in obscurity. (She, he presumed, was the source of his gift in discerning truths and falsehoods, his intuitive grasp of mental magic. It certainly hadn't come from his useless, deranged Muggle father.)

Albus Dumbledore was like his late mother, in a sense: where she'd wasted her magic on love
potions and bedding Muggle toffs, Dumbledore demonstrated party tricks to children and enchanted miniature gumball machines to decorate his office.

On their way back to the lift, Tom asked Hermione, "Did you find anything good?"

"Oh—" said Hermione, who appeared to be deep in thought, "Um. Yes, I did!"

"Can we use it?"

Hermione shot him an aggrieved look. "Isn't it possible to appreciate information for information's sake?"

"Perhaps for you," Tom replied. "But I've never seen the use of learning just to be learnt. That way is the path to becoming another Albus Dumbledore."

"What's wrong with being like Professor Dumbledore?" Hermione folded her arms across her chest. "He's very well-respected, I'll have you know. He won the Barnabus Finkley Prize when he was just seventeen," she said, and her voice rose in a shrill crescendo. "I'm seventeen years old, and I've never done anything!"

"I found out that Dumbledore's been requested to work with the Aurors for decades, and each time, he's refused to co-operate," said Tom. "If he won a Finkley Prize, then he could have gotten an Order of Merlin; they're both awards for acts of exemplary magical performance. If he can earn one, he can earn the other—if only he wanted it."

"I'm seventeen years old, and I've never done anything!"

"I still think Dumbledore's got a lot of worthy accomplishments," said Hermione waspishly. "There's nothing wrong with aspiring to academic success."

"There's something wrong with letting Grindelwald run about unchecked," said Tom. "And that's exactly what Dumbledore's been doing for the last twenty years. Grindelwald isn't just a dark wizard—he's a dark lord. Is it bold of me to assume that the winner of the Barnabus Finkley Prize would be a good prospect to take him on?"

Hermione sent him a doubtful look. "Sorry, are we still talking about Dumbledore?"

"I suppose never mentioning Dumbledore again is too much to ask," Tom sighed. "I'm certain that he wants to be as irrelevant as I want him to be—but that's the issue here, isn't it? The magical world's population is so small that institutions will bow to the individual, as long as he's skilled or powerful enough. Not even Minister Churchill or King George could influence affairs as much as a single wizard."

"If there's anyone you talk about more than Dumbledore, it's yourself."

"There is nothing that inspires me like greatness," said Tom, "no matter where it comes from. I can't help it if it happens to be my own."

It was Hermione's turn to sigh. "Have you ever heard of the concept of 'hubris'?"

"All I need to know is that it's a morality lesson told by parents to scare their children into proper behaviour," said Tom, his tone dismissive. "I've no need of them; you must have noticed that I'm not a child, and I've never had any use for parents."
Hermione made a strange coughing noise but refrained from commenting further. Together, they returned to the Atrium, the row of fireplaces at the end of the hallway dark and cold on a Saturday afternoon.

Tom lit the fireplace with a silent Incendio, while Hermione took a handful of Floo powder from an urn on the side, made of glazed pottery on a wrought iron stand that matched the iron boot scraper on the opposite side. In contrast to the magical lighting and gold décor of the Ministry of Magic, the interior of The Hog's Head was dark and smokey. Tom's eyes took a minute or two to adjust; he scanned the bar and occupied tables for any sign of the bartender. He'd Obliviated the man two summers ago, the first time he'd ever used that spell on a human being. Although he trusted his own magical abilities—enough to risk his own reputation on them—Hermione didn't, and he didn't want to get Hermione into trouble.

Not because there was anything inherently wrong about breaking school rules, but because Hermione would never let him forget it if his carelessness landed her in detention. And she was afraid of detention, and not as a waste of two good hours before curfew. No, Hermione's fear lay in having any sort of stain on her academic record. Where Tom expected to be handed the Hogwarts Head Boy badge after sitting his way through two years of eight course Slug Club dinners, Hermione had got it into her head that she had to constantly prove herself worthy of such an accolade by being a model student. A ridiculous notion: almost all Head Boys and Girls were chosen from the current crop of Prefects, and even if the announcement was made in the summer before Seventh Year, one could predict who was most likely to be chosen years earlier.

He indulged Hermione's sensibilities, nevertheless. She was more disposed to listen to him when he presented himself as a Good Boy. And he did like it when she listened to him and went along with his ideas, especially if they involved sneaking around past curfew or into his bedroom at the Riddle House.

Circumstances were very different now, weren't they? Once, he'd loathed the thought of grubby, sticky-fingered orphans going through his possessions, and the desire for companionship had been an alien notion that Tom had associated with a deficiency of character. But he hadn't minded having Hermione around now, or having her in his bedroom this Christmas holiday. They'd studied, practised magic, and completed their homework assignments together. He could see himself enjoying her company for more than a few weeks a year—for more than this school year or the next—for the rest of his—

His thoughts were interrupted by a low, hissing voice from a few tables over.

"Let me go! Stop squeezing me, you lumbering boor!"

His head jerked to the left, where two figures were bent over a corner table, one of them wearing a heavy cloak with the hood on, not unusual for a pub regular. The other person was a large lump wearing the black robe of the Hogwarts student uniform, lined in red at the lapels and sleeves. Most students had their uniform robes fitted to them by the saleswitch, the ends hemmed anywhere between one to three inches above the top of the shoe, this student's frayed robe ended a good half-foot above his ankles.

There was only one person at Hogwarts of that size, and Tom was correct in his guess: Rubeus Hagrid, Fourth Year Gryffindor, a dependent on the Student Relief Fund, and absolutely pants at every single core subject on the curriculum. Tom had heard of Hagrid's aptitude at Care of Magical Creatures, which was an elective subject, not core—but that hardly counted for anything, did it? It
was a subject, along with Divination and Muggle Studies, that required little wandwork, and there was nothing Tom hated as much as being told to take his quill out and put his wand away at the beginning of a lesson. To him, a class without wands might as well be Muggle day school.

So what was Hagrid doing in The Hog’s Head? With a snake, no less?

He nudged Hermione, who had changed out of her coat and back into her school robes. "That fellow over there has a boomslang. Aren't they Ministry restricted magical creatures?"

Hermione's gaze darted over; her eyes narrowed. Then she appeared to make up her mind; she marched up to the corner table, squaring her shoulders and clearing her throat. "Underage students in Hogsmeade are expected to stay with their year group, under the supervision of their House Prefects. And not wandering around with dangerous animals!"

Tom watched Hagrid's back turn, his broad features scrunching up like a failed soufflé. "He's harmless, he is! Look at him; he's just a little one—his teeth haven' even properly grown in—he won' bite, I swear it!"

To Tom's satisfaction, Hermione's stance refused to soften under the deluge of pathetic excuses. "I'm sorry, but if you bring that snake into the castle, I'm afraid I'll have no choice but to report this to your Head of House! Those animals are restricted to licensed handlers for a reason. And you—I don't know your name—shame on you for showing a dangerous creature to a student! What's your license number, sir? I'm sure that Madam Gardiner at the Ministry of Magic would be interested to know if anyone's been violating the terms of their registration!"

The cloaked wizard at the table gave a muffled response, some crude observation or other about the particulars of Merlin's below-the-belt physiology, before he slid off his stool and stumped away, stuffing a green-scaled juvenile boomslang into an interior pocket. Its complaining was drowned out by Hagrid's own whining, and Tom was unnerved to see such a large lump of a boy act in so infantile a manner.

"He wouldn't hurt no one—if I didn' take him, the man was going ter sell him to the apothecary—I couldn' let tha' happen to the poor thing!"

"If you want to ensure magical creatures are fairly treated, you ought to petition the Department of the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures," Hermione told him. "Or ask your Care of Magical Creature professor to procure one for lessons—he's got a license for handling restricted animals. Anything is better than endangering other students! What were you going to do, keep that snake under your bed?"

"My trunk—"

"An adult magical boomslang can grow over six feet long!"

"I've got a big trunk—"

"Oh yes, I expect that'll serve you very well when they make you pack your things if the snake gets out and someone sees it! You'd be expelled for that, you know!"

Tom found it entertaining to watch someone else bear the brunt of Hermione’s officious attitude. He thought that she wore the mantle of authority well, for all that it was second-hand, bestowed upon
her by the likes of Professor Beery, Headmaster Dippet, and the long arm of the Ministry of Magic's administrative auditors. The supreme assuredness in her tone and bearing—that came of someone who believed that they were entirely in the right. It wasn't quite the same as innate charisma, that rare variety of gravitas which came from within. Conviction, although issued from an external source of authority, had one thing in common with charisma in its highest form: it could never be counterfeited.

Hermione had that fierce, unmoderated conviction. And beyond that, she had facts and rules and logic on her side.

She, however, still had no charisma.

If Tom had been anyone else, and if the subject of reproval had been anyone but Rubeus Hagrid, he might have felt sorry for the boy. In the end, he decided to slide himself into the conversation; it was better that he and Hermione make themselves scarce before the bartender came over to see what all the fuss was about.

"There's no harm done, is there?" said Tom. "No venomous snake in the castle, and no expulsions. I recommend that you keep it that way, Hagrid. We won't report you or deduct points this time around, but if you're caught later on, there won't be anything we can do." He gave Hagrid a meaningful look. "It would be in your best interest to leave The Hog's Head and pretend you were never here today."

"Oh," Hagrid said gruffly, shuffling his enormous feet. Each foot was the size of a bread loaf—not the bland, grey, patriotic bread promoted by His Majesty's wartime government, but one of Mrs. Willrow's yeasty white loaves sliced up for the Riddle family's breakfast toast. "Er, o' course. I'll thank you lot fer not telling Professor Dumbledore abou' this; he's done me one good turn after another, an' we wouldn' want to bother him with the small things, eh?"

"Of course not," said Tom. "Enjoy the rest of your Hogsmeade weekend, but do remember that if you're caught again, whoever catches you won't be as lenient as we were."

After Hagrid had stumbled his way out of the tavern, Tom made a face and turned to Hermione. "Someone in the Slytherin Common Room said he's half troll."

Hermione's expression was disapproving. "No one ever chooses their parentage. And whatever he is, he's still a wizard, and shouldn't that be the only thing that matters?"

"I see your point," said Tom, nodding. "At least he's not a Muggle."

"Tom!"

Tom laughed and reached for Hermione's hand. "We've missed lunch and dinner's not until seven. Do you want to go to the Broomsticks?"

Hermione pursed her lips. "The Broomsticks is always crowded on weekends. Is the food here any good?"

"No," said Tom. "People only come here for the drinks."

"Are they good, then?"
"Not particularly." Tom paused for thought. "The only decent thing on the menu is the freshly-squeezed goat's milk."

Hermione ended up ordering a jug of iced goat milk to share, while Tom loitered in the corner avoiding Old Ab. He did want to question Aberforth about the death of Percival Dumbledore, but that was best postponed to a time when he was alone with the old man and had a chance to Stun him with his back turned. To strike a man from behind was considered cowardly by most, but formal Rules of Engagement were expected and enforced in public exhibition duels; outside of the public eye, Tom bowed to no expectations but his own.

*And possibly Hermione's*, he conceded.

He thought she looked rather silly with a milky moustache on her upper lip, but then again, so did he.

But it was perfectly acceptable because no one saw them.

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In the final month of the school year, Tom was granted an opportunity to interrogate Professor Slughorn. Every Friday night over the course of the year, Slughorn invited students to his dinner parties. It was a rotating selection of his favourites: those whom he thought had the potential to go somewhere after Hogwarts due to their academic brilliance, exceptional talent, or advantageous connections. The parties were always overcrowded in September and October (Tom remembered the picnic lunches in a cramped train compartment with clear distaste), but by May, dinner attendance had whittled itself down to no more than a dozen people.

Tom had personally judged the attendees as those who had the most to gain from ingratiating themselves to Professor Slughorn, and those who didn't care about their exam marks. The exams were weeks away, and the Ravenclaw members of the Slug Club—including Hermione—had decided that they'd get more benefit from high marks than from Slughorn's network of associates.

Which left only Slytherins to join Slughorn for dinner that evening: Tom, who knew he'd score Outstandings whether or not he studied; Lestrange and Avery, who weren't going to work for a living even if they did manage to score Outstandings; Abraxas Malfoy, the Slytherin Quidditch team captain who wasn't fond of Tom but had learned to hold his tongue after being tossed off the duelling platform a few times; Lucretia Black, the current Head Girl and fiancée to a Slug Club alumnus who'd graduated ten years ago; and finally, Orion Black, who preferred Slughorn's spreads over the offerings fed to the rest of the student population in the Great Hall. (Mutton and potatoes were pedestrian compared to the imported Fire Crab croquettes and freshwater plimpies in chilled lemon aspic served at old Sluggy's table.)

Tom waited until the platter of dried figs and sliced cheese had been passed around before he posed his questions to Slughorn. By then, Slughorn had chugged his way through his first bottle of red wine and was well on his way to finishing his second.

"Sir, I wanted to ask you something," said Tom, widening his eyes and lifting his eyebrows ever so
slightly. He was seventeen, shaved his whiskers every other day, and was fully aware that his Good Boy guise had only a few years before it reached the end of its lifespan. Sycophancy, on the other hand, had no age limit.

Slughorn smacked his lips, setting his goblet down on the table, a few drops splattering onto the tablecloth. "Ask away, then, m'boy."

"Sir," Tom ventured, "I wondered, what do professors do during the summer holidays?"

"Planning to apply for a summer apprenticeship, Tom?" said Slughorn.

"Not exactly, sir. I was told that there was no supervision at Hogwarts in the summer, and students aren't allowed to stay at school for that reason. If that's true, then where do the staff go? Does everyone have a house they live in for ten weeks a year?"

"Well, many of us do," said Slughorn slowly, stroking the rim of his wineglass. "I do enjoy spending my holidays with good friends of mine—can't see 'em for most of the year, better get the most of my days off when I have 'em, you see. But some have their own houses, and others let out a cottage down in Hogsmeade."

"I heard that Professor Dumbledore's brother lived in Hogsmeade," Tom said. "Are the Dumbledores Hogsmeade natives? It'd be strange to consider The Hog's Head tavern a family business... It's not exactly family friendly, is it?"

"Far from it, Tom! They have an excellent dragon's blood firewhisky, reserved orders only, but you didn't hear that from me," Slughorn chortled, leaning forward and giving Tom a conspiratorial wink. "Albus actually lives in Godric's Hollow—one of those mixed villages, down in the West Country. He's on neighbourly terms with batty old Bathilda; did you know? Before Cuthbert came in for the History seat, she was dear old Professor Bagshot. Retired now, but she deserves the rest; she must have taught here for over half a century! She taught me, Albus, and half the staff here. That was late last century, goodness me, how time flies..."

"Really?" said Tom. "You don't look a day past forty."

Slughorn beamed in delight, his wine-flushed complexion growing a shade more ruddy.

"I'm sure you must have some good stories to tell about your old professors. Professor Binns is, well, not the most engaging when it comes to teaching History. Nothing like your stories—I think we here can all agree that they're the best part of every Potions lesson."

Tom's gaze flicked over to Avery and Lestrange; on cue, they murmured their assent. To his disgust, they appeared to be engaged in a competition to see who could stack up the most layers in a cheese and cracker sandwich.

"Oho, you flatter me, Tom, you rascal," Slughorn said, sighing deeply. "Professor Bathilda was a great teacher. Knew the material back and front, wrote the textbooks you're using today. No, the most irregular thing about Old Batty was her sister." He lowered his voice and continued, "It's not commonly known, but she went and married a German fellow, moved to Europe, and that side of the family later got itself involved with a bad crowd." He shook his head, jowls quivering. "I heard tell that Albus struck up a close friendship with Professor Batty's European nephew. That was before my time, of course, but it's a tricky business, very tricky indeed... Albus still refuses every call to action the Ministry sends him, you see, and some have started to wonder..."
"Oh?" said Tom. "Wonder about what exactly, sir?"

"Well, it's all just speculation," Slughorn admitted, glancing around the table. Lestrange and Avery were steadily demolishing the contents of the cheese platter, but every other Slytherin at the table was listening with avid attention. "But one could begin to understand a certain smidgen of reluctance... the last place any man should like to see a good friend of his is on the opposite side of a battlefield."

"I, for one, am shocked at how many well-known British personages have queer connections," Malfoy remarked, his thin-lipped face twisted into an expression of disdain. "My father said that the Rosiers were German sympathisers. Everyone knows they aren't properly British like the rest of us."

Lucretia Black snickered. ""The rest of us', Malfoy?"

"My family have been here for centuries!"

"If there are any secret German sympathisers out there, why haven't the Aurors arrested them?" Tom asked.

"It's never an easy job to get proof of these things. Rumours go around, but with important names being tossed around—respected wizards, proper families, most of 'em—they have to be surer than sure about anyone they take in." Slughorn shifted uncomfortably. "But on to a more important subject, Tom—have you considered taking up that trainee position at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement?"

The dinner lasted until half-past nine, when the last cracker crumbs had been licked off the platters, and the last grain of sand had fallen into the bottom bulb of Slughorn's hourglass. Tom considered this dinner less of a waste of time than ones he'd suffered through in the past; instead of being a mix of the four Houses, the attendees had been Slytherins to the last, so there was no need to keep up the pretense that any of them enjoyed one another's company.

Lucretia Black couldn't stand Abraxas Malfoy; Malfoy, Avery, and Lestrange weren't fond of pureblood witches with personal opinions as "progressive" as Lucretia's—she supported the fair treatment of Muggleborns and half-bloods in the context of professional employment, as opposed to the counter-argument that one's cousins shouldn't need to apply for work, if they were in need of finding work at all. Orion rolled his eyes at the ridiculous posturing done by teenage boys trying to impersonate their fathers, while Slughorn sipped his nightcap, obliviously congratulating himself on what a fine crop of youngsters he'd gathered here tonight. Tom himself had mentally divided the group into puppets who regurgitated someone else's opinions, or indifferent toadies who had no opinions at all until their comfortable lifestyles were put under threat.

Tom wanted to tell Hermione what he'd learned about Dumbledore. She'd bought into the meddling old man's act, that of the harmless old scholar, and Tom was eager to inform her that she was wrong. Not for the same reason that Hermione liked correcting people (which was pure pedantry) but because nothing thrilled Tom's heart quite like watching other people's pre-conceptions shatter into tiny pieces. They could try to put themselves back together, but the cracks were permanent, and so was their heightened level of cynicism.

(The dark satisfaction, he recalled with great fondness, was the same as what he felt when he was six years old and had just told Jimmy at the orphanage that his uncle wasn't actually his uncle, and his mother—despite all her tearful promises—was never coming back for him. And the best part about it was no one being able to point their fingers at him and say that he'd broken any rules or committed
On the walk back to the Slytherin dormitories, Tom asked Lucretia, "Did you or Bledisloe assign a patrol to Granger tonight?"

If Hermione had a Prefect patrol, Tom could catch up to her before bed. He knew he could always visit her after hours by going through the Ravenclaw Common Room door-knocker puzzle, but Ravenclaws always liked knowing they were the cleverest students, and it wouldn't earn him much goodwill if a Slytherin proved he could sneak in at night. Cultivating goodwill mattered; even if he borrowed books from the Common Room library during the day, the Ravenclaw girls' dormitory was still off-limits to him and sending Hermione a message required the assistance of one of her dorm mates.

Lucretia yawned, covering her mouth with a prim hand. "Granger asked for Friday off when I assigned the schedule last Sunday. I assumed she was planning to join us at the Slug Club tonight, but then I came across her in the Prefects' Bathroom before dinner. With a Slytherin boy..."

She inclined her head toward him. "You know, I do like seeing inter-House friendships; they're few and far between for members of Slytherin House. To go without is so self-limiting. We're often obliged to associate with family regardless of our own preferences, but one ought to be more discerning when it comes to choosing their friends."

"You disapprove of inter-Slytherin friendships?" said Tom.

"Friendships!" said Lucretia, her mouth tilting up at the corners. "What bosh! Only a half-wit would mistake Avery and Lestrange for friends. Trust me, Riddle, once you get your step next year, those two will be strutting about the Common Room as if they'd earned the badge themselves."

"You needn't be concerned," said Tom. "By the time I've made it to Head Boy, I'd have had six years to train them properly. They'll bark, fetch, and heel if and when I want them to."

"Perhaps I should be concerned on their behalf, then." There was a thoughtful pause, before she went on, "I should be, but I'm not. Oh well. Have a good night, Riddle."

She spoke the password at the blank section of wall that concealed the Common Room, and stepped through the gap that opened up. Tom stood still, analysing their conversation for a minute, before he abruptly turned around and strode out of the dungeons.

The Prefects' Bathroom was on the Fifth Floor, behind a nondescript door hidden between a tapestry and a statue of a man putting his robes on backwards. It opened to the password, "Birch bristles".

He'd been here once before, at the beginning of his Fifth Year, just to see why everyone had been so interested in it on the train. It had been an impressive sight at first glance: a high ceiling and floor laid with slabs of gleaming white marble, as grand as a Greek monument. Gold gilt, crystal chandeliers, and stained glass: Rococo magnificence fit for anyone with a royal taste for opulence. The lavish architecture had appealed to him as much as the theatre had, when he'd watched Madame Butterfly with the Grangers.

But then his sense of practicality had set in.

Why a private bathroom just for Prefects?
A bathroom.

He'd much prefer a private study or Prefects' common room, which had more uses than just bathing. And using it didn't necessitate having to take one's clothes off.

(Not that he was afraid of dis-robing or anything, unlike many of the girls who were mortified at the prospect of changing their clothes in a train compartment, though it was empty of other people and the doors were locked. As if anyone cared about the colour of their garter belts. Tom just liked wearing his school uniform; he liked dressing as wizards did, performing feats of magic in robes with flowing sleeves and cloaks that swept the floor.)

The door of the bathroom swung open, and a bank of scented steam roiled out, thick and white and smelling of a potioneer's pantry. Tom waved it away, drawing his wand.

Ventus.

The steam shredded, wisping away to reveal a strange tableau.

Hermione and Nott, wading around the bottom of the Prefects' swimming pool, the water ankle-deep and filled with bubbles. They had their shoes and robes off, draped over a stack of towels in a corner of the room, their white uniform shirts half-transparent from the moisture. Hermione had removed her stockings, and dried flower petals were stuck to her bare legs. The tails of Nott's uniform shirt dangled over his long woollen underwear, the hems rolled up to his knee, darkened here and there where water had splashed over them.

"I read that Muggle London had wooden plumbing in the sixteen-hundreds, but metal hydraulic valves are relatively recent," spoke Hermione in her lecturing voice. "Even if the founders built this as a communal bath house in the beginning, the tub and taps have to be new. I presume that this was given to the Prefects after they installed new bathrooms for each dormitory..."

"Yes, but do any of these new taps do anything?" asked Nott impatiently, picking up a handful of bubbles, inspecting them, then tossing them aside. "The best place to hide something is in plain sight, but there are fifty of these things here."

"Well, we'll just have to keep trying them one by one, won't we," Hermione snapped.

"You were the one who suggested we look here, Granger; no need to tie yourself in a knot about it."

"Why don't you help me instead of whinging, then? Curfew's in half an hour!"

"What curfew? You're a Prefect!"

"I can't just pick and choose what rules to follow!"

"But you let me into the Prefects' Bathroom—are guests even allowed in here?"

"T-that's different!"

"So you tell yourself," snorted Nott.

"Having a pleasant evening, you two?" said Tom, stepping out of the swirling cloud of steam.
There was a splashing sound, someone yelled, "Fuck!" very loudly, then someone else said, "Language!"

A few seconds later, Hermione's head popped out from the side of the pool. She dragged herself up a golden ladder, looking somewhat bedraggled—the back of her hair had puffed out in the humid steam, and the front was damp and plastered to her forehead and cheeks.

"Yes, Riddle, we were having the time of our lives," Nott said snidely, following her up the ladder. It seemed that, as usual, he was physically incapable of being pleasant.

"Doing what, exactly?" Tom asked.

"Washing our feet," said Nott, a scowl on his face. "What does it look like?"

"Was that really necessary?" Hermione said to Nott.

"It's Riddle; I can't help myself," he replied with a shrug.

"You should be grateful that I can help myself." Tom tapped his wand against his thigh in impatience. "Now," he said, staring fixedly at Nott, "need I repeat myself?"

"Do you need to do anything?" Nott muttered under his breath, his scowl deepening. In a louder voice, he said, "We're looking for the Chamber, of course."

"In the Prefects' Bathroom?"

"The plumbing leads down into the Hogwarts foundations, and empties into the Lake," said Nott. "In terms of classical affinities, Hufflepuff was associated with the element of Earth, and Slytherin with Water—and that's why their Common Rooms were built in the lower levels of the castle."

Hermione added helpfully, "The Slytherin dormitories are built under the Lake."

"Looks like someone's been sharing House secrets," Nott remarked, before he continued, "If there are any hidden rooms or chambers in the castle, Slytherin would've hidden them under the castle or the Lake, having built them at the same time as the House dorms and the dungeons. The other founders banished him before the castle's construction was completed, and they'd have noticed if Slytherin had asked to work on one of the towers.

"If you talk to the portraits or the ghosts, they can give you a list of Hogwarts' architectural features, and the century that they were installed. Of the few features that date back to the founding, the dungeon network is the only one that makes sense. And the Hogwarts dungeons include the Slytherin quarters, the Potions classrooms and storage rooms, and everything under the Lake. The plumbing system goes under the Lake!"

"It's the only thing large enough to hide a monster for a thousand years," said Hermione, who had been nodding along to Nott's explanation, looking ready to pounce on any logical inconsistencies. "I think Professor Slughorn would have noticed if someone hid a dragon egg in the back of his store cupboard. I don't know about the Slytherin quarters, but I'm quite sure Salazar Slytherin was clever enough not to put a bewitched manticore where a hundred students sleep every night."

"Salazar Slytherin didn't care much for children," Nott put in, "but he did care about blood."
"This is why we've been looking," Hermione corrected him. "It'll go much faster with another pair of eyes."

Tom lifted an eyebrow. "Why should I help?"

"Because... because you chose to set that awful, completely unnecessary time limit!"

"Hmm. I'm still not convinced."

"If we don't find anything tonight, at least we'll know what all these taps do?" Hermione tried again. "This is top-notch enchanting, even if it post-dates the founders."

"You've never used this bathroom before?" asked Tom.

"No," admitted Hermione. "It seemed like such a waste to spend fifteen minutes filling up the tub for a single person..."

"I've never used it either," said Tom. "Never saw the point. Until now, I suppose."

He reached for his tie and began to loosen the knot.

"What are you doing?" said Nott uncertainly.

"Joining in," said Tom, slipping off his robe and folding it. "What does it look like?"

In the end, they found no evidence of the Chamber of Secrets being hidden in the Prefect's Bathroom, but they did see what all the taps did. Colourful bubbles, dried flowers and herbs, scented oil, mounds of foam, perfumed steam, and different temperatures of water, from a frozen slush to a tea steeping boil.

The hot water was relaxing to Tom, who enjoyed the experience of bathing. Back in the orphanage, the pipes froze every winter, and bathing was a chore to suffer through once or twice a week, and involved buckets of snow and kettles of boiling water poured into a tin laundry tub of icy suds. And then he'd come to Hogwarts, where he had his own towel, clean and fresh every day, and not a cake of hard yellow soap in sight. The only disadvantage of the Slytherin dormitory bathroom was the one bathtub shared between the six boys in his year group. (The disadvantage was mostly Lestrange, who soaked his muscles after Quidditch practice, leaving a ring of mud like a high-tide mark on the porcelain, which lasted until the tub was magically cleaned overnight. Tom had opted for the showers instead.)

As relaxing as it was for Tom, he noticed that the beneficial effects didn't extend to Hermione or Nott. Hermione was pink-faced the whole time, her complexion flushing darker when Tom reached past her for the stack of towels on the other end of the pool, letting out the most peculiar-sounding squeak when their bare knees brushed together under the water.

Nott, however, nervously averted his eyes whenever Tom gazed in his direction, choosing to tread water alone on one side of the pool.

It was strange, as there was no reason at all to be nervous: none of them had taken their
undergarments off—and they weren't even visible, with the heavy layer of foam floating on the surface of the water.

Tom had no other choice but to attribute their response to shyness.

That must be it, wasn't it?

They were both single children of their families. They'd always had their own showers and bathtubs—living at the Grangers' house in the summer after Second Year, Tom had seen how Hermione had had an entire bathroom to herself. Going to Hogwarts must have been the first instance in their lives that they'd had shared accommodations. And even then, the sharing was limited: their dormitory bathrooms had individual shower stalls, their beds had canopies for privacy, each resident had their own trunk, bureau, and nightstand. Their sheltered lives were nothing like the grim communalism of Wool's Orphanage, where the orphans were expected to write their names on the inside collars of their shirts, and oftentimes had to cross out several other names, the former owners who'd outgrown their assigned 'Broadcloth Uniform Smock, Size Four, Grey'.

He remembered, a year ago, contemplating the column of vertebrae, the procession of little nubs that traced their way from the nape of Hermione's neck and down the curve of her spine. He still thought of it now and again when Hermione wore her hair in a plait, and it was a disappointment to him that she felt, in the here and now, that it was necessary to preserve her modesty behind a wall of bubbles.

Had she not touched his bare leg, his knees, his skin slick with blood, just a few months ago? She had seen him then, pyjamas stained and torn, delirious with pain, falling unconscious on the floor of St. Mungo's. Had she not slept in his bed, so close to his side that he could feel the ridge of her spine as it disappeared into her bloodied nightgown—his own blood—so close that he'd had to peel her hair out of his mouth in the morning?

After that, what sense was there in maintaining an illusion of innocence?

Hermione had presented minimal opposition when he'd asked her to stay; she had partaken, and her present reluctance was exasperating. Yes, Nott was in the room, but he was irrelevant. Tom had ensured that Nott's reputation, fortunes—his life—was tied to his own. He wouldn't speak a word to their fellow students of anything even tangentially related to his quest for the Chamber of Secrets.

It was a puzzle as to why Hermione was so resistant. They'd known each other for half their lives. They'd broken rules together from the very beginning, been accessories to one another's crimes: he'd done his classmates' homework for money and favours; Hermione had hired a wizard to ward a Muggle house; they'd both performed underage magic long before the age of seventeen. Of course there were plenty of things he hadn't told her, and didn't plan on doing so, but out of all the people in their respective circles of social acquaintance, they had no one else but each other who shared—who could share—so great and extraordinary a connection.

Hermione's delusions of modesty were absurd.

Tom ultimately decided that they were a minor inconvenience, and that he would never deem any obstacle permanent or irreversible. Indeed, over the years, he had trained owls and spiders and rats; he knew that adaptability was a matter of conditioning.

He'd invite Hermione to his home this summer; he would think of reasons for her to visit him as often as she could. Eventually, she'd come to enjoy his company—all aspects of it, without the artificial limitations imposed by some internal sense of morality or propriety.
To him, these limitations were arbitrary. To Hermione, they were conditional.

They had a year left of Hogwarts.

Looking at the stiff expressions of his fellow bathroom occupants, Tom supposed he wasn’t the only one keeping an eye on the time.
This chapter was a weird mix of dramatic mystery, sexual tension, and goofing around.
Hermione couldn't avoid the awkwardness that emerged after the incident in the Prefects' Bathroom. If she was honest with herself, the awkwardness hadn't been entirely unpleasant. She made a clear distinction of the two types of awkwardness: good and bad.

*Bad* awkwardness was the dinner last summer with Tom's grandparents, who lacked any and all awareness about the state of the world outside their insular sphere of privilege and affluence. *Good* awkwardness was Hermione's attempt at a dance lesson during the Veterans' Gala, where she found that Tom didn't need an explanation of metre signatures to follow the steps of a basic waltz.

That designation of... *awkwardness without unpleasantness*, she admitted with reluctance, could apply to Tom's presence in the bathtub that Friday night.

In the summers she'd shared her bathroom—and the bathroom in her parents' magical tent—with Tom, she had never seen him in this degree of undress. Yes, she'd seen him in the morning with his hair uncombed, barefoot, and wearing his pyjamas, and that was a more private, intimate view of him that few outside his dorm mates ever saw of him. But apart from the instance where she and Nott had Apparated Tom to St. Mungo's, she couldn't recall seeing any part of him that lay below his collar or above his ankles.

Her father was a doctor, so Hermione knew on an intellectual level that despite Tom's boasting about being Special and Different to everyone else, he was physically no different than any other boy his age, Muggle or wizard. Like every English boy in Britain, he had pale skin that turned pink when scrubbed in hot water; he had two arms, two legs, and one bellybutton; he had hair on his forearms and lower legs that matched the colour of the hair on his head. There was nothing remarkable about it; in an anatomical sense, Tom Riddle was completely ordinary.

But somehow, seeing Tom unknot his necktie and unbutton his shirt in preparation of joining them in the oversized bathtub, Hermione was nonetheless entranced by the view.

She didn't want to be—she never liked the sort of talk she'd overheard in the corridors on the way to class, teenage boys ranking which of their female classmates had made the best impression upon their return from summer holidays, or teenage girls giggling in the library about an upper year boy browsing on the other side of the shelf. Tom was often the subject of these off-hand discussions; for him to be reduced to the sum of his social graces and outward appearance, regardless of its complimentary nature, seemed tremendously insulting. (Hermione had been teased throughout her early childhood for her hair and her teeth and the way her hand was the first to shoot up whenever the teacher asked a question, so she understood how it felt to be judged by appearance first, and capability second.)

She was mortified that night to have found herself in the category of people she'd once criticised, guilty of appreciating Tom Riddle for naught but his corporeal appearance.
There was no justification for this unworthy behaviour, she knew. It was degrading to judge women by their looks, as if the colour of their lipstick or the liveliness of their walking gait was a measure of their character. It was of equal superficiality to judge a man by such a standard as the polish on his shoes, or the strength of his handshake.

But—

It had been difficult to look away.

It wasn't because she'd seen anything horrifying or unexpected that night.

It wasn't the sight of any disfiguring scars or marks on his body that had drawn her gaze, but Tom's utter lack of concern when he'd undressed in front of her. In fact, there were no scars, or anything disfiguring at all, just a smooth expanse of skin, sprinkled with a few moles on his back and lower hip. It had been intriguing to observe, because she'd gotten herself used to Tom's being well-admired for his physical attributes; she'd acknowledged that much of his appeal (no matter what she personally thought of it) came of his symmetrical features, but here—up close—she could see that he wasn't so symmetrical, or so perfect.

Without his many layers of clothing, Tom was lean of frame, perhaps a dozen pounds away from looking underfed, an effect of being so tall, and at his age, growing still taller. His waist was narrow, shoulder blades prominent, and his collarbones jutted. On his body, it was easy to discern the places where flesh gave way to tendon and bone, but Tom wasn't as gawky or unco-ordinated as one might expect for someone with his build; he exuded an aura of confidence—or perhaps it was a lack of uncertainty—that distinguished him from boys his own age. Nott, stripped to his shirtsleeves and underwear, was of a similar appearance—thin by nature as opposed to lack of nourishment—but he was nowhere near Tom's equal in sheer presence.

For the sake of her sanity, Hermione resolved that she wouldn't think of that strange, awkward evening (or at least, try not to), nor would she bring it up in conversation with any of the participants. Tom didn't mention it afterwards, but Nott found her in the library the very next day, looking eager to discuss what she had termed, "The Bathroom Incident".

"If there's one thing I can say about Riddle, it's his efficiency," said Nott, having figured out that her favourite table was the quiet little nook by the wizarding law section, far away from the shelves of basic textbooks and out of view of the librarian's desk. "Posturing at you, while threatening me—the man doesn't know how to rest, does he?"

"I... I'm not certain he was showing off, exactly," said Hermione nervously, unable to hide the flush that had risen across her face.

Showing off was so entrenched in Tom's nature that it was hard to tell when he was deliberately going farther than his usual, and when he was being his normal self. Even having no need to impress anyone was not reason enough to stop him.

"Please." Nott rolled his eyes. "Riddle looked much too eager about dropping his trousers in front of you."

"You took your trousers off too," Hermione pointed out.

"I was wearing proper underclothes," said Nott. "Riddle was wearing some sort of strange Muggle unmentionables. You could even see his knees!"
Hermione gaped at him. "I'm wearing a skirt; you can see my knees right now!"

"That's different," said Nott, "you're a girl."

"I don't understand what difference it makes," said Hermione, scowling at him.

"It's tradition," said Nott blithely. "Like bowing before a duel. Or the rule that one must never sleep in a wandwood grove or store Goblin silver in their Gringotts vault."

"That's not tradition, that's just common sense," said Hermione. "There's a good reason for that first one: bowtruckles attack wizards sleeping under wandwood trees."

Nott gave a careless shrug. "It doesn't matter why. The fact is that some things aren't done, but Riddle does them anyway. If he's going to be a proper wizard, he ought to do things properly. No one would ever trust a Minister for Magic if he doesn't at least pay lip service to wizarding tradition."

"'Minister for Magic'?' Hermione echoed, incredulous. "What?"

"Isn't that what he's aiming for?" Nott's eyes narrowed. "I had it from Avery that Riddle asked about Ministry jobs after Hogwarts—Slughorn tries to push him into one department or another every time they have dinner." He ticked each point off on his fingers. "He toadied up to that Ministry lady when we had Apparition lessons. He was making that smug face of his, and she gave him her card! You said he cosied up to the Ministry secretary when you sneaked off the grounds the other weekend. Without me."

He shot her an annoyed look, then continued, "I can sum it up for you: Riddle is in the perfect position to enter politics. He has the connections; he'll have the marks by next year. Having half the witches at Hogwarts eating out of his hands isn't enough. He needs legitimacy. He needs real men of consequence taking notice of him. And he'll have that when everyone sees he's not just some no-name, half-blood upstart—that he's the Heir-of-fucking-Slytherin!"

Hermione couldn't help herself; she laughed. "That's the most presumptuous thing I've ever heard."

"It's not presumptuous," retorted Nott. "Can you imagine a man of Riddle's talents ending up as a shop clerk or a sweeper at the owl emporium?"

*Can you imagine Tom writing an article about breastfeeding?* thought Hermione. *Because he's already done that.*

It was easy to assume that Tom applied high standards to everything in his life. Easy for those who didn't know him, that is. He earned top marks; his close associates were the children of prominent and wealthy families; he looked and dressed and sounded like a promising young wizard that other young wizards should aspire to be. But Hermione knew that this was merely the surface. Much of Tom's outward appearance was affected, and the truth was far less polished.

(She remembered the early days of First Year, when she and Tom had skulked around the corridors and broom closets, checking the caretaker's traps before and after class each day to see if anything had been caught. For around six months of that year, they'd kept a rat collection. It was far from dignified, but when Tom discovered new forms of magic, dignity was the last thing on his mind.)

"It is presumptuous," she insisted. "What makes you think Tom is interested in being the Minister
Hermione had been thirteen years old when Tom had decided that she should be the Minister. Over the years, he'd brought the subject up on occasion, though he hadn't changed his mind: he wouldn't turn his nose up at the rôle of dictator if offered, but any offer of the Minister's job would be faced with a firm rejection. Public speeches on one's dedication to serving the public good was one thing; deriving one's power from a public vote was another. Tom, unlike Hermione, saw no benefit—no benefit to himself—in a democratic system. Hermione had seen no point in arguing with him about it. He didn't want to be the Minister, and his preference was out of the question—as if anyone was going to make him a dictator.

"What else would he be interested in?" asked Nott. "He's a Slytherin, and a wizard. In the wizarding world, there's no official position as powerful as that of the Minister. I may not be as far up Riddle's... confidences... as you are, but I do know what kind of person he is. He seeks power," he spoke with absolute certainty. "You can't deny it."

"I-I'm not denying it!" Hermione protested. "I just think you're counting your chickens, that's all."

Nott regarded her with a measured gaze. "If you want to do things properly, you ought to avoid those awful Muggle sayings. Unless you like people thinking you're more common than you are."

"I'm not sure why that matters," said Hermione flatly. "There aren't any men of consequence I need to impress."

"Oh, very droll," Nott said. He gave an unamused sniff. "I'm just saying, Granger, that everyone should try to, shall we say, refine themselves."

"Why would I have need of that?" said Hermione. "Nothing I do will 'refine' my blood status."

"It's for the look of the thing," Nott answered. "If Riddle can do it, then so can you. I'm sure he'd appreciate it—that's if he has hasn't decided to throw you over the moment he's landed a position as someone's senior secretary. He'll be an important man one day, and he knows that looking important is part of the job."

"Tom wouldn't throw me over," Hermione snapped. "And he's not interested in taking on an administrative position after Hogwarts. If anyone should be worried about being 'thrown over', it's you."

"How do you know?" asked Nott abruptly. "He's not said anything, has he?"

Hermione hadn't had many friends before Hogwarts; afterwards, sharing a dorm with five other Ravenclaw girls hadn't made her more than passing acquaintances with them. They'd formed their own little sub-groups by the end of Second Year, with Hermione on the outside. Not that she'd minded, of course. She had Tom, who might not have been able to match her eye colour to the most complementary shade of nail enamel, but was nonetheless a wonderful partner for class projects and exam preparation.

She supposed that her friendship with Tom had spoiled her. Tom didn't expect surprise birthday parties. He didn't demand that every spare minute she had outside of lessons be spent with him. He didn't even like it when she read over his essays and was too kind in giving her critique. It wasn't something she thought much about these days: Tom was her friend, she was his, and what had once begun as an alliance of mutual convenience had become something... more. Something reciprocated,
somehow intimate, with no expectation of transactional exchange.

It took a moment or two for Hermione to recognise that this—their type of relationship—didn't apply to everyone else. Tom's favour was never an achievement she laboured to earn. Tom favoured her, and she didn't have to buy him expensive gifts, carry his books between classes, or put in the painstaking effort of pin-boning his pickled Shrakes in Potions. (She'd disapproved of Tom gently nudging another student into taking up the worst task in a group brewing exercise. But they'd managed to finish their potion earlier than everyone else, and Hermione left the classroom without the smell of fish clinging to her robes, so that was one instance where she kept her disapproval to herself.)

"If you want to know, you could just ask him," said Hermione. "I admit that Tom can be difficult sometimes, but I do believe he has a good soul."

"Difficult,'" Nott grumbled. "That's one way to put it..."

He shoved his hands into his pockets and wandered off, leaving Hermione to herself in her corner of the library.

She picked up her quill, but didn't resume the essay she'd been working on when Nott came and interrupted her.

The end of this school year was fast approaching, and most students were considering their future careers, with their N.E.W.T.s right around the corner. It was strange for Nott to be considering Tom's future career, as if it was any of his concern. As she thought about it, she began to consider the decisions Tom himself had made about his future. He had a job—not a steady one, but it was flexible and he'd saved up quite a bit in the few years he'd been writing for *Witch Weekly*, not to mention the bonuses he got for various product endorsements. He had an inheritance courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Riddle, and through their bequest, Tom would one day be a gentleman of leisure.

She couldn't imagine Tom sharing this information with anyone else... Not with Professor Slughorn, career advisor to the Slytherin students. Not with his Slytherin "friends", or with the grandparents who expected him to attend a prestigious university after completing his secondary education. (His field of study didn't matter, as they didn't expect him to actually work.) Tom's plans, which encompassed all his childhood dreams, his wild goals, were so personal to him that he'd gotten upset when he thought Dumbledore had found out about their letters.

Tom would never speak candidly about that subject with his fellow Slytherins. No, Tom Riddle had built himself a reputation as a brilliant student, and everyone who believed what they saw, believed he would go on to do great things—although what exactly these 'great things' were was heretofore unknown. Tom, who enjoyed being an object of mystery and speculation (and wasn't bothered if the things said about him were nice or not) never attempted to correct anyone of their assumptions.

She could understand Nott's concern now, though she wasn't sure she sympathised.

They treated Tom as if he was a firm in which they could invest, which would eventually pay out dividends for their support. Slughorn had cleared out a section of his shelf next to the photograph of the stern and unsmiling Arcturus Black, dropping a few unsubtle hints about his 'reserved spot'. Nott—the rest of Tom's Slytherin followers, for that matter—must be eager to cling onto Tom's coat tails, to bask in Tom's reflected brilliance.

The worst part was Tom's taking great pleasure in encouraging their assumptions, neither granting
firm confirmation or clear denial, always turning aside the questions with one pretty answer after another, insinuating this and intimating that, but never saying anything. Hermione had since Christmas wondered if Tom's half-baked marriage proposal had been one of his many great teases, as Tom hadn't brought it up since the holidays, and she was almost too afraid to ask. (To an equal degree, she was also afraid of what answer he would give her.)

With a sigh, she uncorked her ink bottle and returned to her work, tapping the desk lamp with her wand to brighten and focus the light. There was no use in contemplating Tom's future career choices, not when there were more important things to concern herself with: her own prospects.

On the last week of term, Lucretia Black tapped Hermione on the shoulder as she was leaving the Great Hall after breakfast, drawing her aside and off down the corridor, the one with the alcove that she and Tom had used for private conversations over the past few years.

Even in the middle of her N.E.W.T.s, Lucretia's presentation was spotless: her robes were neat and pressed, no ink spots staining the green lining of the sleeves. It was quite unlike the Ravenclaw Seventh Years that Hermione had seen in the Common Room, a handful who'd stayed up studying the entire night and hadn't changed their clothes when coming down to breakfast in the morning. Her immaculate appearance extended to Lucretia's dark hair, fashionable curls held with jewelled pins in the shape of feathers. They had to be roller curls—Hermione's natural curls never behaved like that; trying to tame them with a brush only made them frizz out more.

Finally, Lucretia's Head Girl badge shone on her lapel, the bright silver free of fingerprint smudges. Its sparkle was matched by the silver rings on her hands, of which the heaviest on her left hand was the most prominent.

"Granger," said Lucretia, her wand slipping out of her sleeve and casting about in the downwards arc and flick of the Silencing Charm. "Do you have a moment?"

"Er," Hermione said hesitantly, "what is it?"

"Official business," said Lucretia. She put her wand away, clearing her throat. "Sorry about that. These corridors echo and the portraits have a nasty habit of listening in on conversations—they get awfully bored hanging on the walls all day.

"On a subject of more importance, Granger, I've had word that you've been nominated for next year's Head Girl. Congratulations."

She spoke in a cool manner that wouldn't have been out of place in class, reciting a passage from the textbook. She didn't sound overjoyed on Hermione's behalf; Hermione decided, out of the desire to be generous, that Lucretia's indifference was due to her short time left at Hogwarts. What did next year's Head Girl matter to someone leaving at the end of the week?

"Thank you," said Hermione. "Although it's probably too early for a congratulations."
"There aren't any female Quidditch captains in your year, so who else could it be? Catesby and Fyfe are, hmm, aggressively mediocre," Lucretia continued, without the least bit of apology in her tone. "And Hipworth's so insufferably gauche that even Sluggy can see right through her. There was no other choice but you."

"Um, I don't think—"

"I expect that you'll do a creditable job of it, as long as you know what's expected of you. And for that reason, I needed to speak with you."

She reached into her robes and drew out a thick roll of parchment, offering it to Hermione.

"Blank patrol schedules, divided by House and month," she explained. "The Prefect system is intended to aid the teachers ensure a high standard of order and discipline at Hogwarts. Traditionally, the Head Boy undertakes the discipline, and the Head Girl manages the organisation... but with the position going to Riddle next year, I've reason to believe that he's uninterested in either."

Hermione frowned. "Are you saying that he doesn't deserve to be next year's Head Boy?"

"I'm sure he's a wonderful person," said Lucretia, waving an ambiguous hand and not answering the question. "If he has the patience to coddle Slughorn for six years running, then who am I to say that he's undeserving? The problem with Riddle is the same problem that arises every time someone hands the badge to a Slytherin: that the person who gets it cares less about Hogwarts than he does about himself."

"But you're a Slytherin," Hermione pointed out.

"A formality," Lucretia replied. "The Hat offered me a choice, but all Blacks go to Slytherin. In the end, one's House colours don't define them—it's the person who wears them that matters. And Riddle would be a shirker no matter what colour he wears."

"He's a hard worker, you know. He earned eleven O.W.L.s last year," said Hermione defensively.

"He wags off detention for anyone who can return a favour," said Lucretia. "He's in my House; of course I notice these things."

"Yes, alright, but he—"

"But you can keep an eye on him, can't you?" She graced Hermione with a considering look, then added, "I doubt there's anyone else who could."

"I..." Hermione began. "I'll try, I suppose."

"Good," said Lucretia, nodding. "The last sheet has a list of duties expected of the Heads, sorted by date. You'll want to get a head start in preparing the welcome speech for the September train ride, and the two farewell speeches—one for the Seventh Year graduation evening, and another for the last meeting on the Prefects' compartment. I expect you to attend mine, next week."

Having finished her speech, Lucretia flicked her wand at the walls to remove the Silencing Charm. She glanced both ways down the corridor, and without another word to Hermione, strode away.
Hermione stared at Lucretia’s retreating back, wondering what that was about. Lucretia Black, Hogwarts’ Head Girl incumbent—for one more week, at least—had always been somewhat brusque, favouring the Prefects whose efficiency and industry met her standards. Hermione thought it unusual for a Slytherin, but she’d appreciated the small courtesies (certain nights off patrol on request) that came of having the Head Girl's approval. When she reflected upon it, she recognised that resourcefulness, one of the traits espoused by Slytherin House, could appear in many forms.

Pride had prevented Lucretia from pandering to Tom, as most Slytherins had been doing since Tom had made Prefect. Lucretia had maintained a professional distance from Tom, but they'd never been convivial. Why should she be? She was secure in her own merits—or that of her family's—that there was no benefit in joining his crowd of admirers, although it must have grated on her that her own brother, Orion, was part of Tom's little club. Like all club members, Orion hadn't seen the inside of the detention room in two years.

Her thoughts on Lucretia aside, the list of Prefect tasks did come in useful. She read through it in one evening and made a copy of it for Tom, whom she met in their usual spot, the abandoned classroom in the dungeons that they'd cleaned up since Tom had made their general club headquarters. (The broken desks had been repaired or removed, the squeaky chairs un-squeaked, but there were a few bloodstains and scorchmarks on the floor that wouldn't budge. She suspected that Tom's half-hearted cleaning efforts had been because he liked the look of them.)

When she presented him with a duplicated copy, Hermione found herself disappointed with his ambivalent reaction.

"The point of being a Prefect is being able to do whatever you want," said Tom, giving a desultory glance at the stack of parchment pages she'd handed him. "This is a rule book. And not even the helpful kind of rules, like 'Mind the Gap' or 'Beware of Sharks', but self-imposed, self-restrictive rules. All I can see is an inadmissible waste of your valuable time."

Tom flicked to the end of the stack, scanning its contents. "'Leaving Day Procedure. One: Prefects will ensure the House Common Room is tidied before breakfast. Female Prefects will inspect girls' dormitories, male Prefects the boys'. Two: Prefects will ensure all trunks are labelled before collection. All misplaced or unattended belongings will be deposited in Lost and Found. Three: Prefects will escort students to breakfast, and after breakfast will escort them to the carriages..."

He gave a loud scoff and said, "Look at this—you're expected to watch them eat, clean up after them, dress them to standard, and make them do their homework. The only thing that's missing is the bit where you're expected to wipe their bums."

"But the Prefects' job is to oversee the younger students," Hermione protested. "Isn't that why they choose the most responsible students of each House in Fifth Year?"

"The function of the Prefect is to lead," said Tom. "In Latin, 'Praeficere' means 'to put in front', and was a title used by Roman military officials. What you've got is the mistaken assumption that you're supposed to go around minding other people's children." Tom, looking quite intently at her, added, "The last I heard, you don't even like children—or that's what you told my grandmother when she asked you about it."

"T-that's not what I said!" said Hermione. "I told her I wasn't interested in, you know, settling down, right away. I didn't say it was out of the question."

"It's not?" said Tom sharply.
"I want to finish school, of course," said Hermione in a nervous voice, feeling bewildered at the unexpected shift in the conversation. "And I'd like to have a stable situation that gives me more than a choice between living with Mum and Dad or living in a ladies' boarding house."

Her mother had lived in a ladies only public boarding house whilst undertaking her medical training. They were touted as affordable, clean, respectable, and that last quality was very important to many young, unaccompanied women who'd moved to the city for work, and planned to return to their villages with their reputations intact. The boarding houses' respectability was maintained by strict proprietors with even stricter rules, upheld on pain of ejection: no loud music, proper presentation at meals, prayers on Sunday, no male guests. Even after Mum and Dad had been engaged to marry, she hadn't been allowed to invite him into the public sitting room.

Mum had plenty of funny stories that she'd told Hermione over the years, but after going to Hogwarts, Hermione saw the reality of Mum's experiences. It seemed incredibly unpleasant. Every boarding house guest got her own private bedroom, which was better than the shared Ravenclaw girls' dormitory, but no one at Hogwarts enforced prayer before supper (in fact, praying at Hogwarts was unusual and quietly mocked by certain members of Slytherin House) or limited association with only their House or sex.

It had shown Hermione the difficult journey of becoming a Modern Woman. She'd read about this feminine ideal from a young age: the woman who was educated, voted, never wore a corset unless it was by her own choice, and had more to contribute to society than motherhood. (Hermione had never seen fatherhood used to gauge a man's respectability. Integrity, rectitude, faithfulness, and sobriety, yes. But outside of an occasional ambiguous reference to the ideal of 'fruitfulness', she'd never found the act of siring children to be a great virtue for the virtuous modern man.)

Wizarding Britain had a different set of expectations for the feminine ideal. Witches had magic, an inherent utility beyond their ability to bear children, but from what she'd seen, the notion of Modernity was yet unheard of.

Well, that wasn't reason enough to stop her from aspiring to it.

"You're always welcome in my mansion," Tom offered magnanimously. "I have servants. You'd never find that in a boarding house."

"You also have a grandmother," said Hermione. "If I started living at the Riddle House for good, I can imagine that she'd bring the vicar around for tea every week to remind us that we're living in sin."

"You'd be sinning no matter what you did," Tom replied, shrugging. "I shouldn't think the God-bothering types approve of witches."

"That's—" Hermione scrambled to find the right word. "—Reassuring."

"You could follow my example, and disregard anything they say," Tom continued blithely. "Really, it's the most sensible course of action. Why should you or I allow other people—Muggles, the government, some insipid rulebook—to determine what we can or can't do?"

"B-but..." Hermione stammered, "the government passes laws for good reasons. Without law and order, we'd be much worse off."
"The natives of colonial Rhodesia or Palestine would be glad to hear that," said Tom. "I'm sure they thank their British viceroys each and every day."

"That wasn't what I meant!"

"But it's what you said," said Tom. "It's alright, Hermione. When you're ready to accept the truth, you need only admit it to yourself."

Hermione let out a loud huff of irritation. "There's no use arguing with you!"

"I'm a natural pacifist," said Tom, giving her a gentle pat on the hand. "It's one of my many admirable qualities."

While Tom was not appreciative of Lucretia's comprehensive guide to good Prefectship—he'd snorted at the tips on effective speechwriting—Clarence Fitzpatrick thought it was a splendid idea. Clarence, who by nature was not particularly assertive or confident, had taken to it immediately. He was under the impression that the recipient of next year's Head Boy badge was still undecided, and had welcomed it as authoritative advice for someone unused to having authority thrust upon him. Hermione hadn't had the heart to contradict him—and she did enjoy having someone agree with her on the importance of proper procedure and responsible oversight, which Tom counted as less important than his own particular habit of delegation. (Those were his words; what it really meant was Tom encouraging the younger Fifth Year Prefects to overlap their patrols with his, under the guise of "extra training").

For the final week of term, Clarence accompanied Hermione on routine patrols, following the instructions given by Lucretia. This included a map of patrol routes, and a checklist of places where students were most often found past curfew: the stairwell leading up to the Astronomy Tower, an empty classroom on the Third Floor corridor, the alcove behind the statue of a witch with a severe spinal deformation, and the broom cupboards on the First and Second Floors.

"I didn't even know about half these places," Clarence remarked while they were finishing up the last evening patrol of the year. He closed the broom cupboard door and tapped it with his wand, murmuring a locking charm. "How do you think Lucretia found out about them?"

Hermione had recognised the cupboard from First Year, when she and Tom had explored the castle, looking for a place to experiment with their "borrowed" rats.

"Perhaps she heard about them from an older student when she was a Prefect?" said Hermione. "I can't imagine that she'd have any use for them herself."

"Oh," said Clarence. His steps slowed, drawing to a halt on the curving staircase that led up to the Ravenclaw Tower. Hermione almost ploughed into his back. "I forgot about that. Isn't she marrying Prewett?"

"Ignatius Prewett—he and his sister were Gryffindors, I think," said Clarence. "Left a few years before we started First Year. His and Lucretia's wedding is set for next year."
Hermione frowned. "Wedding? She's barely eighteen!"

"Most girls of the old families marry at nineteen or twenty," Clarence said. "Their families expect them to—though they never seem to push the boys quite so hard." He gave her a curious look. "Hasn't anyone mentioned it to you? The, um, other boy I saw you studying with in the library the other day? He was in Slytherin robes..."

"You mean Nott," said Hermione. "No! We don't talk about that sort of thing; we just study together."

It wasn't just studying, but she wasn't going to tell that to Clarence.

"Oh," Clarence said awkwardly. "That's good, then. I was going to say... but I suppose I oughtn't to mention it now..."

They'd reached the Ravenclaw doorknocker by now, though this late in the night, the eagle sculpture was quiescent, its eyes closed and a soft snore emanating from its cast-bronze beak.

"What is it?" asked Hermione.

"You're Muggleborn, so you might not have heard, but pureblood boys don't usually marry as young as the girls do. That doesn't meant they don't—they can't—you know, um," Clarence broke off in a stutter, his throat bobbing.

"Oh!" said Hermione, clearing her throat. "Yes, I see what you mean. You don't have to worry about that, not with Nott." She made a face. "He's that kind of pureblood—I think he'd cut his own hand off rather than let it touch me."

"Oh, um," said Clarence. "I see. I just thought..."

Hermione looked down at the floor, then the wall, then the sleeping eagle doorknocker.

"I wouldn't, not with anyone who saw my blood as a mark against me. A stain on my character. It doesn't matter," she said fiercely, reaching for and seizing the ring held in the eagle's mouth. "The only thing that matters to me is one's talent and ability."

She knocked on the door, waking the eagle with a loud squawk.

"O-oh," said Clarence, and the little puff of noise he made sounded crestfallen.

The last day of the school year was chaotic for the Prefects.

Students of all ages were underfoot, packing their belongings, collecting everything they planned to
take home with them, and sometimes demanding them back from whoever had asked to borrow them earlier in the year. In the Ravenclaw Common Room, the items most frequently exchanged and misplaced were books, and Hermione had had quite a job of sorting out ownership disputes with the contents of the Lost and Found box, containing all the lost odds and ends that the cleaners had picked up from the beginning of September.

Watching Twyla sort through her nightstand and dump out dirty, lipstick-stained handkerchiefs and broken hairpins, Hermione wondered why the other girl hadn't packed her trunk days earlier, like she had.

"You could've done that last week, you know," said Hermione, folding her nightgown and placing it in her trunk, atop a stack of folded blouses and uniforms.

"The train goes at eleven," Twyla replied with a sniff. "That's plenty of time! I even set my school alarm this morning, and we don't even have lessons today!"

"You're meant to be at the station at half past ten," Hermione pointed out. Lucretia had written it in the Prefect instruction list.

"That's only a suggestion, not a rule," Twyla insisted, inspecting a bottle of nail enamel whose colour had separated from the oil base. "Like party invitations—everyone knows you're supposed to come an hour after the listed time. If you show up when it says, there won't be any people there, and that's no fun, is it?" She giggled, and added, "But I'm sure you wouldn't mind that."

"Just be there so I can tick your name off the list," Hermione huffed, slamming shut the lid of her trunk.

For the rest of the morning, Hermione helped her fellow Ravenclaws gather their pets and stuff them into their cages, before herding down to the Great Hall for their final breakfast. The banners on the walls weren't the normal set of gilt-tasselled purple velvet embroidered with the Hogwarts crest, but a set in rich emerald green. Slytherin colours, for Slytherin House had won the House Cup again, beating out Ravenclaw through the additional points earned in Quidditch games.

(Ravenclaw students were awarded the most points by the teachers, but Slytherin Prefects never deducted from their own House, and had the strongest Quidditch team of the whole school. Based on what she'd heard from Fiona Catesby, a Gryffindor Prefect, the Slytherins were just the best at cheating. Hermione could neither support nor refute it; she hadn't attended a Quidditch game since First Year.)

After that, she and the other Ravenclaw Prefects ticked the names off the roll, a difficult task with the number of students milling about and mixing with their friends of other Houses. They'd had the House Cup ceremony at last night's farewell feast, and this morning's students were no longer cowed by the threat of point deductions or detentions. From across the Great Hall, she could see Tom, among the tallest of his year, his group of Slytherins hovering about him. He didn't appear distressed in the chaos; rather, he appeared to have gotten his friends to forcibly shove the younger students into some semblance of a queue.

"Right," said Hermione crisply, ticking the last name off her list, Twyla Ellerby, who'd just arrived at the end of the queue, panting and puffing. Twyla had a canvas-lined wicker basket dangling from her elbow, and a spitting cat clamped under her other arm. "You're the last on my list. They've already started moving the carriages, so you'll probably have to share one with the stragglers."
Twyla nodded, turning to follow the now-thinning crowd. With a sudden yowl, the cat tucked under her arm latched its claws into Twyla's sleeve. Twyla cried out, her grip loosening, and the cat, a black and orange calico with long tufted ears, dropped to the floor of the hall and ran for freedom.

"Stupefy."

A jet of red light struck the cat in the back of the head; it toppled to the floor, paws akimbo.

Tom ambled up, tucking his wand back into his pocket.

"Someone should pick that up," he remarked. "It's bad form for people to leave things lying around like that, someone could have a nasty fall. Hermione, are you done yet? I've sent the others ahead to save us a good compartment—the ones at the back of the carriages have the most leg room."

"I'm done with my list," Hermione replied, rising up on her toes to peer over the crowd. Clarence still had a few people waiting to be marked off, one lower year girl at the head of the line looking rather unhappy with him. "Clarence isn't done with his."

"I don't see what that's got to do with you," said Tom, glancing over at Clarence, who had dropped his quill on the floor, and after picking it up, dribbled ink on his hand and down into his sleeve.

"Let's go, before we end up in a carriage with the Gryffindors. I think Hagrid was at the back of the queue."

"You can go ahead, if you'd like," Hermione said. "I'll just pop in and see what's taking him so long."

She folded up her list, tucking it into her robe pocket, before striding over to Clarence and tapping him on the shoulder.

"Is there anything wrong? The train leaves in twenty-five minutes! And it takes ten for the carriages to take us down to the station!"

Clarence's expression turned sheepish. "I'm missing someone from my list, a Fourth Year. Her dorm mates said she liked taking her time in the bathroom, and that she'd catch up to us at the carriages."

Hermione held out her hand for Clarence's list, scanning the crossed out entries. She'd been assigned the names at the beginning of the alphabet, A through F, while Clarence had been all the students from U to Z. It was an organised way of sorting all the students in their House, compared to the Gryffindor slapdash method of First Come, First Served, or the Hufflepuffs' cumbersome chaperone system of older student mentor matched to a group of three or four younger students.

"Warren, Myrtle,", read Hermione. "I checked all the girls' dorm bathrooms before we left, and told the doorknocker not to let anyone back in."

"If she's still in the bathroom," continued Hermione, "then it can't be the ones in the dorms. It must be one of the bathrooms on the First or Second Floor—they're the only ones in between Ravenclaw Tower and the Great Hall." She sighed. "Should I go and fetch her? It's the girls' loo; you wouldn't be allowed in, obviously."

Once the last carriage had departed, anyone left behind would have to travel to Hogsmeade by foot. It was a journey of twenty minutes, twice the time it would've taken the enchanted carriages;
Hermione had done it before, when Hogsmeade weekends had fallen on fair weather days—and when she hadn't bought anything from the village bookshop or stationer's. It was a scenic trip around the Lake and past the edge of the forest, but it wouldn't be as pleasant with a pet carrier or owl cage, as this scenic route involved a stretch of rocky path that led down from the castle. She could manage it with a handful of convenient charms, but a Fourth Year wasn't allowed to use magic past the front gates.

"You could wait for her to finish her business," Clarence suggested. "I thought all girls took ages in the loo."

"We can't just leave a student behind!" said Hermione. "The teachers have already gone home, and they left us in charge. If she needs to do her business, she can do it on the train."

With that, she turned on her heel and marched to the door of the Great Hall, robes flapping.

Hogwarts' First Floor contained the Great Hall, and a central corridor that connected it to the great double doors by the Entrance Hall. In turn, it was connected to a flagstoned quadrangle that led into the covered bridge that spanned the narrowest part of the Lake. Hermione had traversed this corridor thousands of times over the years, for classes during the day, and patrols at night. With the students either en route to Hogsmeade Station or settling themselves into their compartments, it was eerily silent, and her footfalls echoed off the stone walls.

She checked the tiny visitors' bathroom that led off the Entrance Hall, no more than two stalls and a washbasin for any guests and Ministry inspectors who might tour the castle, but it was empty. She hadn't been expecting to find anyone there, so she continued onwards.

There was a larger bathroom on the First Floor, one that people queued up to use after Quidditch games. Due to Quidditch's ridiculous rules, no one knew how long a game would last, so most attendees held themselves in as long as they could, and if they couldn't, this was the nearest bathroom to the school pitch. Hermione peeked in, noting the ink-daubed lions that a vandal had painted over the stall doors, charmed into animation so that the lion bounded after a fluttering doodled Snitch. Commendable charmwork; it was almost a shame that they'd be removed during the holidays.

That bathroom was empty too. With a sigh, Hermione climbed up the nearest set of stairs, holding the banister as it swung across the central chamber of the castle and connected her to a Second Floor landing.

She was very familiar with the Second Floor, because this floor contained the Hogwarts library wing, the largest public collection of magical literature in Britain. The Defense Department had a wing at the opposite end of the corridor, which contained Professor Merrythought's office, classroom, and a duelling room with a regulation-compliant platform and a number of enchanted practice dummies. There was a bathroom in between the two wings, Hermione recalled. The students who'd been ejected from the library for being too noisy had often congregated in that particular bathroom to finish their conversations.

The library was closed now, the lamps shuttered for the summer, and the door closed. However, something, a shadow, moved behind the glass window on the door, then the door swung open, and Nott stood in the threshold, stuffing a large, rectangular object under his robes. He'd drawn his wand, and as Hermione watched, he prodded the door handle with it, which let off a scraping sound, followed by a firm click!

Hermione cleared her throat.
"What are you doing?"

Nott turned around, scowling. With the movement, a corner of a book poked out of his pocket, which he shoved back in.

"Some last minute borrowing," he said coolly. "I'll, ah, just be on my way, then."

"Borrowing?" said Hermione. "It's against library policy to lend books over the summer."

"Well," Nott said, "perhaps I got a permission slip from Slughorn? You know he throws them at Riddle whenever he asks."

"Yes, but that's Tom," spoke Hermione with as much patience as she could muster, "and you're... you."

"And glad to be," Nott retorted. "Now if you don't mind..."

"Show me the book."

"No."

"I'm a Prefect!"

"Slytherin's already won the House Cup!" said Nott. "There's nothing you can do."

Hermione drew her wand. "I could hex you!"

"You could, but you won't," said Nott, eyeing her wand, then her face. "You're a Prefect."

"Then I—I'll rickle you!" Hermione cried. "Rictusempra is only a First Year charm, but I don't know anyone who could suffer ten entire minutes of it!"

"Are you going to tell Riddle?" asked Nott, narrowing his eyes.

"No," Hermione conceded. "As long as you return the book in the same condition you got it."

"Fine," said Nott. He reached under his robes and flashed the cover of the book at her. Hermione couldn't help herself; she gasped.

"A Compleat History of the Founders!" she groaned, covering her mouth. "That's a N.E.W.T. reference book! No one's allowed to borrow it, and you need a teacher's note to even touch it—and everyone knows that Professor Binns never gives them out!"

"I know," said Nott smugly. "I had to wait until the librarian was gone before I could nick it. I'd have got my own, but Hogwarts has the only public copy, and any other families who might have one squirrelled away in the back of the attic won't share."

"Are you quite sure you'll put it back?" Hermione asked, glancing down the corridor to make sure the librarian wasn't hiding behind the nearest suit of armour.
"Yes," said Nott, grimacing in distaste. "I'll bring it back in September. Someone will notice if it's gone, and by then I'll have made a copy of the most important bits." He stroked the spine with a languid finger. "I'm sure you'd like that, wouldn't you, Granger?"

"Um." Hermione bit her lip. "Maybe."

"Maybe, maybe," Nott said, his expression wary. "Maybe you should tell me what you're doing here. Did Riddle send you up here to sneak around for him?"

"Tom doesn't send me to do anything," said Hermione snippily. "I'm looking for a missing student. A Ravenclaw Fourth Year—she was supposed to have gotten on the carriages with the rest of her year, but we can't find her."

Nott rubbed his chin. "I suppose that's where the crying came from, then."

"Crying?"

"I heard someone sobbing in the loo down the hall," he explained, jerking his head in the direction of the Second Floor bathroom. "Didn't know what that was about—not that I care, as I have obviously got more important things to worry about."

"So have I," said Hermione, marching down the corridor and into the bathroom, where she could hear the faint sobs of a young girl from one of the stalls.

The Second Floor girls' bathroom had a high, vaulted ceiling, but unlike the corridor outside, there were no chattering portraits or moving tapestries here. The walls were interspersed with lead-framed windows set with thick panes of rippled glass; on this summer's morning, it was bright and airy, the sunlight reflecting off the panel of mirrors over the pedestal sink feature, casting shimmers of white and gold over the floor. The bathroom's position as a much-trafficked meeting room had made Hermione avoid it early on; this was a place where girls gathered to chatter, to gossip, and to her great agitation, express their feelings in a most intimate and alarming fashion.

(She understood the cathartic release of crying, but did people have to do it in such a public venue? Pushing past the girls crowded in front of the mirror to touch up their lipstick, Hermione had come to appreciate the privacy—the exclusivity—of the Prefects' Bathroom, which had toilet stalls off to the side of the changing area. She'd mentioned it to Tom, and he'd nodded sagely and said, "No one likes sharing with the peons if they can help it", which wasn't exactly the affirmation she'd been looking for...)

Behind the locked door of a bathroom stall, Hermione heard a wet sniffle.

"Hello?" she said, rapping on the door. "Myrtle? Myrtle Warren?"

There was a brief silence, punctuated by the sound of tearing paper and the swish and gurgle of water going down the drain.

"Who is it?" The question was hesitant, the voice unsure.

"Hermione Granger, Prefect. You're meant to have gone down to the carriages; I'm sure your friends are already on the train and wondering where you are."

She heard a hiccuppng gasp, the slide of the latch, and the creak of the opening door.
A girl stood in front of her, brown hair bound in pigtails, and a pair of thick spectacles perched on her nose, fogged with steam. Her face looked pink, her cheeks wet, and there were dark splotches on her uniform robe. Hermione was instantly tempted to cast a Tergeo, but restrained herself in the name of politeness.

"I," croaked Myrtle Warren, "don't have any friends!"

"Everyone has at least one frie—"

"Everyone hates me!" she cried, bursting into a round of fresh tears and throwing herself into Hermione's arms. "They all left and forgot about me! No one remembered I was here, not one of them!"

"Actually, I came because—"

"Because you had to! But you don't really care!"

"I—" Hermione began, attempting to pick her words carefully, "I care about the welfare of all Ravenclaw students. And I really do want to make sure everyone gets home safely..."

"That's all you care about, I knew it!" Myrtle wailed into Hermione's shoulder, dribbling a line of snot over her lapel. "They're all the same, you know; they say nice things—'Oh, Myrtle, don't cry, we're here for you!'—but as soon as they leave—I just know it—they'll, they'll—who's that?"

"What?" said Hermione, trying to peel Myrtle's hands off her robe.

"There's a boy in the girls' bathroom!" Myrtle shrieked, glaring over Hermione's shoulder.

Hermione craned her neck to see.

Nott was inspecting the sinks in the centre of the bathroom, tapping his wand to them and muttering to himself. When he felt them staring at him, he straightened up, his eyes darting down to the wet streak of gobby mucus on Hermione's robe.

"You weren't doing anything important," Nott said. "And I haven't had a chance to look around the girls' loos yet. The mirrors here are larger than the one in the boys'... But ours is better maintained. The handle on this tap won't even turn—"

"That one's always been broken," Myrtle said.

Nott drew his wand along the porcelain bowl of the sink, but suddenly he stopped and glanced at Hermione.

"Interesting," he remarked, and then without warning, he pointed his wand at Myrtle. "Petrificus totalus."

"What was that for!" Hermione scrabbled into her robe pocket for her own wand—

"Imperio," said Nott.

"Nott—"
"You'll leave this bathroom and walk down to the carriages, and take one to Hogsmeade. You won't mention seeing anyone here. You'll forget anything that happened here. If anyone asks, you'll say you were alone."

"What are you—"

"Go," ordered Nott, and with a flick of his wand, he broke the Body-Bind on Myrtle Warren and watched her totter out of the bathroom, her eyes glazed behind her spectacles, her expression blank and oddly gormless. He turned to Hermione, twitching with eagerness. "I think I've found it!"

"You just used an Unforgivable Curse on a student! That's illegal!"

Nott waved away her complaints, gesturing at the sink, the one with the broken tap. "That's not important. This is. Look—Slytherin's sign!"

Cast into the aged, tarnished metal of the spout, along the side where it joined the porcelain bowl, was a small curled serpent in relief, its tail and throat twisted in the shape of an S, a design that matched that of the crests worn on Slytherin robes and the House banners in the Great Hall. This tap was identical to the others, but it was this single detail that differed. No other tap had that unusual symbol; they all produced a steady stream of water when she turned the handles, and no conclusive result when she cast Revelio upon them.

All except for this one.

"What does it mean?" she asked. "Slytherin hid the Chamber of Secrets inside this broken tap?"

"You've no imagination," Nott scoffed. "It's obviously a door handle, magically sealed so that only the Heir can open it."

"So how are you going to open it?"

"I..." Nott began, but he caught himself just as they heard Tom Riddle calling Hermione's name from the corridor outside.

"Hermione!"

"Tom!" Hermione replied, passing Nott and throwing open the bathroom door, where Tom stood, his sides heaving, wand gripped tightly in his hand.

"Someone attacked the missing Ravenclaw with dark ma—" He stopped mid-sentence, then asked sharply, "What are you doing here?"

Nott tensed, his shoulders stiffening. "How did you find us?" he asked, carefully adjusting his body to block sight of the tap.

"I asked the portraits about the girl, since she couldn't tell me herself. She was compelled into silence," answered Tom. "Now I see why. What are you hiding, Nott?"

"Nothing," spoke Nott in a hoarse voice.

"Don't lie to me," said Tom, pushing past Hermione and stepping into the bathroom. "There is
nothing I despise more than being lied to. *Tell the truth.*

A vein pulsed in Nott's forehead, and he shuddered, the cords of his throat bulging and twisting as he tried to wrench his face away from Tom's burning gaze.

"The truth, Nott," said Tom, his words ringing off the stone walls. The brightness and warmth of the summer morning seemed to darken, the atmosphere dissolving into one of fraught anxiety.

"I—I've found it," Nott finally choked out, clutching his throat and casting his eyes to the floor. "The Chamber of Secrets."

"*Show me.*"

Nott moved out of the way, gesturing at the tap with the design of the serpent. Tom inspected it, running first his fingers, then his wand, over the sinuous curves of the metal snake, his eyes hot and fevered.

"How does it open?" he asked, tearing his attention away from the tap.

"There's a... a password." Nott hesitated, his eyes drawn to Tom's wand, which Tom was absently stroking. "I haven't a clue what it is."

"Hermione?" Tom prompted.

Hermione had been dwelling over Nott's casual use of the Imperius Curse, but upon hearing her name, she jerked to attention. "Er... After he was expelled by the other founders, Slytherin was said to have entrusted knowledge of the Chamber to his apprentices, who were allowed to remain in the castle as long as they renounced their blood purity ideologies. The other founders never discovered the Chamber, so the password must be something special or significant to Slytherin. Perhaps it was a spell he invented, or in a language he spoke—according to historical record, Slytherin returned to his estate in Ireland and spent the rest of his life there; his given name, 'Salazar', suggests his ancestors were of Celtic Basque descent."

"The password is in Gaelic, then?" Tom asked, looking doubtful.

"You could try it," Hermione suggested.

Tom shrugged, then bent over the tap and whispered a few words.

Nothing happened.

"Are you sure you're saying the right thing?" said Nott. "Maybe the password is *Reducto'?"

Tom considered it for a few moments, before he leaned over the sink and whispered something in an unrecognisable language, the sharp consonants giving his voice a peculiar hissing quality.

He stepped back, his brows furrowed, glaring at the pedestal sink feature.

"Let me try," said Nott. "You mustn't have gotten the conjugation right. I think I can—"

There was a pop, a metallic creak, and a low rumbling under their feet that Hermione could feel as much as hear. Something squealed, and Hermione realised that it was the handle of the broken tap; it
was turning, spinning now, faster and faster, and from the worn pewter spout a brilliantly glowing light emerged.

With a groan, the sinks descended into the floor, the blackened iron drain grates vibrating under the soles of her shoes. Tom stepped back, his eyes bright, his expression hungered, bumping against her side; she felt his hand slip under the sleeve of her robe, his fingers tight against her wrist, clenching, unclenching, shaking in agitation—in excitement—as a hole opened up in the centre of the Second Floor girls' bathroom.

"The Chamber of Secrets," he murmured, stepping forward eagerly—

Hermione yanked him back. "No one's going in!"

"What!" both Tom and Nott exclaimed, staring at her in astonishment.

"The train leaves in less than ten minutes! We'll have to run to the gates, then Apparate to the station to catch it before it leaves!"

"Damn the train!" said Tom heatedly. "We can Apparate to London—our luggage has already been sent on."

"You can't Apparate six hundred miles!" said Hermione. "You'll splinch yourself!"

"I'll stop in Yorkshire," Tom replied. "I'll be fine."

"No," said Hermione firmly. "Lucretia Black is delivering her farewell speech in the Prefects' compartment in fifteen minutes. We'll both be there. I... We'll pretend nothing happened, that everything's normal. No one will have any reason to suspect that we've done anything wrong." She glared at Nott, who appeared completely unaffected about his recent use of the Imperius, an offence worthy of an Azkaban sentence. "And then we'll spend the summer coming up with a plan for what to do with—with that."

She flapped her hand at the hole in the floor. "You weren't going to just jump in headfirst, were you?"

"No," said Tom. He sent a sideways glance at Nott. "I was going to toss him in first."

"My vote goes with Granger!" said Nott.

"You don't get a—"

"Two against one, Tom," said Hermione. "If we're missing on the train, they'll send a teacher to look for us. And if the teachers know we've found this, they'll send the Ministry to investigate."

Tom looked rebellious at that, but he gave a sigh and turned away from the sinks.

"Very well," he spat. "We'll work on a plan. Together. You'll spend this summer with me, won't you, Hermione?"

"O-of course," said Hermione.

"Good."
"What about me?" asked Nott.

"What about you?" Tom gave him an irritated look.

"Aren't you going to release me from the oath?"

"No," said Tom instantly. "Since we're apparently not going down there, there's no proof that it's the real Chamber."

"What else could it be?" said Nott, his tone contemptuous.

"Slytherin's secret laundry chute," said Tom. "Really, it could be any number of possibilities."

"Oh, come off it, Riddle," snapped Nott. "What about this summer? Am I going to be let in on the plans?"

"No," Tom said.

"Yes," said Hermione, remembering the book Nott had taken from the library and stowed under his robes.

"Hermione—" said Tom.

"He found it," said Hermione. "It's only fair."

"I found it," insisted Tom.

"There's still the issue of Slytherin's monster," Hermione reminded him. "Three wands are better than two, when we don't even know what it is. With Hogwarts closed for the summer, we won't have access to the library anymore. But Nott has a family library..."

"The contents of which I'm gracious enough to volunteer," said Nott. "But only if it's tit for tat. Anything you—we—find down there, I'll pay a fair price for it. Scrolls, artefacts, trinkets: better that they go to someone who'll appreciate them properly than have them disappear into the Department of Mysteries forever."

"We have two and a half months to settle on the finer details," Hermione said. "Let's put the bathroom back to rights and get to the station."

Stepping off the drainage grate around the sinks was enough to make them return to their proper position, to Hermione's relief. She'd been expecting another set of complicated passwords. When the hole was covered, there was no sign of anything unusual about it—no hollow noise when she rapped her knuckles against the mirrors, no suspicious cracks between the sinks, no glowing lights when she tried to turn the handle of the broken tap.

Tom gave the sink one last, longing look before they left the bathroom. They hadn't much time left; leaping down a flight of stairs to the Entrance Hall, the three of them pelted down the stone-lined path from the castle to the front gates, guarded by a pair of winged stone boars, each bearing a formidable set of polished tusks. The gate shut behind them, great crossbars sliding into place, but Hermione didn't spare a moment to admire the impressive enchanting; she was too busy drawing up a mental image of the Hogsmeade train station: a twee little country station with a single platform,
iron rails over weathered wooden sleepers, the signage placards painted in glossy black and red, matching the livery of the locomotive itself. A few rustic cottages owned by village locals backed onto the platform, a tiny island of civilisation in an ocean of lush green foliage, thick with summer growth.

Crack!

Tom had already arrived when her feet hit the platform, and Nott came seconds later. They had to run to the half-closed door, shouting and waving their hands, and inside Lestrange was arguing with a student in Hufflepuff robes who wanted it shut for safety's sake. The student fell silent when Tom appeared in the doorway, closely followed by Hermione and Nott, just as the train began to pull away from the platform.

She and Tom were the last Prefects to enter the Heads' compartment, and for all Tom's efforts to present an air of serene self-possession, he couldn't hide the red flush of exertion on his skin, the sheen of sweat on his brow, or the slight catch to his breathing. Hermione was awfully aware that she was just as out-of-breath as he, and that Lucretia Black had noticed it too, her eyebrows rising in disbelief.

"Riddle, Granger," remarked Lucretia, sliding a stack of note cards out of her robe pocket. "What excellent timing. If you wish to set a good example, I would recommend that, next time, you'll ensure your indiscretions remain... discreet."

"We weren't—" said Hermione.

"Of course, Black, if you'll forgive us," said Tom. "Distractions come so easily in the presence of such delightful company." He gave a quick look in Hermione's direction, and just as quickly lowered his gaze in what appeared to be bashfulness, showing the high colour on his cheeks to full effect.

A few of the female Prefects tittered; Lucretia quelled the noise with a sharp glance, cleared her throat, and began the opening to her well-rehearsed speech.

As Tom and Hermione had been the last Prefects, there hadn't been much room in the compartment for them to sit, so she spent the first hour on the Hogwarts Express pressed bodily against Tom. He bore it with quiet dignity for the rest of the journey, but whenever she met his eyes, she saw in them hints of the same dark hunger that she'd noticed when the floor had opened up at their feet. It was that look he wore now, when he looked at her, smiling; Hermione could almost rate it as somewhat... ominous.

In the end, she didn't.

She could believe in magic, but superstition was a step too far.
Chapter End Notes

So they finally found it, yay. Did it go like you predicted it would? I'm curious what guys thought would happen with the CoS.

And you know the drill, post any typos you see.
The Hogwarts Express arrived at King's Cross Station at seven o'clock, the whistle shrilling at its highest volume, gouts of steam spewing over the brickwork platform and all the families waiting on it. To Tom's amusement, their cries of welcome were stifled in the blast of air and noise, and he could see more than one young child beginning to cry after taking in a faceful of smoke.

His own family weren't there, but the Grangers were. When he and Hermione disembarked the train, Doctor and Mrs. Granger's enthusiastic greetings made him glad of the Riddles' absence. Hermione, of course, didn't mind her parents' smothering embraces, but glancing around, Tom observed many of his dorm mates exhibiting similar shows of acute discomfort: Rosier's mother ruffling his hair, his younger sister tugging him by the sleeve and chanting, "Ice cream, ice cream!"; a grave-looking wizard in robes of plum velvet speaking to Travers, whose shoulders were hunched and expression shadowed; a slender witch with a crown of be-ribboned braids, smoothing down the front of Nott's uniform, while a wrinkly little elf gathered his luggage.

Watching the other families, Tom couldn't imagine the Riddles—his father in particular—in their place, partaking in this world that was his by birthright. The sight of grown men dressed in anything other than trousers, wands in every other hand, the casual use of magic; it would shock his grandparents' staid sensibilities, and his father's volatile temper... And yet, the Grangers didn't bat an eye at the proceedings—not the heavy robes and fur-trimmed cloaks layered with cooling charms to keep from sweltering in the summer heat, the pointy hats whose plumed cockades were still attached to the rumps of live songbirds, or the floating toy broomsticks ridden by screaming children not yet of Hogwarts age.

He himself had no need of whatever notional joy and comfort was derived from parental relationships, but he couldn't begrudge Hermione hers. The Grangers were excited to see Hermione after a year's absence, would wish her a fond farewell when she left for Scotland in September, and after that, Tom doubted that she would be more than an occasional guest in her own home. It was a solemn truth, but Tom was assured of its inevitability.

Hermione was a witch. The Grangers were Muggles. The wizarding world was Hermione's birthright as much as it was Tom's; its draw was inexorable to them both. Hermione could live in a Muggle house, operate a Muggle motorcar, be proud of her Muggle parentage, but it would never alter the fact that she was magical and Special. This summer holiday, perhaps next year's as well, Hermione might call the Grangers' house in Crawley her home, but it would not be so forever.

Tom was certain of it.

(Tom would guarantee it.)

Until then, he could shake Dr. Granger's hand, greet Mrs. Granger, and make polite chatter about the past school year with a smile on his face. He made sure his answers were general, agreeable, and circumspect; it wouldn't do for them to know the precise details of their time at Hogwarts, especially not the fact he'd made with Nott, the secret passage they'd discovered in the girls' loo, or the fact that
he and Hermione had engaged in some mixed-gender bathing, an activity that had only taken on a patina of respectability within the span of Tom's lifetime. (Admittedly, his few experiences with public bathing had been limited to the seashore, and never proper swimming pools with paid entry.)

The Grangers were gracious to him in turn, not having noticed how careful he was with his words, putting in a few favourable impressions about last Christmas in Yorkshire, with no mention of the incident with the dog or his father's health. He doubted that the Riddles would have shared this information with outsiders. Not even the well-connected Tindalls had known what irregularities had afflicted Tom Riddle the Elder—other than his position as a landed layabout. But for men of his station, that wasn't considered shameful, if not the most admirable situation for a citizen of a nation at war.

Hermione hadn't noticed anything either, too busy collecting her owl from the train carriage where the pet cages had been stored, and when she'd finally shooed Gilles out of the cage with an order to return home, the crowds had thinned enough to pass through the brick barrier.

"Your grandmother rang this morning," Mrs. Granger told Tom, observing him slide the tip of his wand out one sleeve. He rapped it on his trunk, and it shrank from the size of a standard steamer trunk to the size of a personal valise, the handle remaining its original size for convenience. It was a variant of the Shrinking Charm, but he doubted that a Muggle could appreciate such a fine bit of charmwork.

"She said that there's no need to rush, since she'll have you for the whole summer," continued Mrs. Granger, with the slightest wrinkle of her forehead to suggest that she was quoting Mary Riddle, word for supercilious word. "You can take the Flyer in the morning, and stay the night in London. The concierge at the Royal Aspen is holding a room for you, but I'd like to offer our home, if you'd prefer it. We've planned a special dinner for Hermione, and you're welcome to join us. The hotels aren't counting out the ration tickets like everyone else, but the austerity has reached every corner of Britain. I shouldn't expect them to serve any more than three or four ounces of meat per person, to a dozen ounces of cabbage!"

"That sounds like better fare than what most people are eating at home," remarked Tom.

"One would expect it, if they're asking for one pound twelve per plate," said Mrs. Granger with a sniff. She then turned to Hermione. "Your father and I are both so happy to see you again! It's been much too quiet at home without you; we look forward to every letter, of course, but it's not the same as hearing your voice. Now that you're back, there's plenty to be done—the Ladies' Aid Society is running a donation drive, and then we have Sunday socials to pack comfort boxes for the soldiers—"

"Mum," Hermione interrupted. "I... I'm afraid I can't come with you to the Society meetings. There's been a slight, um, alteration with my summer plans."

Mrs. Granger, who'd been craning her neck and searching the road for the motorcar, which Dr. Granger was bringing around, stopped. She glanced at Hermione, then at Tom, a worried frown flickering across her face, before it was quickly smoothed away. "What do you mean, Hermione, dear?"

"I'm spending the summer at Tom's house!" said Hermione, in a rather breathless voice. "Our exams are less than a year from now, and there's no way we can log our star charts for Astronomy with the blackout curfew in London—Tom has the space to practise Apparition outdoors, too, without the neighbours complaining about the noise—and, and we were going to—to—"
"Shh," said Tom, stepping forward, slipping his hand into hers and giving it a gentle squeeze. "It's alright, Hermione. There's no need to panic."

"Oh," said Hermione, the deluge of words drawing to a trickle as she paused for breath. "I'm not panicking!"

Mrs. Granger searched her daughter's features, eyes darting down to where Hermione and Tom's hands were linked together. "I won't say that I'm disappointed, but it's a very sudden decision to make, Hermione. Have you thought it through entirely? You've been looking forward to volunteering this summer."

"I do want to, Mum," said Hermione, "and I still plan to—on the weekend, maybe. But Tom and I, we—we're..."

"We're walking out," finished Tom. He patted Hermione's hand. "Hermione was embarrassed about announcing it, but I thought it better to just say it, instead of stepping around it for the next few weeks. I hope it's not too much of a shock, Mrs. Granger."

The lines around Mrs. Granger's mouth tightened, but in a steady voice, she answered, "I wasn't expecting something like this quite so soon, but I suppose it was... unavoidable, in a sense. Hermione, you must come to me if you have any questions, anything at all. If you're ever made to feel uncomfortable, or unsafe in any—"

"I would never allow Hermione to feel unsafe," said Tom, his grip on Hermione's hand tightening. "I believe Hermione to be a better judge of that than you, Tom, well-intentioned or not," Mrs. Granger replied firmly. "Hermione, if this isn't what you want, you can change your mind at any moment. You're an adult by wizarding standards, and eighteen in a matter of months, but you're still young enough that no one—certainly not me or your father—would ever try to rush you into making a decision you're not ready for."

"Mum, please don't worry about me," said Hermione, speaking hesitantly, glancing between Tom and her mother. "I'm not unhappy that Tom decided to tell you. I'm... just thrown because he hasn't prepared me for the news." She gave Tom a sharp look. "We'll have to discuss this later, won't we, Tom?"

"Whatever you want, Hermione," said Tom. "Oh, look. The motor's here. May I take your bags?"

Dr. Granger brought the family motorcar up to the kerb, and after tossing their trunks into the boot—it had been enchanted not only with an Extension, but a Cushioning Charm—Hermione pushed him into the rear passenger bench, drew her wand, and cast a quick Silencing Charm. Then, before Tom could form the first words of his explanation, Hermione's carved vinewood wand turned on him, the tip of it trembling in the air, wavering between the region of his throat and his upper chest.

"Tom!" Hermione hissed. "What in heaven's name was that about!? 'Walking out'! You told my mother we were 'walking out'! Walking—" she drew in a shaky lungful of air, —"out!"

Tom placed his hand over hers, sliding the point of the wand down and away from his throat. "You were speaking too quickly, rambling, and blinking far too often. I could tell that something was off. Your mother could tell. If I'd let you go on, you'd have told her about the Chamber!" He glowered, adding, "Next time, leave the talking to me."
"Yes, and look what happens when you talk, Tom!" said Hermione, clutching her wand with white-knuckled fingers. "I'm not used to lying to my mother. I've never had anything to hide from her."

"Really?" said Tom. "You told her about the time you and I, hmm, explored the Prefects' Bathroom a few weeks ago?"

"N-no!" Hermione said quickly, shaking her head. "Of course not! But that's totally different—not mentioning some minor event isn't the same thing as lying. But you! You just lied to my mother, and she believed you! This isn't something you can take back, and now that she knows, she'll tell my father and your grandmother, and after that, everyone in the village will know! What are you going to do now?"

"Nothing," Tom said, leaning back in his seat. "This will work, trust me, Hermione. If they think we're walking out, they won't question our suspicious behaviour. We are going to make plans about exploring the Chamber of Secrets, aren't we? This way, if we're locked away together for hours at a time—or when we go back to Hogwarts and no one knows where the Head Boy and Girl have gone—they won't ask where we were and what we've been doing. They won't send the teachers for us, or—" his lip curled, "—the Aurors."

He paused for a moment's thought, then said, "They might do, but I'll deal with it when it comes. It'll be easy, once I've laid the groundwork. You didn't expect everyone to believe that we were simply studying for the exams, did you?"

"It's worked up until now," Hermione retorted. "That summer between Second and Third Year, we nearly spent the entire time in the cellar."

"We were children then," said Tom, keeping the distaste for the term from entering his voice.

He'd hated being called a child when he'd lived at Wool's, legal definition or no. The word was saddled with so many associations he despised: that he was dependent on his elders, that he was naïve and immature and impressionable, and in that state, was in need of the firm hand of Moral Authority to protect him from the corruptions of Sin. He'd looked forward to adulthood where all these juvenile trappings, the heavy-handed paternalism, would be abandoned for good. (While he'd had them, however, he couldn't recall any hesitance in using his boyish charms around figures of authority. Dumbledore couldn't resist an opportunity for philosophic debate; Slughorn loved dropping little pearls of knowledge amongst those who could feign both ignorance and admiration.)

"We're still the same people," said Hermione. "Why should we have to change things to suit other people's expectations?"

"Because, pointless or not, other people care about it," said Tom darkly. "And out of all our options, the least offensive one is to make a statement about the situation, regardless of its honesty, because the alternative is to allow room for assumption and speculation. My plan would do you—and I, too, for that matter—the benefit of protecting our reputations. The fact that we aren't children anymore is going to make us a subject of gossip if we're going to continue carrying on like this once term starts."

"I'm of half a mind to let them gossip," Hermione said, wrinkling her nose; Tom's attention was caught by the shifting constellation of freckles on the bridge of her nose, which, just like Virgo and Hydra, appeared every spring and faded away by autumn. "I'll be Head Girl next year, if Lucretia guessed right, and that means I haven't time for silly things like schoolyard rumours."
"Our last year," said Tom, lifting his gaze from her nose and back to her eyes—people thought him more sincere if he looked them in the eyes. "Is exactly when we ought to be most concerned with rumours and reputations, our own in particular. You can be as idealistic as you like, but in reality, most people aren't interested in inventing cures for Dragon Pox—they're interested in the sordid details of other people's lives. Especially if those people are as important as we are. Or will be."

He gave her an imploring look. "If you're upset that I lied, then you should consider that it's only as much of a lie as you want it to be. Last term, we had milkshakes at Hogsmeade every other week. That fits any definition of what it means to go 'walking out', even if you don't count all the, you know, other things."

Hermione chewed her lip, taking her time to consider Tom's argument, while he waited, holding his breath and trying to keep himself from fidgeting, from taking her hand again. It was a common thing in Tom's experience for other people to be so slow, so tediously obtuse. When he came across a problem, whether it was an exam question or a practical dilemma, he could find an answer to it, an elegant and intuitive solution, almost immediately.

(There was a good reason for it: he was a wizard. He was magical. And even without magic, Tom Riddle would still be the most exceptional person he'd ever had the privilege of knowing.)

In Hermione's case, she wasn't obtuse, not in the same way as Matthias Mulciber, a boy who chewed the ends of his quills when thinking his way through a simple question on potion ingredient ratios for half- or double-doses, and struggled to write in a straight line. No, Hermione's thought process involved pondering the moral implications of each of Tom's points. On more than one occasion, he'd found it as maddening as watching Mulciber count on his fingers. But this time, Tom made sure to give a straightforward explanation, which hinged on safeguarding Hermione's personal interests; not only was it sensible and uncomplicated, but above all, it was precise and factual. Nothing appealed to Hermione like facts. Objective facts were free of the burden of moral weight.

His facts were the following:

One. Hermione, when put on the spot, wasn't very good at talking her way out of it. She thought she was persuasive, but her ability to make people do as they were told depended less on the meticulousness of her arguments, and more on her ability to whittle down her opposition through sheer tenacity. This was a useful ability—he himself was not immune to it—but it wasn't one that could have convinced Mrs. Granger right then and there. So naturally, Tom had had no other choice but to intervene.

Two. 'Walking out', the awful Muggle-ish label for what the purebloods called 'courtship', wasn't an inaccurate descriptor of his and Hermione's situation. From the outside, and completely divorced of context, there were only so many interpretations to be made of their unusual relationship. Whichever one of them arrived to class first saved the other a seat; in Potions, they borrowed each other's tools, each trusting that the other maintained their knives and wasn't missing anything from their kit. They always chose each other for partner projects; beyond class assignments and Prefect duties, they sought each other's company. For recreation, for discourse, for the simple joy of being in one another's presence.

Although it wasn't to Tom's taste, such an ignominious label had its uses. It confirmed the nature of his and Hermione's relationship to public consciousness; it was the first step of a process, given enough time, that would result in his ultimate plan coming to fruition. He was still enthusiastic about that plan, despite becoming more and more aware of the number of obnoxious labels he'd have to endure beyond 'walking out'. Nevertheless, he'd endure it. Even if his ears might bleed at hearing
someone refer to him as Hermione's 'fancy man'; which was just as awful as her being his 'steady girl'.

A success was worth the sacrifice.

Three. Hermione also knew that success was worth a minor sacrifice—of time and dignity, of self-regard. Hermione had prided herself on her capacity to cast aside selfish impulses in the aim of serving the public good; she often spoke of correcting the inadequacies of wizarding bureaucracy, but after Tom's prodding, she had rarely elaborated on the future state of her personal life, deeming it unimportant, of less significance than professional success. Her personal life was something she'd wanted to address years from now, but here the choice was being thrust upon her. In essence it was a pretense, but pretense or not, it was still an unexpected step down an uncertain path.

Hermione wasn't a true Slytherin, but after many years and dozens of exchanged letters, she understood pragmatism. It didn't mean that she liked it, but she did acknowledge that political philosophy and its practical implementation required two different approaches.

Was it even a sacrifice to put on a minor pretense, so slight that it was hardly even pretense at all?

There existed a much greater goal.

(Tom's goal was different, but just as significant.)

Hermione greatly desired success.

(Tom's desire was just as great.)

There was only one answer he could accept.

"It sounds like it has a high chance of going sideways," said Hermione, after some deliberation. "You want to protect us from rumours by spreading your own rumours first."

"A half-decent summary, but not entirely correct..."

"How am I wrong?"

"A rumour is unconfirmed, unsubstantiated information," Tom explained. "It stops being a rumour when we make sure that the confirmation is given first-hand."

"And I'm supposed to be the pedantic one," Hermione huffed. "Alright, if I agree with this plan of yours, we won't have to do anything but smile and nod when anyone asks, will we? Just pretending to be 'normal', so no one will guess what we're doing or why we're sneaking about." She pressed her lips together, brows furrowed. "I don't like it that we even need an alibi. It makes me feel like a... a delinquent."

"Well, it's either that you feel like one, or let other people think you are one," said Tom, without much sympathy. "Besides, it can't be that bad, can it? It's not as if this—giving it a name—changes anything between us."

"Doesn't it?" Hermione asked.

"Would it bother you if it did?" Tom said. "It's a temporary inconvenience. I needed a convincing
excuse for your mother, and this one has the benefit of versatility. When we go back to Hogwarts, you'll be Head Girl and the teachers will want to shove whatever task they're too lazy to manage themselves on your shoulders. With this, you needn't do more than say you're busy—which is nothing but plain truth—and they'll leave you alone and find another Prefect to mark their First Year essays."

Watching the light of temptation enter Hermione's expression, Tom put in his finishing touch. "And you've a polite way to refuse all the invitations. You know that during a N.E.W.T. year, people are going to crowd you while you're eating dinner, just to pester you into sharing a copy of your class notes. When you're Head Girl, you'll be allowed to sit at the Slytherin table. No one there will bother you—not when you're sitting next to me."

Hermione shot him a sceptical look. "Was this your goal all along?"

"Oh, Hermione," said Tom, smiling. "We both know that I set my goals higher than that."

"I suppose you're right," she sighed. "Fine. We'll go along with this plan of yours, but if it doesn't work, we'll think of something else. 'Walking out' isn't a permanent commitment, after all."

No, thought Tom. Not for now.

"I promise it'll work," he said, "as long as you don't go around giving the game away."

When the motorcar pulled into the Grangers' drive, Tom very gallantly made a show of holding the door and helping Hermione with her luggage. Mrs. Granger observed the scene with narrowed eyes, but in the end, there was nothing she could say. Gilles, who'd arrived before the Grangers, flapped down from the roof guttering to her shoulder, and with one last cool glance at Tom—and a concerned one at Hermione—Mrs. Granger swept into the house, which had not changed in the year since Tom had seen it: it was clean, well-kept, and modern.

There was no pretension, but no elegance either. The Grangers' house, like all the houses on Argyle Street, had been built to fit the dimensions of their square suburban lot. When he stopped to hang his coat on the coat rack by the door, Tom noticed that he could see to the other end of the house from the entryway. Somehow, the rooms felt smaller than he remembered, the lintels too low, the staircase too narrow; it was a sight so familiar and yet unfamiliar at the same time. The soles of his shoes squeaked on the linoleum tiling, and, wistfully, he recalled the gleaming parquet of the Riddle House's foyer, and the thick, knotted pile of the Oriental carpet on his bedroom floor.

When he'd been invited to live with the Grangers in the summer before Third Year, their house had seemed like an impossible luxury to him. Back then, he had had no other frame of reference than Wool's Orphanage and Hogwarts. A radiator in every bedroom, a bathroom with an indoor toilet and taps with hot water that flowed clear—and never left a sharp, metallic taste on his tongue after he brushed his teeth. Seeing it had confirmed his assumptions of the Grangers' affluence, if their family motorcar, Hermione Granger's casual donation of several dozen books, or Mrs. Granger's Christmas contribution of twenty-five pounds sterling (two months' wages for an orphanage minder, he'd later heard from an eavesdropped conversation) hadn't already established it.

And now, studying the interior of their house, he had the impression that something about it was lacking, but there was nothing he could place as missing from the walls or the rooms themselves. The wireless in the sitting room was still there; the framed prints hadn't changed, with the exception of a more recent photograph of Hermione, wearing her Veterans' Gala formal dress, at the far end of the hall.
He wasn't given a chance to think more upon it; after they'd dropped their luggage off in their bedrooms, he and Hermione were told to wash up for the 'special dinner' that Mrs. Granger had mentioned at the station. By the time he'd made it down the stairs, it was a quarter to eight, and he was looking forward to dinner. He had only eaten a pumpkin pasty from the train's snack trolley for lunch, along with an apple taken from the basket at breakfast, and Mrs. Granger's offer of a special dinner had made a creditable effort in swaying him to stay the night. If he had gone direct to Yorkshire, he placed his arrival at an hour before midnight; it would have offered him a choice between having his supper in the dining carriage, where the rationing rules applied, or a supper at the Riddle House, leftovers saved from his grandparents' table and sent up on a tray.

And that was irritating on a personal level, because food was one of the few things exempt from most magical manipulations. Tom could double the amount of food if he had some to start with, but enlarging the tiny meat portion as served by a train attendant wouldn't make the ration regulation meatloaf taste any better. He could warm up any leftovers prepared by Mrs. Willrow, the Riddles' cook, but it wouldn't change the stale texture of the bread, baked fresh and delivered before dawn by a village boy on a bicycle.

Skin tingling from a thorough scrubbing in the upstairs bathroom, Tom pushed open the dining room door, expecting a spread of Mrs. Granger's favourite home recipes, which he'd eaten every day for two summers in a row—some combination of Beef Wellington, braised leg of mutton, liver and onions, or stuffed chicken roulade, paired with an assortment of vegetables and bread. Good British cooking, with more vegetables than he preferred, but still more appetising than the stranger dishes he saw on occasion at the far end of the Slytherin House table. (He'd asked about it, and as it turned out, one could request specialties like potted neat's tongue or pigeon fricassée on weekends, by sending a note to the kitchen staff. Stiff drinks and the rarer magical delicacies, though cooked by the same kitchen staff who serviced the rest of the students, were strictly limited to Slughorn's table.)

He didn't recognise the food on the Grangers' table as Mrs. Granger's cooking: skewered fish, their silver hides marked with rows of charred black lines, meat dumplings wrapped in boiled leaves, a suckling pig curled around a pile of roasted onions, heaping bowls of seasoned rice, and colourful salads of raw vegetables topped with crumbled white cheese, olives, and the bright ruby seeds of a pomegranate. Tom had never eaten a pomegranate before; he'd only seen them dried on strings or brined in jars at the apothecary—the textbooks said they were useful in reducing inflammation, but his own experience was limited to using the shredded bark of a pomegranate tree as an ingredient in the Deflating Draught, an O.W.L. curriculum potion.

The explanation for this strange meal lay at the end of the table.

Mr. Pacek sat at the end of the table smoking a cigar, an odd, glistening bubble enveloping his mouth and chin. When the door opened, Mr. Pacek drew his wand from his pocket and swished it through the air. The bubble popped; a thread of smoke spiralled out from his lips and into nothingness; the contents of the ashtray on the table before him were similarly Vanished, then the ashtray itself was sent flying over to the sideboard.

He pushed himself up from the table, and Tom noticed the man had done it with a certain stiffness that suggested a mix of awkwardness, injury, or fatigue. It was a moment's undertaking to catalogue a list of further oddities—the dark circles beneath Mr. Pacek's eyes, hair longer than Tom had seen it a year ago, and a change from his eclectic style of dress; on previous occasions, Mr. Pacek had passed as some sort of Muggle professional, unremarkable on a typical London street. Today, his ensemble included a red waistcoat thick with gilt embroidery, and loose trousers tucked into tall
boots of tooled and polished leather. Nothing about it revealed his magical origins—there was no robe, and in the style of most wizards who ventured among the Muggles, the wand pocket was tucked inside the breast of the jacket—but Tom found it overall a strange look.

"I am pleased to join you for dinner tonight," said Mr. Pacek, flicking his wand at the food. "One should take the chance to dine in good company when it is offered..."

A gust of air whistled through the room, fluttering the curtains at the window, and an instant later, Tom could smell the food: roasted meat, fat trickling down the crisp skin of the piglet, a pan of iced buns oozing with honey and stewed currants, the pungent aroma of the grilled fish.

It must have been a Stasis Charm, and a complex one at that—each dish would have been kept at a different temperature. Some hot, some warm, and some chilled, all at the same time. It wasn't a spell that required a powerful wizard, like one of Dumbledore's magnitude, but rather, one with great power of concentration, as this kind of magic relied on consistent and attentive visualisation.

Hermione would be able to do that, Tom thought to himself. She's a great witch; she can already hold a Shield Charm longer than I can. Although mine can deflect more jinxes than hers, so it balances out. Plain evidence that greatness calls to greatness.

"...My thanks to Doctor Granger for the very kind invitation, and the lovely Mrs. Granger for extending her hospitality this evening," continued Mr. Pacek, as the Grangers chose their seats and looked over the food, which consisted of familiar ingredients—pork and meatballs, courgettes and cucumbers—prepared in foreign ways. "I do hope to return their hospitality—good food for good company, and what goes better with it than good drink?"

During dinner, Tom's impromptu announcement was shared by Mrs. Granger over the carved piglet, while Hermione bit her tongue and pressed her lips together to keep herself from voicing a denial, which Tom could see she was clearly tempted to do. He slipped his hand under the tablecloth and felt for hers, which made her jerk in her seat and drop her fork with a clatter, but after that, Hermione relaxed somewhat and began to enjoy the food. This was helped by Mr. Pacek producing a small wooden cask, tapping it, and Summoning the beer into their glasses in a graceful stream, twirling through the air above the table in bright golden ribbons before pouring right up to the rim without a splash.

"Did you cook this yourself?" asked Hermione, picking at the last bite of her cherry strudel, dusted with powdered sugar. "This is quite a lot of food. You and Mum must have been in the kitchen all day to make this dinner; the five of us here haven't even finished half of it."

"No, this was prepared by a classmate of mine," said Mr. Pacek. "A friend from my old school days, Madam Anna Sergeyeva Kr—"

He paused, a sudden uncertainty deepening the lines on his forehead. "I am at present unaware of her preferred surname, as I have been told she is leaving her husband's house to return to her father's."

"Oh," said Hermione. "Um, is she divorcing? I've never heard of a witch being divorced, unless it was in a marriage to a Muggle, and officiated by a civil magistrate. I am not sure if the Ministry of Magic administrative department even grants divorces—though I imagine things must be very different outside of Britain."

"It was not a divorce, Miss Granger," Mr. Pacek replied, and his face looked as if he was being beset
by a bout of indigestion. "She was widowed last week, and this feast was prepared for the funeral. The circumstances of her late husband's death resulted in low attendance at the burial ceremony, and the food was offered to the remaining guests." He nodded at Mrs. Granger. "I can sense your concern—I assure you, it is entirely unwarranted. Wizards may be unfamiliar with your icebox contraptions, but we understand the concept of animalcules, and I am well-versed with charms of preservation. The funeral, in any event, was only held this morning, so everything has remained quite fresh."

"Why didn't anyone come to the funeral?" Tom asked.

Though the empty platters had been cleared throughout the meal, Mr. Pacek had produced even more new dishes from a basket on the sideboard. Course after course, plate after plate, strings of cured sausages, a steaming tureen of vinegary tripe soup, mushrooms in pungent scallion butter, so much food that Tom had not seen the colour of the tablecloth since the beginning of the meal. This was much more than one could expect five people, even five hungry people, to eat.

"Tom!" said Hermione.

"You asked about divorce, and that's just as sensitive a subject!" Tom countered, and in a softer voice, he whispered to her, "It's not like I went and asked about everyone's religious affiliation, or whether they regretted voting for Chamberlain the last time around."

Hermione response was to bump him under the table with her foot.

"They were frightened of potential repercussions," said Mr. Pacek, observing Tom intently. Tom attempted to keep his curiosity from showing on his face, twisting his expression into one of mild concern, though without a mirror, he supposed it could just as well be mild constipation. "Anna Sergeyeva's husband supported a government in exile and was killed by Gellert Grindelwald in reprisal. Anyone who accepted her invitation to the funeral would risk being labelled an enemy of the state by the present administration."

"And you went?" Tom said, cocking his head. "I thought you preferred to remain a neutral party to the affairs on the Continent."

"Some things are worth the sacrifice of neutrality," said Mr. Pacek, and for a brief moment, he lowered his eyes; Tom could not tell if it was in mourning or remorse. "A man can resist the stirring of his conscience only so many times before he forfeits the ability to call himself conscientious. Anna Sergeyeva asked me to lay the wards on her husband's tomb, and I found myself unable to answer her letter with a refusal."

"May I offer my condolences, sir?" said Tom. "Do you mind if I ask what manner of wards can be cast on tombs? I've read of witches in the West Indies performing traditional burial rituals, but as far as I'm aware, magical funerals are rare in Europe."

"You have read of burial ceremonies, Mister Riddle?" asked Mr. Pacek. "I recommend that one practice caution when browsing reading material on that particular subject. Their authors have a reputation for exaggerating the more gruesome details, but one cannot deny how the macabre can draw the eye and fascinate the mind. I recall, in the days of my youth, those books were some of the Durmstrang library's most popular. I daresay they have inspired many a student's independent research over the years."

"Including yours?" said Tom.
"Unfortunately, no." Mr. Pacek drew his wand and tapped his glass of beer, the foaming head rising and rising; it stopped an instant before it slopped over the rim. "In my younger days, the subject of my obsession was Divination. You are aware, Mr. Riddle, of the Exemptions to Gamp's Law? Food, gold, love, knowledge—they cannot be produced from nothing, and yet, is that not the essence of Divination? The magical art of divining truth from the depths of darkness, a single thread from a tapestry of unrealised potential. An exception to the exemption..." He cleared his throat and added, "Magical academics are a wonderfully fascinating topic, but I recommend studying some aspects of practical magic if one should like to produce some food or gold now and again."

It didn't take long for Mrs. Granger to gracefully divert the conversation to more pleasant things than war and burials. Tom was put out; at Hogwarts, his information on the state of the war was limited to what the *The Daily Prophet* printed, whatever was permitted to be published in the few Muggle newspapers that arrived through owl mail, and second- or third-hand information passed to Travers from his father, or Slughorn from one of his former students. At the Grangers' table, the war was fixture of their daily lives, and a rather grim one at that; Doctor and Mrs. Granger had anticipated Hermione's return to be a joyful reprieve from their working routine, and for the rest of the meal, they questioned Tom and Hermione on their summer plans, Mrs. Granger eyeing him coolly whenever Tom made mention of the size of his estate or the convenience of his servants.

After dinner, the Grangers removed themselves to the sitting room for tea, biscuits, and the evening wireless broadcast.

Looking both ways to ensure he wasn't being overheard, Tom cornered Hermione in the hallway, murmuring to her, "If that funeral was enough to convince a fence-sitter to pick a side, I wonder what it'd take to get Dumbledore to make up his mind."

"Are you—" Hermione began, then stopped herself before continuing. Tom had told her about what he'd gleaned from Slughorn, the rumour of Dumbledore's European friend back in his school days. "Tom, Professor Dumbledore's a teacher! I'm sure he's too busy to engage in international political affairs; besides, it's the Aurors' job to handle the issue."

"Dumbledore gets ten weeks off every summer, and two-and-a-half weeks for Christmas," said Tom. "You can't argue that he isn't qualified; if he wanted to contribute, there's no question that he could. And very effectively."

"I thought you preferred that he not be involved," Hermione remarked.

"I prefer that people not resign themselves to impotence unless there's a good reason for it," said Tom. "And in Dumbledore's case, his reasoning isn't good enough. He's powerful. He's talented, and yes, I'm admitting to it. Best of all, his family all hate him, or they're dead—they can't be held against him to keep him in line. If there's anyone with the influence to lure Grindelwald himself into the field, it's Dumbledore."

Tom knew that he was powerful and talented, too. He was at the top of his class; he had eleven Outstanding O.W.L.s to his name; he was a favourite of the Hogwarts staff; he was a published and well-respected writer, esteemed by the segment of the wizarding population who believed that silk chiffon worn after October was inappropriate, and before six o'clock, immodest.

He was thought of as a rising star, and therein lay the catch: his star was still rising.

Tom knew all the coursework for his Seventh Year classes, despite having only just completed his
Sixth. He could sit for his N.E.W.T.s right now and score a full set of Outstandings. But in the same manner as his Prefect badge, or even his future Head Boy badge, these were merely student achievements, and Tom, though considered a legal adult, was merely a student. It rankled, just as much as calling Wool's Orphanage home had. They were, would be, temporary labels; Tom would make certain of that.

For now, it was fact. And it was one of those facts that he could try to shift through clever or evasive phrasing, but it wouldn't budge the kernel of reality fixed at the very centre.

Tom Riddle was a scholar of magic. A legal adult, a wizard—not a boy, nor an underage child.

Albus Dumbledore was a wizard of sixty-something years, had graduated Hogwarts with top marks at the turn of the century, travelled the world, and, according to Hermione, had won a Finkley Prize for scholarship, and completed an apprenticeship in France with a famous Master Alchemist.

Tom was seventeen years and seven months. He was a student. His magical expertise was limited to the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts Library, and his travel itinerary stretched no farther than the grounds of Hogwarts in Scotland, his family estate in Yorkshire, and the mews and alleys of central London. He knew the best scrumping spots; he knew where things lost, abandoned, or liberated from their original owners were brokered into new homes; he knew which publicans ran the fairest odds, and which ones had the time and dates of the unofficial races, as the official tracks with the exception of Newmarket had been shut down for the duration of the war.

For all his hard-won knowledge, for all his efficiency in correcting those who questioned his magical might, Tom doubted he could do the same to Albus Dumbledore, let alone Gellert Grindelwald, the looming shadow of the Continent. Tom didn't like admitting it—he didn't even like thinking it—but he knew that joining in the war and earning his Order of Merlin wasn't going to be an easy task. The last time he'd assumed something would be easy, he'd ended up shattering his pelvis, laid out on a Healer's workbench, with the Healer covered up to the elbows in his blood. He didn't have a sensitive stomach, but there was nevertheless something unsettling about seeing flaps of his own skin peeled open and pinned back, while a pair of icy-cold hands fumbled inside his body to retrieve white shards of broken bone and, finally, the twisted little lump of metal that had caused all his suffering.

If he had learned a lesson from the whole experience, it was that Hermione was usually right. Not always, but she could be counted on to come up with some good ideas. She was powerful and talented, and the most useful element of her power and talent was that they complemented his own.

Tom was a student with six years' worth of magical education. With Hermione's six years, they made twelve years together. He saw that, together, they made a credible threat to Grindelwald's battle-hardened lackeys; together, they stood a better chance of tilting the conflict in Europe towards a British victory.

(For now, he would acknowledge that Dumbledore surpassed him. Dumbledore wasn't his superior in talent, but he was superior in experience, and that was due to nothing more than his luck in being spawned years before Tom's parents had even come into existence. Give him a decade, and Tom could see his way to surpassing Albus Dumbledore; give him two decades, and Albus Dumbledore would be soliciting his professional advice.)

"That's your plan?" Hermione hissed. "You want Dumbledore to be your bait?"

"Grindelwald is dangerous," said Tom in a quiet voice. "You've warned me, over and over, that
going after him head-on is like poking a tiger in the face. And I agree—I can't say I'm as eager to put my own skin on the line as I was a year ago. The obvious solution is to have someone else do it instead."

"Yes, I told you to leave it to people with more experience—"

"When officials of the British Raj went sport hunting, they hired native guides to set the lures. They'd done it dozens of times before; of course they'd be better at it."

"I believe that the natives were hired for their expendability..."

"Exactly," said Tom, nodding in agreement. "I'm glad we're on the same page here."

Hermione sighed. "Tom, I don't think we're even on the same book."

"You're a fast reader, Hermione," Tom said, holding the sitting room door for her. "I trust you to catch on quickly."

In the sitting room, the wireless on the mantel relayed the evening announcements. Propaganda, public notices, and reminder that all citizens had to carry their gas masks outside the house and ensure their windows were properly blacked out to stymie the German bombers. Every household would be inspected on a monthly basis by a corps of volunteer auxiliaries, and anyone who failed to cover their windows would be fined. The list of announcements droned on and on; after the first twenty minutes, Tom found himself concentrating more on Hermione, who'd curled up on the sofa cushion next to him, the first book from her summer reading collection open on her lap.

When her attention was ensnared within a world of ink and parchment, awareness of her surroundings was minimal. Tom wondered if Hermione would notice if he laid his arm over the back of the sofa seat. Wasn't that what young men did when they invited a girl to the cinema for a picture show?

There was a brief bout of uncertainty, followed almost instantly by a bout of disgust. What other young men did or said or wanted had no relevance to Tom. Other people chased after saccharine delusions of romance—if the word *romantic* could be applied to the pursuit of a single evening's entertainment. Those that wanted something longer-lived sought to fulfill an uninspired biological objective: a secondary entity to either win the bread or serve it to their handful of wailing offspring. It was profoundly insulting to apply those standards to himself—or to Hermione. He was better than this, and she deserved better.

While Tom contemplated the implications of 'walking out' with Hermione, Doctor and Mrs. Granger held a low conversation between themselves, glancing over at him every once in a while. Mr. Pacek scribbled notes into a leather-bound diary, referring on occasion to a mechanical calculating machine, a small metal drum the size of a salt cellar, marked with numbered notches down its length, a rotating handle fixed at one end.

When the broadcast ended, Mr. Pacek tucked his equipment into his trouser pocket—Tom noted that the calculator went in without a lump in the fabric—and bid goodnight to the Grangers.

Tom took it as an excuse to follow him out the door, catching him as he retrieved his wicker picnic basket from the kitchen and had gone to unlock the tradesman's door that led out into the Grangers' small back garden.
"Mr. Pacek," said Tom, flicking his wand to shut the kitchen door behind the two of them, and cast a Silencing Charm, "can I speak with you?"

"Mr. Riddle," said Mr. Pacek, the lilting inflection of his speech as much a question as it was an indication of surprise. "What is it?"

"Are you going back to the Continent?" asked Tom.

"Have you an interest in joining me?"

"No," said Tom. "I just wanted to tell you that you're being watched."

Mr. Pacek's expression didn't change. "Everyone these days is under observation, even the Muggles."

"The Ministry's watching you in particular." Tom reached into his pocket and pulled out a scroll of parchment. Marked File #DI-682 at the top, it was crinkled and folded where Tom had read and re-read the names since he'd retrieved the list during his visit to the archives.

He offered the scroll to Mr. Pacek, who took it and slowly unfurled it, drawing his wand and murmuring a few spells over the paper.

"So," Mr. Pacek said, finally, his voice flat. "It is as I suspected—your Ministry has been tracking the Portkeys. No matter; I have always requested ones for the most popular terminals."

"Do you think the Ministry is unfairly targetting Europeans?" said Tom. "If Hermione knew about this, she'd start a letter-writing campaign to the Ministry on your behalf."

"No," replied Mr. Pacek, looking over the list. "No, I understand why your government might employ such a strategy, and why certain personages would find themselves worthy of interest. But my name, it appears, was recorded over four years ago, and yet, in all that time, I have never been apprehended or shadowed by Ministry officials; if they had followed me, they would have discovered and Obliviated the Grangers. If this is their strategy, then I expect that they have not had an easy time of separating the wheat from the chaff."

"I'd assumed that any competent wizard would be successful at evading the Ministry, because they hire for names and connections rather than ability," said Tom. "But, sir, do you mean to say that you could tell the difference between 'wheat' and 'chaff' on their list?"

Mr. Pacek's mouth tightened in a faint grimace. "The great families of Vienna and Brandenburg concern themselves with preserving their hereditary rights of patent—rights to manufacture, to import, to hunt and harvest from the few remaining magical forests, and so on. Those who are well-connected have no difficulty in establishing themselves a position after graduation, and those are not... might do well enough if they have a knack for innovation. If the Ministry had any shred of competence, they would see that not one of these names—Bührmann, Eglitis, Gerdt, Grozbiecki, Khudekov, Lehtinen, Vanhanen—is of the Adel. These are the people who might see merit in revolutionary discourse, the notion of equality for all wizardkind." He let out a snort, continuing, "I recognise many of them from my time at Durmstrang. If only they knew that their Grand Minister himself carries a well-born name."

"Grindelwald is well-born?" Tom asked. "Is that anything like the pureblood families here and their 'Sacred Name' nonsense?"
"The Durmstrang Institute does not tender invitations to wizards born of Muggles, like your Miss Granger. But not all those invited are students of means," said Mr. Pacek. "Many families must save their gold and choose just one child, while the rest are sent to study at a local lyceum. Grindelwald's family was not one of them; they are not the most prominent, and in the last few generations they have had a habit of marrying outsiders, but they still maintain ownership of an estate in the mountains —though I cannot say the same for the money. Revolutions are a costly undertaking."

"If it's known where Grindelwald lives, why hasn't anyone come knocking at his door?"

"One should wonder why no one has captured Nurmengard and released all the prisoners," said Mr. Pacek, chuckling. "Here, Mr. Riddle. I do not know how you came into possession of an original document, but it would do you well to prevent it leaving. Hide it, burn it; do what you must to keep it out of sight." He gave a short bow to Tom and drew his wand. "Please give my best regards to the Grangers."

Snap!

He disappeared with the sound of a door being shut, not the loud gunshot crack of Tom's own Apparition, and soon the noises of the evening resumed their course—crickets chirruping in the summer grass, the hoot of Hermione's owl going off to hunt for its supper, the slide of shutters and doors as the families of Crawley locked their windows for the night.

Tom returned to the guest room Mrs. Granger had given him, where his trunk lay, still shrunken, at the foot of the bed. He enlarged it, unlocked it, and dug through to the bottom, where he found the medicine chest the Healer at St. Mungo's had given Hermione. In the slots that had once held vials of pain potions, there were now rows of Acromantula venom that Tom had collected over the months at Hogwarts. He'd sold some to strangers at The Hog's Head, but the oldest ones, the weakest venom, were of such a low quality that no one had bought them. He took the scroll of names out of his pocket and slid it into an empty vial, corking it and setting it in amongst the rest.

He would think of what to do with it later; he had ten weeks before he would be forced to embrace the strictures of authority and expectation. Until that time came, he was free to enjoy his summer. There was no reason why he shouldn't. No reason why Hermione shouldn't, either.

After all, they were supposedly involved, whatever that meant to anyone who cared about these things.

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Tom and Hermione left for Yorkshire the very next morning.

Although he and Hermione could Apparate to Platform Nine and Three Quarters, then cross to the Muggle side of King's Cross, Mrs. Granger still insisted on seeing them off at the platform. She drove them to the station, kissed Hermione on the cheek, patted Tom on the shoulder, and finally waved them off, pressing a cloth-wrapped parcel of sandwiches into each of their hands. It was a
kind gesture, but it was offset by Mrs. Granger never halting her close scrutiny of Tom. He was reminded of his days at Wool’s; when someone had had something stolen, Mrs. Cole demanded that everyone line up and turn out their pockets, and that Tom Riddle should be the first to do so.

(On other occasions, Tom might have enjoyed being given special treatment, but he hadn’t liked that. He found it so unfair that they singled him out—even if they happened to be right eight times out of ten—that by his last few years at Wool’s, he’d begun hiding the things he took in other people’s rooms instead of his own, his own limited storage space having been dedicated to holding the collection of gifts sent by Hermione. He still wondered if they had managed to find Edith Hurley’s mouth organ.)

As soon as the York Flyer began moving, Tom turned away from the window and shut the curtains. He drew his wand and ensured the compartment door was locked and silenced.

"We need to plan how to get into the Chamber of Secrets," said Tom, "without other students bumping into us when we're coming or going."

"Oh, it's the Chamber of Secrets now?" asked Hermione, looking up from her book. "What happened to Slytherin's laundry chute?"

"I needed to keep Nott on a leash," Tom said. "He wanted to find the Chamber all along. That means, of course, that there's something about it, something down there, that serves to his personal advantage. And I can't allow it."

Hermione sighed, marking her page with a finger. "I can't recall you having any apprehensions about voting me in as Minister for Magic."

"That's completely different," said Tom.

"I see," said Hermione, huffing.

"Look," said Tom, sliding into the seat beside her and leaning in. "You and I, Hermione, want the same things: progress and order. A leadership with vision, guidance through competence. Any one of these things is rather thin on the ground these days.

"And what does Nott want?" Tom asked, propping his chin on Hermione's shoulder and having a subtle peek at her book—some dull treatise about the enchantments of ancient magical plumbing; he could see a complicated diagram labelled Archimedes' Pump on the opposite page, charmed into an animation that repeated itself in five-second intervals.

"I've no idea, but I bet it's something as uninspired and self-serving as collecting Slytherin's beard comb as proof of his exalted ancestry. And the most bizarre thing is that everyone in Slytherin House would swallow it." Tom took shook his head in solemn disapproval. "Wealthy people, they're worse than magpies."

"Perhaps," Hermione ventured, "he wants the monster that Slytherin was said to have hidden in the Chamber? The legend says that Slytherin intended to purify the school with it, but if that was just made up to scare the other founders, there could still be a creature, either bound or dead, under the school. I suppose it could be worth a lot. That is, if you could get it, and find somewhere to sell it."

"Nott's already rich," Tom mused. "He'd see no sense in using the Chamber for money. No, it's got to be something else... Purifying the school would be up his agenda, I imagine. But if he tried to turn
the creature, whatever it is, against us, he'd run a high risk of killing the both of us accidentally, and he can't do that. Not when he needed us to open the Chamber in the first place. Not when I make sure he'll never know the password."

"Well," said Hermione, "you could ask him directly. He's eager to meet with us during the holidays."

"If only I had any eagerness to meet with him," Tom said. "Truth be told, I prefer to see as little of him during the summer as I can. I've other people more deserving of my time."

"On that matter," Hermione began, fidgeting nervously; Tom was so close that if she turned her head, their cheeks would brush. "Are you going to keep up the pretense when there's no one else around?"

"What do you mean?"

"That we—we're, you know, walking out!"

"Well, we are, aren't we?"

"I thought that was just a story you told my Mum," said Hermione. "It's not real."

"Why can't stories be real?" asked Tom. "We opened the Chamber of Secrets yesterday morning, and everyone thinks that's a silly bedtime story."

"What are you saying, Tom? That we are?"

"Why not?"

"Because I've never seen any indication that you've ever cared about or wanted something like that," said Hermione. "What happened to this sort of thing being the province of dullards and fools?"

"You've never seen it, Hermione," said Tom, sliding the book out of her hand and onto the seat, and lacing her now unoccupied fingers through his, "because I am a master of subtlety."

"Really, Tom?" said Hermione.

"Really," said Tom, brushing his cheek against hers.

Chapter End Notes

Durmstrang, unlike Hogwarts, is an international wizarding school. For the purposes of this story, I've decided that Durmstrang isn't run as a public school, like Hogwarts is with their Ministry funding and subsequent Ministry meddling in staff hiring and firing. Instead, they are an elite school with student fees and German as their language of instruction, because they wouldn't be named after "Sturm und Drang" without some kind of Germanic connection. Anyone who can't afford the fees or can't speak German
is better off going to a school in their own country.

This fits with Draco Malfoy, a British student who wanted to go to Durmstrang for the "dArK ArTS!!1!!" but ended up at Hogwarts because "Mummy says it's too far away!". It also fits with Karkaroff being the Headmaster in the 1990's, even though he was convicted as a terrorist (but got out of it by snitching on the other Death Eaters).

Don't mind me, just trying to make something believable and canon-consistent out of JKR's worldbuilding here.
From the window of the train, the view of the countryside moved too quickly for Hermione to see more than an indistinct blur.

But after stopping at Sheffield and York, and from there the minor stations of Easingwold, Thirsk, and Great Hangleton, a picture of Yorkshire in full summer was revealed to her in full: tidy villages surrounded by an idyllic landscape of rolling hills, lush pasture, and rambling hedgerows in a hundred different shades of green. The effect, however, was ruined by the sky being a single flat shade of grey, which produced a constant shower of rain somewhere in between a mist and a fine drizzle.

The weather, though unpleasant, wasn’t anything new to her. Scotland was rainy for half the year, cloudy the other half, and thus most students were incentivised to study the Impervius Charm without the looming urgency of their impending exams. But there were some differences to Scotland that Hermione could perceive. The grounds around Hogwarts consisted of rocky cliffs and wild forest—wonderfully scenic, but a harsh environment even to those who possessed the conveniences provided by magic or technology.

Yorkshire, on the other hand, showed clear signs of habitation with every glance: the railroad, an iron course slicing through hill and spanning valley, with well-maintained fields on either side, stiles and neat copses of trees separating each property from the next. And all along the way, the railway platforms abutted local coaching inns, whose windows and swinging signs were hung with flags. The Union Jack, Saint George's Cross, and the white rose banner unique to Yorkshire—they were symbols of alignment, of identity, that she hardly saw in the wizarding world outside of Quidditch matches and the family crests worn by the children of wealthy families.

This was the scale of Muggle Britain when compared to that of Magical Britain. Even with the loss of Ireland, the number of Muggles in Britain vastly outnumbered the wizards, several thousands to one. Little Hangleton was a village so tiny and insignificant that it and Great Hangleton were merged and marked on maps under a single name. And yet, it was still larger than Hogsmeade, the largest purely wizarding settlement in Britain. (There were others: Tutshill, Ilkley, Godric's Hollow, and Chudleigh—the hometown of the infamous Chudley Cannons Quidditch team—but they were subsections, satellites of larger Muggle towns. Once connected, after the passing of the Statute, they had been hidden in a manner similar to Diagon Alley’s wand-activated doorway, and all proof of their existence removed from Muggle record and memory.)

It was a fact that the Riddles' tenants numbered greater than the entire population of Hogsmeade.

Tom seemed to be aware of it, too, judging by the way he swiped his hand against the foggy side window of the Sunbeam after Mr. Bryce had come to collect them from the station at Great Hangleton. As the green acres flashed past the misted glass, Tom surveyed the village, his dark eyes fixed on the rows of slate roofs and handsome crofts with the stone steeple at their centre, then the village green and adjoining cemetery.
As the motorcar crunched up the drive and into the shadow of the great house, he turned to Hermione and said, "We'll be watched from the moment we step foot through the door."

"Attentiveness, according to your grandmother, is a mark of good service," Hermione answered. "You've been going on for weeks about your servants."

She knew this from dining with the Riddle family during the Christmas holidays. Mrs. Riddle's favourite mealtime conversation topics had included personal anecdotes illustrating how everything in the past was better than the state of things in the present. Not only were good servants easier to find and cheaper to hire, but in her day, there was none of that nonsense with young ladies donning trousers and going out to till fields or drive ambulances. And one could actually find proper *eau de vie* for the cherries jubilee after supper, because the lack of grocery options was surely the worst thing about the war. No, no, it was caught in a tie with the suspension of formal court presentations, due to a lack of eligible young men.

(After saying these things, Mrs. Riddle would send surreptitious looks at Tom, who'd been paying more attention to the crystal bowl of cherries jubilee that was going around the table than the conversation. Hermione had reason to doubt that Tom cared much about the cherries not being properly flambéed with German brandy, that the social Season was a pale shade of what it had been thirty years ago, or that he himself qualified for the labels of *young*, *male*, and *eligible.*)

"I have," Tom replied. "But as I said it then, I say it now: it's a good thing."

"Oh, I suppose I have to hear this one, then."

"We can use them for practice," said Tom.

Hermione gaped at him. "Sorry?"

"If we're to present ourselves as..." Tom made a face, then spoke the next word with distaste, "*together*, then we ought to act like it, shouldn't we? At Hogwarts—that's where it really matters—we not only need the teachers to swallow it, but the rest of the Prefects, too. If we're to pull it off, then we have to practice for it. And who'd make a better audience than the servants? My grandmother's always going on about how they do nothing but stand around and gossip, so they've got that in common with the students at Hogwarts."

"I can't see it being that difficult, here or at Hogwarts," said Hermione. "Can't we just tell them? You didn't have a problem telling my Mum."

"It's not that simple," said Tom.

"Why not?"

"Just because someone is told something, doesn't mean it'll be believed," said Tom. "I know that it wouldn't work on me."

"So you're saying that we have to act the part," said Hermione slowly. "I see."

"I knew you'd understand, Hermione," said Tom approvingly. "The unfortunate truth is that for all your talents, talking isn't one of them, and you've not been happy the last few instances where I've spoken for you. This is the most logical solution. A compromise." He leaned forward in his seat. "Years ago, didn't you say that the ability to make compromises was a sign of emotional growth?"
Well, count me grown."

"It's not the same thing," said Hermione, sending a glare in his direction. "That was a different set of circumstances. I seem to remember that we'd been talking about the management of civic infrastructure under different political regimes—"

"Shh," said Tom. He held a finger to her mouth, then lifted it slightly and twitched it to the left.

She threw a quick glance over her shoulder, realising in that the motor had come to a stop, and was now parked at the foot of the steps leading up to the house. And there, standing on her side of the passenger window, was the Riddles' driver, Mr. Bryce, the rain spattering on his oilcloth mackintosh as he fiddled with the catch on a gold-handled umbrella.

"We'll save this conversation for later, won't we?" Tom whispered, leaning even closer, so close that she felt his lips tickle her ear.

The door opened, and Mr. Bryce proffered the umbrella.

"Sir? Miss? If you'll take this up to the door, I'll be followin' along with your luggage."

Mr. Bryce spoke with hesitance, his eyes drawn to where Tom was tucking a curl of Hermione's hair behind her ear; it had escaped the ribbon she'd tied it with that morning, the damp of the summer rain having puffed her hair up to twice its usual size.

"Thank you, Bryce," said Tom, reaching past Hermione and taking the umbrella. "It looks like there's only one, Hermione, so we should be alright if you stay close to me."

Tom escorted her up the stairs, one arm around her shoulders, and the other holding the umbrella aloft over the two of them. It was an unexpected reversal of their position in January: Hermione had helped Tom down the steps of the Riddle House, the darkness of early morning and the slick, ice-covered stone inciting concern over his recently-healed injury. Now Tom was helping her up, and with a subtle flick of his wand, he cast a Shield Charm to keep the blowing rain from hitting them in the face.

A maid held the door open, taking the dripping umbrella, their coats, and ushering them into the house. Mrs. Riddle greeted them in the foyer, giving a polite acknowledgement to Hermione, and a more enthusiastic welcome to Tom. She clasped his hands in hers, smoothing down his wind-blown hair, fluttering around them both and demanding hot tea and warmed blankets delivered to the drawing room so that the 'exhausted children' could finally have a chance to sit down.

"It seems that Mrs. Riddle hasn't a head for logic, Hermione thought, girding herself for the socialising to come. We've been sitting down all day.

She didn't vocalise that thought. Instead, she allowed herself to be fussed over, biting her tongue when Mrs. Riddle sneaked her well-meaning opinions into the conversation. (On Tom's weight—whatever Professor Dumberton was feeding them at his school, it wasn't enough for a growing boy. Or Hermione's clothes—if she wanted to become the lady she was meant to be, instead of dressing like a little girl, she needed the proper garments, and luckily, Mrs. Riddle knew a seamstress who still had access to steel boning.) It was condescending in the most benevolent way, and listening to Mrs. Riddle remark to an impassive Tom that someday he was going to be as tall as his papa, Hermione was reminded of Nott and his suggestions on the subject of 'personal refinement'.
Hermione wondered what Nott was doing right now. She'd last seen him at King's Cross yesterday evening, and all through the train journey, they hadn't spoken of the book he'd stolen from the library, the Chamber of Secrets, or what they were going to do with it once the school term resumed in September. He'd wanted to say something; Hermione could not have ignored his wriggling eyebrows and his meaningful glances at the compartment door, but Tom hadn't let her out of his sight for the whole trip. Even when she'd excused herself to visit the loo and change out of her uniform, Tom had volunteered to accompany her, leaving Nott fuming in the compartment with the other boys.

("I didn't know that you cared about gentlemanly conduct," Hermione had remarked to Tom when he'd followed her out into the aisle between compartments. She was the only girl to a group of seven boys, so it was the most sensible choice for her to change in the bathroom instead of making all of them stand outside the compartment so she could change alone.

"I care more than Nott," had been Tom's reply. "You saw what he did to that Ravenclaw girl. Miranda—"

"—Myrtle."

"Yes, whatever her name was," said Tom. "It's a clear sign that he's not to be trusted. You shouldn't speak to him unless you have someone else there with you, Hermione."

"But it's perfectly fine if I'm alone with you?"

"Of course," Tom said, manoeuvring students out of their path with a few prods and polite nudges here and there. "I am a gentleman.")

And the designation wasn't inaccurate: Tom was a gentleman. He had the title by virtue of birth—the Riddles had no peerage, but they were landed, to such an extent that their estate incomes could support the family without requiring any member to work. And these days, their income made the Riddles wealthier than many genuine peers who had had no option but to support themselves in trade. Though most of them, according to Mrs. Riddle, had the grace to take only respectable positions in law, governance, civil administration, or academia.

At dinner, Tom made every attempt to look considerate, drawing out Hermione's chair, rising from the table whenever she stood and pardoned herself for the bathroom, and offering her the choicest morsels of the veal medallion that was their main course. He was so attentive that she felt he had gone far, far past the mark. His conduct wasn't a gentleman's brand of chivalry, but the doting of an enamoured young swain.

The queer thing was that Mrs. Riddle, for all her solicitousness over Tom, her darling grandson, gave no indication of disapproval to this behaviour, and Mr. Riddle gave no indication that he'd even noticed. Tom hadn't crossed the line into looking unseemly—he hadn't suggested she try a bite of food from his fork, let alone his plate, and there was no mention of their more colourful Hogwarts adventures—but the way he comported himself around her was inconsistent to not only what it had been last Christmas, but what it had been the previous summer, when Tom had been ill-tempered about his no longer being a Ward of the Crown. Back then, Mrs. Riddle had sent them invitation after invitation to dine at her hotel, and Tom had instead spent most of the meal glaring at his grandmother, his new guardian, rather than pay attention to Hermione.

During the dessert course of lemon sorbet garnished with candied rose petals, Hermione decided that she would confront Tom after dinner. He was the one who'd decided that announcing their "news"
wasn't good enough, and that it would be more effective to act it out. Well, his acting was bordering on farcical, and if this continued, Mrs. Riddle would form certain expectations that could not be made good.

This pretense of Tom's was only meant to last a year, their last year of Hogwarts, their sole window of opportunity to explore whatever it was that lay in the Second Floor girls' loo. After that, there would be no more teachers to mislead, no more fellow students to distract. But Mrs. Riddle, a member of Tom's family, was not a teacher or a student. She wasn't one who could so easily be forgotten once they had no more shared classes or scheduled patrols together. In fact, being forgotten after Tom and Hermione reached their majority in the Muggle world (and this was only a few months away, as Mum had pointed out) was the opposite of what Mrs. Riddle hoped to achieve, as indicated by the suggestions she'd made to Hermione throughout dinner and dessert.

"Hermione, as you're to be summering here with us," said Mrs. Riddle, while Hermione looked down at her plate to keep herself from snorting. It was a rare type of person to use 'summer' as a verb in casual conversation. "You should take this opportunity to make enquiries of the local institutions. Mrs. Swindon, I believe, sent her daughter on to the Armoured Division's office in Helmsley. She joined through the Girls' Training Corps, but I'm sure if I made arrangements for your character references, you needn't waste your time with military drills if all you wanted was an office position."

"That's very kind of you, Mrs. Riddle," said Hermione, watching as the maid went around with a platter of round, sugar-dusted almond biscuits to go with the tea and brandy.

"I had my reservations, if you must know," said Mrs. Riddle graciously; she allowed the maid to drop two biscuits on the side of her plate with a pair of small silver tongs. "But soon I recognised that whilst it is quite a bold undertaking for a young girl, the situation, in essence, is temporary. And I've heard from Mrs. Swindon that it's respectable enough—there will be plenty of young officers of good family coming and going, and I don't doubt that Miss Caroline Swindon knows that her best prospects lie in the uniformed services; her father, of course, is Chief Constable of the North Riding Constabulary."

She sipped her tea, regarding with Hermione with a cool expression. "Not that you would find yourself inclined to follow her example in that respect, Hermione. But perhaps you might enjoy the company of girls your own age. I certainly did, and saw its merits when I was settled and had good friends whose children were the same age as my own. It is truly disheartening when your time comes, and you have no one else to keep you company in your fragile state but the nursemaid."

"If I was in such a fragile state, wouldn't there be a second party responsible for it?" Hermione asked, glancing at Tom from the corner of her eye. "Is it too much to expect that their responsibilities would include keeping me company?"

"One would surely wish it to be," said Mrs. Riddle easily, "but there is good reason why the whole ordeal is known as 'going into seclusion'."

"Tom?" said Hermione, nudging him under the table with her foot.

"Hermione?" said Tom, tearing his eyes away from the clock on the sideboard. "What is it?"

"My dear," said Mrs. Riddle in a kind voice. "Articles of this nature are, and shall always be, a woman's burden."
Although she knew it was unworthy of her, Hermione couldn't stop herself from feeling cross all through dessert. Mrs. Riddle was older than her Mum, and would have considered women marching for their right to vote as alien a notion as women voting in the first place. She could not have helped her sheltered upbringing, just like Nott could not have helped his; they had both been informed from childhood that certain things fell into a natural order, by blood or sex or station, and had encountered few people over the course of their lives who could convince them to reassess their opinions.

Nott, she thought, was less vocal about his beliefs than he'd been a year ago—perhaps his closer association with her and Tom had softened his stance on blood supremacy—but Mrs. Riddle had had decades to corroborate her beliefs on the fragility of the 'fairer sex'. Within her circles, women were delicate doves who started out as maidens, and must be shepherded, as gently as possible, into the rôle of matron, with nothing in between. There was no nuance, no room for exception; one had to be one or the other, or one was not a woman at all.

It was here, more than ever, that Hermione was tempted to say, "Oh, dash it all!" and follow Tom's example: escape to the wizarding world as he'd planned to at the age of eleven, and never look back. Be a witch first, and relegate everything else to the periphery. The fact, as repeated many times over by Tom, was that Hermione was no Muggle, nor would she ever be; she would have twice the lifespan of a Muggle, and as such, there was little chance she would end up, as they called it, 'on the shelf', by age thirty. Witches had borne healthy children at fifty or sixty years old—there were potions and Mediwitches to make it possible—so the conventions of Muggle society (or high society) did not apply to her.

It was here that Hermione wondered if Nott had a point in scoffing at Muggle sensibilities. He did it less than he once had, but he'd also been oddly fascinated by the idea of millions of Muggles dying of famine overseas, and even more fascinated when he'd learned that it had been caused by the British Muggle government.

("Where would they put all the bodies?" Nott had asked. "They can't Vanish them. Did they eat them? Of course it sounds barbaric, but you can never tell what those Muggles will do next—and it would solve their problem."

To prevent the Japanese from gaining access to supply lines in British India, the wartime government had blocked the transport lanes, to the result of millions of Bengal natives going hungry. It was a crisis covered in the London press, but yet again, it was something that no other student at Hogwarts cared about. She'd mentioned it to Tom, but his response had been to inform her that the most interesting war-related news would be hearing that the Germans had blown up Wool's Orphanage.)

Ultimately, she tried her best to be polite. Hermione was a guest, and Mrs. Riddle was the hostess. She was fortunate enough to have a choice in taking those rôles that other women had thrust upon them; even other witches, Lucretia Black for instance, were not immune to it all. Hadn't Clarence Fitzpatrick said that Lucretia would be married next year, to a man ten years her senior? And on top of that, Mrs. Riddle wasn't even her mother, so Hermione had no obligation to accede to her suggestions. Not that a blood relation had swayed Tom either; he gleefully denied Mrs. Riddle at every turn, and she was his legal guardian.

She had wanted to speak to Tom about his acting skills, but the dinner was so exhausting that she went straight to bed after washing up and changing into her nightclothes. She would correct Tom in the morning, when she was well-rested enough to counter any of Tom's arguments as to why he thought it necessary to act out gestures of affection in such an exaggerated fashion. It was far from subtle, especially for a self-described 'Master of Subtlety'—how on Earth could he expect anyone to think him sincere, and their... 'involvement' genuine?
With the rain pattering at the windows, Hermione cast a quick Warming Charm on her bed, setting her wand on the nightstand before climbing under the blankets. Thirty minutes later, she had fallen into a light drowse when the latch on her door gave a click, then a shaft of light from the hall lamps cut across the carpet, and a dark figure crept into her room on slippered feet.

"What—" she groaned, rolling over and pushing herself up on her elbows.

A heavy weight fell over her body, a warm hand pressing over her mouth, then a voice whispered in her ear.

"Shh, Hermione, it's me."

"Tom! Why are y—"

"Hush!"

The weight fell off her, and the shaft of light from the hall disappeared as the door swung silently shut.

"Right," said the voice, "I've cast a few charms, so we can talk now. There's a Tripping Jinx on the hall carpet so if any of the servants comes sneaking along this wing of the house, I'll know about it."

"Tom," Hermione said with a note of reproach, "you could have cast an Intruder Charm to sound an alarm if someone entered the hall."

"Well, yes, I could have," Tom admitted, rolling over to one side of the bed with a squeak of steel springs. "But alarm charms only set off a noise when they're triggered; they don't do anything to delay an intruder. Hmm. I didn't think Yorkshire would be that much colder than London—could you move over, please, Hermione?"

Hermione obliged, wriggling closer to the window.

The blankets rustled, and Hermione felt Tom slide in next to her. It was too dark to see what Tom was doing until he murmured "Lumos", and the tip of his wand glowed with a faint yellow light, illuminating the space between their pillows, and Tom's pale face.

"You may be wondering," Tom began, "why I wanted to speak to you so urgently."

"Actually," said Hermione, "I'm wondering why you're here at all. Here. In my bed."

"This is my house," said Tom. "So it stands to reason that this is my room, and my bed. But I'm generous enough to share it with you, so here you are. You're welcome, Hermione. No, I wanted to tell you that my plan worked, and my grandmother bought it. I overheard her tell the maids to keep an eye on us—she doesn't want either of us to tarnish our reputations until there's an official confirmation of intent. From now on, expect to be interrupted whenever we hold revisions in the library. She can't outright order us to stay under a chaperone's supervision without looking overly presumptuous, but she's jolly well going to try."

"She can't mean any harm by it," Hermione said slowly. "I mean, if assigning a chaperone could prevent things like this from happening, I'd understand why she cares."
"There's nothing for her to care about," said Tom. "Did she think that I was going to, hah, compromise your virtue?"

"My virtue is none of her business," said Hermione. "If, by any chance, it needs protecting, I'm sure I can do it myself."

"Do you think it needs protecting?" asked Tom.

"I think that's a question I should be asking you," Hermione answered, tugging back some of the blanket that Tom had, inch by inch, stolen away to the side of the bed he was presently occupying.

"Mmm," said Tom. "You don't need to be protective, no. If I ever made an attempt to compromise your virtue, I'm quite certain that you'd know it."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that it would be insulting to your intelligence, not to mention mine, to pretend that 'virtue' means anything," said Tom, very smoothly. "It's obvious that clergymen invented it to trick people into tithing."

"Oh, yes, obviously," said Hermione, sniffing. "What isn't obvious to me is what you're doing here. Couldn't you wait until morning to tell me this?"

He gave a soft laugh, then rolled closer to her, dimming his wandlight. "As much as I enjoy a good debate, there's something more important to discuss when we have an opportunity for privacy. The Chamber, of course. Have you come up with any theories for what's down there?"

"Slytherin lived before there was a Ministry of Magic, or a Department for the Regulation of Magical Creatures. A thousand years ago, there weren't international laws back then to control what animals could be exported, sold across national borders, protected from hunters, or raised in captivity," said Hermione. "The legends imply that it's a creature capable of killing wizards, so there are some things it can't be. Not a puffskein, a jobberknoll, or a snidget. Perhaps a runespoor... no, they live decades, not centuries... a hydra, then? That would certainly fit Slytherin's image."

"Not a dragon?" said Tom. "I've always wanted to see one with my own eyes. It's a shame that Care of Magical Creatures has such a dull curriculum—last year, we spent a month learning how to sex owl chicks."

"Er," said Hermione after taking a few seconds to digest this information. "I suppose that might be useful one day..."

"When that day comes, it will be too soon," Tom muttered. "What do you think is the best way to fight a dragon? They have that spell-resistant hide; it can't be so simple to defeat one with standard duelling strategy."

"I can't imagine that fighting a dragon would ever be simple," said Hermione. "You can out-strategise an opponent in a duel, but is it even possible to apply that to a dragon? Dragons don't have strategies—they have instinct."

"Instinct or strategy, could either best a Killing Curse?" Tom mused, not quite meeting her eye. "Can anything beat a Killing Curse? In all the books that I've read, I've never seen mention of anything but a physical barrier blocking a Killing Curse, and most dragons on the ground are too
large and clumsy to hide themselves well. Not that they'd want to—by instinct, they'd fight an enemy the size of a human wizard. They'd only turn tail on another dragon, and only if it was bigger. And that's the same for most magical creatures. Rather simple minds, if I'm to be the judge of it."

"I don't know..." said Hermione hesitantly.

As much as she disparaged this discussion of Unforgivable Curses, she knew that they weren't illegal to discuss, or even illegal to use on animals. And there was plenty of precedent of using the Killing Curse on animals in the past: those who harvested creature parts wanted to preserve the body as perfectly as they could—organs, flesh, bones, and hide. The utility of a Killing Curse lay in how quick and painless it was, without causing an animal undue stress, or damaging the skin as a Muggle hunting rifle would have done in a game shoot; this was of vital importance in the harvest of Demiguises, an animal raised solely for the magical qualities of their skin and fur. She could admit that it was more humane than how pigs and oxen were butchered for the average Muggle family's table, but it was nonetheless frightening how the speed and convenience of the Killing Curse had resulted in its use by wizard murderers.

*The wartime government, Hermione reminded herself, had caused the deaths of millions of rural Indian farmers. This spell is a tool, and not the cruellest tool in existence, not by far.*

A land mine, unlike a spell, was not directed by its operator. It was indiscriminate; each instance of its use was not limited by an individual's conscious intent. It could maim a person, kill them, or do everything in between, but its main purpose was to deny access to terrain through the threat of unexpected violence. *That* particular spell, unlike a land mine, was clean and exact in comparison.

"Professor Merrythought said that the adult dragons in creature reserves took several wizards to Stun," Hermione said. "It must be because of their inherent magical nature, or their magic-resistant skin. Whatever it is, you'd likely only disable part of it if you hit it in the wing or the leg."

If there was a creature capable of killing wizards hidden under Hogwarts, wasn't it best to keep it from escaping into the school? If that were the case, then Tom using a Killing Curse on a dangerous animal was better than risking the lives of unwary students. She might not like it, but with reluctance, she ceded that it was tolerable, morally and legally—unlike Nott's use of the Imperius Curse. She still hadn't forgiven Nott for it, and was unsure of how to go about rebuking him for it, because she couldn't let it stand between them unaddressed.

She had wondered, changing out of her uniform in the tiny train bathroom with Tom standing guard outside the door, if Nott had ever thought about turning his wand against her when she was being short with him. He'd cursed Myrtle Warren because she was an inconvenience; Hermione, in retrospect, had been as much of an obstacle, and for a stretch of months, not minutes.

But...

*No.*

Tom would have noticed if Hermione had demonstrated any strange behaviours. He would have taken her to the Hospital Wing the moment he saw her eyes glazed and vacant; he, after exchanging letters for years, would have noticed if she spoke words that sounded as if they'd come out of anyone's mouth but her own.

Nott wouldn't have dared, not with the possibility of having Tom's anger descend upon him.
"On the other hand, if she and Tom had never known one another, Nott would never have had anything to do with her in the first place."

"I'd need to aim at the head, then," said Tom thoughtfully. "If a dragon's skin is that resistant to spells, then the best way to get it would be through its mouth or its eyes. A *Reducto* couldn't blast through dragonhide, but what would it do if aimed at a dragon's open mouth?"

"That's only if there is a dragon," Hermione pointed out. "It's traditional to use a dragon to guard treasure, but if you haven't noticed, most people these days just go to the bank. Dragons are good at protecting gold, but it's hard to get the gold back if you decide you want to spend it. With the Chamber, the legend doesn't say that it was meant to be hidden forever, but that Slytherin intended it to be used."

"Perhaps it's a Sphinx," Tom suggested. "They're not as aggressive as dragons, and can be communicated with. Slytherin's agenda was to 'cleanse the unworthy', and with something so vague, the monster—whatever it is—needs to be able to take orders and differentiate its victims."

"How charming," remarked Hermione. "But a Sphinx? It would offer any potential victim a puzzle first, and if answered successfully, that victim would be allowed to walk free. They're too clever and difficult to simply order around like an executioner."

"Would Slytherin even use a lion to complete his so-called 'great work'? The whole idea of hiding a secret chamber is very dramatic, but I've seen no sign that he valued dramatic irony."

"Then..." Tom trailed off, rolling onto his back, before whispering, "it's got to be a Cerberus! Dangerous, but obedient if trained right after weaning. Tradition also makes them out to be guard creatures, though they're not as common in Britain as in other parts of Europe. And—here's the greatest clue—they're comfortable in dark spaces and underground. Dragons are creatures of the air; they'd be better used to guard a tower than a hole in the ground."

"Slytherin's legendary monster," Hermione whispered back, "is a dog?"

"A giant dog," said Tom. "With three giant heads."

"Oh," said Hermione. "Well, I suppose it could be..."

"Do you fancy a flutter?" asked Tom in a casual tone of voice.

"What I fancy is a good night's sleep."

"So do I," said Tom, and saying that, he extinguished his light.

Hermione heard the bedsprings creak as he leaned over to the side, then there was a soft *click* as he placed his wand on the nightstand next to hers. She waited for him to roll out of the bed and make a departure back to his own room, but to her surprise, he didn't. Instead, he wormed his way deeper under the blankets—*her blankets*—with a rustle of sheets and the thump of a pillow being plumped. She could feel him very close to her, the dip in the mattress where his weight, several stone greater than hers, pressed down on the springs. She could feel the heat of his body, warmer than the hot water bottles the maids had prepared her bed with during her visit last Christmas.

"Tom?"
"Mm?"

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to sleep. Do you mind?"

"Yes, I do!"

"Don't worry, once you fall asleep, you'll forget I'm here."

Hermione let out a tired sigh. "Good night, Tom."

"Good night, Hermione."

It was an even greater surprise that Tom's presence didn't bother her all that much. He'd spent much of the day by her side, and the day before as well. To have him at her side now, despite being rather unexpected at first, didn't feel wrong. Yes, it could be argued that it was 'wrong' in the sense that it was completely inappropriate by conventional standards of decency and propriety, but Hermione didn't feel that it was a moral transgression.

Tom disdained common distinctions of right and wrong, especially in attempts to apply them to his person. And although she was the one who, most of the time, had been the one making those attempts, Hermione was reluctant to apply them to Tom right now—out of favouritism, out of fondness, and out of mutual friendship.

It was also due, in part, to Tom's being a quiet sleeper. He didn't snore, kick, or talk in his sleep, and Hermione found herself falling asleep before she could properly articulate a list of reasons why Tom should return to his own room, which was larger and better-appointed than hers.

She didn't wake up until the next morning, when a maid set off the Tripping Jinx with a shrill cry and a crash of shattering porcelain.

Tom, who had somehow draped himself over her during the night, didn't budge an inch at the noise.

Over the next few days, Hermione scarcely got a minute to herself.

During daylight hours, Mrs. Riddle monopolised her time, inviting her to tea in her private sitting room every afternoon, sometimes with a guest or two from the village. This had included the local parson, a balding man of mild disposition who deferred to Mrs. Riddle whenever he was asked to give his opinion on anything, which was rare, as Mrs. Riddle had taken a firm hand with the conversation from the very start. The mornings were occupied by Mrs. Riddle squiring Hermione around the Riddle House, the gardens, outbuildings, and orchards, making broad insinuations about what changes could be made in future, if Hermione were to find herself in charge of the estate.
"English primroses were the done thing when I was a girl," Mrs. Riddle had said, leading her out into the conservatory behind the house, where the hothouse flowers were grown. "Of course, they'll still suit most occasions, but I expect that you'll want something with a bit more spirit. Zinnias, perhaps. Or anemones. My dear, you're young enough to get away with a daring choice or two—but not too daring." She gave a silvery little laugh. "We've an image to maintain."

The evenings, after Mr. and Mrs. Riddle had retired to their rooms when the last remove had been cleared from the dining table, were spent with Tom. He was still fixated on the subject of Slytherin's monster, and was determined that he would not only discover it, but defeat it in single combat.

They met in Hermione's guest bedroom, because over the last week, Tom had developed an unfortunate habit of coming and going whenever he liked, half the time waiting a mere second between knocking on her door and opening it up. The room was larger than her bedroom at home, and the bed could easily fit two without trouble, so it wasn't as if his presence made the space too close and stifling. But it was a nuisance that Hermione couldn't even change her clothes in her own room. She'd started to change into her nightgown in the bathroom down the hall, after too many close runs where Tom had barged in with an armful of Care of Magical Creatures textbooks.

Hermione had just returned to her room with an armful of laundry to see Tom lounging on her bed, twirling his wand between his fingers, a selection of books scattered over the bedcovers.

"This might be your house, but it would be nice if you had the courtesy to ask before you came in," said Hermione reprovingly. "You lived at my house for two summers and my Mum always knocked when she came in to change the sheets."

"Are you afraid that I'll see something I'm not supposed to?" asked Tom. "Because there's no reason to be afraid—you know I'd never laugh at you, Hermione." His eyes darted to Hermione's laundry. Underneath the smart blouse and woollen skirt she'd worn to dinner was a small sliver of cream satin trimmed with lace.

Hermione quickly dumped her slip into the laundry basket and closed the lid. "I know you wouldn't laugh at me; that was never the problem."

"So what is the problem, then?"

"The fact that you're so certain that the Killing Curse will solve everything," said Hermione. "Yes, it's neat and tidy, but people will know what spell you used, based on just how neat it is. That could put paid to your idea of making yourself out to be a fearsome dragonslayer. No noble dragonslayer would cultivate a reputation of being handy with illegal curses—yes, I know it's legal in that context, but you don't want the wrong people asking the wrong questions."

"What else do you suggest?" said Tom. "Assuming it's a carnivore, we could brew a Sleeping Draught, baste it on a side of beef, then feed it to the creature... but that would take too long."

"Assuming it's a Cerberus, you wouldn't even need a Sleeping Draught," said Hermione. "Orpheus made one fall asleep by playing music. You could sing it to sleep, you know."

Hermione had learned more than a few interesting facts this summer. The latest one was that Tom had a fine singing voice, which she'd found out on Sunday, when the Little Hangleton congregation had gotten up to sing a hymn before the end of the service. The Riddles sat at the front, in their family's reserved seat, and Tom, within direct sight of his grandparents and the parson, had had to sing rather than mouth the words. His voice was untrained: Hermione didn't think that Wool's could
have provided tutoring, and when she'd taught him to dance, she'd been stymied by the fact that he was unfamiliar with formal musical terminology. But he didn't crack on the higher notes, and he could carry a tune better than she could.

(Hermione's Muggle primary school had had a class for music, where she'd learned to sight-read sheet music and play a whistle, very poorly. It had also been her first introduction to the existence of natural aptitudes. She memorised the composition better than her classmates, but the teacher had admitted that while her recitations were accurate, she lacked 'joy'. Hermione had scoured musical encyclopaedias for weeks to understand the meaning of that comment, and to this day, she still didn't know.)

"I can't very well speak spell incantations and sing at the same time," said Tom. "And not to be rude about it, but you can't sing either. Can you play an instrument?"

"The only instrument I play decently is the piano," she replied, "since playing one is just a matter of hitting the keys in the right order. But we can't just Transfigure one unless we study how they're made—there are eighty-eight strings in different lengths that we'd have to get right to make a working piano. The alternative is borrowing one, but the only person I know who has a piano is your grandmother... And she'd notice if the one in her sitting room disappeared for a few weeks."

Hermione paused for a moment, frowning. "I'm not certain we could fit a piano down that hole in the girls' bathroom."

Tom rolled onto his stomach, tapping his wand against his chin. In a low voice, he said, "Nott can play the harp."

Hermione couldn't imagine Tom and Nott casually discussing their hobbies and recreational diversions. Nott certainly hadn't discussed anything of that vein with her.

"Did he tell you that?"

"We live in the same dormitory," said Tom. "One tends to know things about the person who has slept ten feet away for the last six years."

"He has to be wondering what we're doing," Hermione said. "Should we write to him?"

Tom was silent, the wand falling still in his hand. "He'll want to meet us."

"Is that such a bad thing?"

Another silence. Tom gave Hermione a curious look, the slightest lift to his brows.

"He's a parasite," said Tom bluntly.

Hermione sighed. "So are your grandparents. Or did you forget that all their money comes from compound interest and collecting other people's rent?"

"It would be a blow to their pride for my grandparents to take even a single shilling from you," said Tom. "Nott, on the other hand, would bleed you dry if he could get away with it."

"He wouldn't do that..."
"No," Tom agreed. "Because he knows he can't."

"What about you?" asked Hermione. "You don't appear to have any qualms about bleeding him."

"Someone who boasts about the purity of his blood should never hesitate to prove it," said Tom. He gave a sniff of disdain. "Write him, then. Arrange a meeting. And tell him to mind his manners."

That evening after dinner, Hermione rang her Mum from the telephone in Mr. Riddle's office. Gilles was despatched from the Grangers' house in London an hour later, bearing a book and a few extra changes of socks and undergarments that Hermione had asked for. When Gilles arrived at midnight, Hermione stroked the feathery tufts on the top of his head, before tying a fresh letter to his leg.

"Broxtowe Abbey, Nottinghamshire. Go to the mews, not the main house," Hermione whispered. "Wait for the elf to clean the roosts in the morning, then give her the letter."

Gilles took one last owl treat from her hand, nudging her palm with the side of his hooked beak. Then he shook out his feathers, gliding out of the window on silent wings and disappearing into the night.

Hermione slid the sash down and closed the curtains, turning back to her bedroom. "I've sent the letter. He should get it before noon tomorrow—unless he sleeps in during the summer holidays."

"You should have ordered the owl to peck him awake," said Tom. "Owls will do that if you tell them to."

"They're the only ones, it seems, who will do what they're told," said Hermione, folding her arms. "Heavens, Tom, don't you like your own room? Mrs. Riddle went through a lot of trouble of furnishing it for you!"

Tom's bedroom not only had an adjoined bathroom, a larger bed, but all the books that Tom had collected over the last ten years, shipped in from Wool's. His room also had a vast armoire for the clothes Mrs. Riddle had bought him. On the shelves were vases of fresh blooms cut from Mrs. Riddle's garden, and the walls were papered in a pattern of Tom's own choice. His room felt like a proper bedroom. Hermione's, in comparison, was clearly a guest room, complete with dried flowers on the mantel and framed watercolours of the Yorkshire valleys on the walls. A rather sterile choice, but safe and inoffensive.

"I do," Tom replied, "but my bed isn't as comfortable as yours." He patted the pillow. "Here, I can fall asleep in a matter of minutes."

"As comfortable as it is for you," said Hermione, "it certainly isn't for the maids who trip over the carpet every morning."

"I'll stop casting Tripping Jinxes if you ward our doors with a Muggle Repelling Charm," said Tom. "If anyone could formulate a conditional enchantment that operates between the hours of sunset and dawn, it'd be you."

"There's no reason why you couldn't do it."

"No," said Tom, drawing back the bedcovers and slipping into the bed, "but I'm not the one who gets upset when the maids have to pick the china out of the carpet on their hands and knees."
"It would do you well to demonstrate some fellow feeling now and then," said Hermione, with a deep sigh. She got into the bed, taking care to not make contact with Tom, who hadn't given any indication that he was going to vacate her room.

Servants, though paid for their service, were still human beings, and deserved to be treated humanely. If there was one thing for which she couldn't fault Mrs. Riddle, it was the woman's belief in *noblesse oblige*. Of course, Mrs. Riddle approached it from a position of privilege, and even if her intentions were questionable, her actions—giving alms to the poor and patronage to the arts—still had merit.

"Well, if you insist," said Tom, slithering over to her side of the bed and giving her a strange, backwards hug. His arms held her so tight that her ribs creaked, and a few seconds later, his grip softened, and one hand lifted up to stroke her hair.

"How's this for fellow feeling?" he murmured.

"It's a decent attempt," said Hermione, closing her eyes.

It rained on the day they'd arranged to meet Nott.

From the breakfast table, Tom watched the gloomy sky with an equally gloomy expression, while his grandparents tucked obliviously into their breakfast. Mr. Riddle had his usual bacon and brown sauce butty, browsing through the financial pages of the *Yorkshire Post*, making the occasional comment to Mrs. Riddle about Parliament's new taxes or the rebuilding of Hull, a port city in the East Riding that had been bombed by the Germans several times over the last few years, resulting in hundreds killed and tens of thousands displaced to temporary shelters across the county.

"Mary, Parliament's raising the Purchase Tax," Mr. Riddle grumbled. 
"
*For the necessity of the war, and the transforming of our home economy, Britons have reduced demand for essential goods; we are heretofore obliged to reduce our consumption of inessential luxuries.*' Utter rubbish." Mr. Riddle slapped the newspaper onto the table. "This luxury tax is to include plate fees for civilian motorcars—hah, as if a man can find enough petrol to drive anywhere these days."

"I'm sure you can find some if you ask the right people," Mrs. Riddle assured him. "I do hope that tax won't be on the auction houses. I've asked Mr. Steadman to keep watch for any good jewels going at decent prices. They'll make a fine gift—and you know how I can't abide an empty trousseau."

Tom made his excuses as soon as he could, and Hermione followed, buttoning up her coat and ensuring her wand was within reach in the front pocket. Together, they crunched down the drive, side-stepping puddles of cloudy brown water, until they'd reached the gates at the foot of the hill. They ducked behind the stone pilings, green with moss, out of sight of the house, then reached for their wands.
The Disillusionment Charm was difficult to master until one had a proper grasp of the visualisation. It wouldn't work when one directed their intent to achieving complete invisibility; rather, one had to will themselves into being *unnoticed*—to fading into the shadows wherever they existed, and twisting the light to create shadows where there were none. Half of it was a re-direction of bystander attention, encouraging them to continue with their business, not stopping to remark on a peculiar shimmer in the air, or darkening of a well-lit room. The other half was the re-distribution of light: muting colours, blurring edges, refracting light so one's shape and silhouette became jumbled with one's surroundings.

Hermione had practised it often over the past year, but she still hadn't gotten used to the sensation of a successful casting, which felt like a cold tube of nit cream being squeezed over her head, a memory from her childhood that she didn't regard with much fondness. (There'd been a head lice epidemic going around her school when she was in Grade Three, and Hermione, having very thick hair, had had a worse time of it than her classmates. The treatment involved the application of a smelly scalp lotion and fine-combing each strand of hair for louse eggs, which had tested Mum's patience as much as it had Hermione's.)

She was still thinking about it when they reached the Little Hangleton graveyard at the bottom of the hill, off one side of the road that led down to the village.

It wouldn't have been a dreary, morbid place on any other day; as graveyards went, the Little Hangleton cemetery was neat and well-maintained, and by the fresh flower clippings on a few graves, it had seen recent visitors. The gravestones were laid in square clusters broken by shade trees dripping rain over stone benches, and in the centre of the cemetery was a stone-lined path that divided the simple granite markers on one side from the elaborate carved statues and mausoleum vaults on the other.

She drew her wand and reversed the Disillusionment Charm, casting a quick Warming Charm over her coat—it was difficult to maintain two spells at once. Scanning a row of stone markers, Hermione deduced that the markers bore villagers' names, so the other half of the graveyard had to be the Riddles'.

She was proven right when Tom suddenly veered off the path, passed under the wing of an angel in serene repose, and stopped at the front of a mausoleum, its gold-leafed double doors gleaming even in the dim light of a cloudy day. Built in a classical style, it had a pair of white marble nymphs on either side of the door, the left carrying a jug of water, and the right hefting a bundle of ripened grain. What had caught Tom's attention were the letters carved atop the lintel and foiled in gold: R I D D L E.

"*Thomas John Edward Riddle*," read Tom, his voice tight. "The angel over there is for another Thomas Riddle."

"What a bunch of unimaginative stiffs, eh?"

Before Hermione could speak a word, Tom had already drawn his wand.

A jet of scarlet streaked through the air, red light reflecting off the gilded doors, skimming off a nymph's bare white shoulder, before it was abruptly halted in mid-air by a dome of pale blue. Crackling with red sparks, the shield glowed for one, two, three seconds before it began to lose its radiance, then slowly, it faded away, just as a large chunk of stone dropped from the statue's side.

*Crack!*
White marble hit the floor of the mausoleum's stone portico, shattering into several pieces and a cloud of white dust.

A cloaked figure stepped out from behind the disfigured nymph, one gloved hand moving to push back a rain-dampened hood. Nott's face was revealed thus, a scowl on his face, and a mean-spirited comment already on his tongue.

"Now that was excessive." Nott paused, then added, "But I suppose it would be foolish to expect anything else from you, Riddle."

"Nott," said Tom in way of a greeting. His eyes darted to Nott's hands. "What's that you've got?"

In Nott's hand was his wand, the handle carved with budding branches; tucked under the other arm, partly concealed by the drape of his cloak, was a sealed glass apothecary jar, the type that Slughorn had lining the shelves of his classroom. Where Professor Slughorn's jars contained bits of dried tree bark or Billywig stingers, Nott's jar contained what looked like a severed human hand, an end of white bone peeking through the desiccated flesh and mottled grey skin at its truncated wrist. The yellowing nails of its fingers were curled around a stump of candle wax.

"A Hand of Glory!" said Tom, eagerly reaching for it. "Where did you find something like that?"

Nott jerked it out of Tom's reach. "Get your own!"

Hermione cleared her throat. "Can we get on with it, please? Tom and I have a good idea of what the creature in the Chamber is."

"Well?" said Nott, clutching the jar tightly to his chest and keeping a wary eye on Tom.

"It's a Cerberus, of course," said Tom.

Nott looked at him blankly. "Are... are you joshing me?"

Hermione rattled off a list of the evidence: "It has to be a creature capable of taking orders from a human master. As the story goes, Slytherin left the school and passed the information on opening the Chamber to his apprentices..."

When she finished, Nott had turned his blank stare not just to Tom, but to Hermione as well.

"It's hard to believe that there are people who have so many O.W.L.s between them, but not a lick of sense," said Nott.

"Excuse me!" Hermione protested. "What do you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I said," said Nott. "It's a snake. Slytherin's monster is a snake. Of course it's a bloody snake!"

"But that's so obvious," Tom interjected. "Isn't Slytherin supposed to be the most cunning of the four founders? What better way than this to make people think it's a snake, so they'd search for centuries, looking for a snake when there was never one in the first place."

Nott flicked a quick glance at Hermione. "Slytherin was also enormously grandiose."
"Here," said Nott, waving his wand over their feet and mumbling a few words; the wet stone hissed and a curtain of steam rose from the floor, leaving it warm and dry, if a little dusty from the broken shards of marble. Nott dropped to his knees, setting the hand-in-a-jar to the side, before spreading his cloak over the paving stones. He unbuckled the flap of the satchel he'd been wearing beneath his cloak, drawing out a leather folio; within it was a thick ream of parchment, which he laid out over the cloth, sheet by sheet.

A pall of uncertainty came upon her quickly, but just as quickly, it passed away, and Hermione was kneeling on the floor of the portico, casting *Lumos* so she could read the pages of hand-transcribed notes copied from the reference book Nott had stolen from the Hogwarts library.

She recognised his handwriting—she'd remarked on it the day he'd drafted a legal letter almost a year ago—on a summarised biography of Salazar Slytherin.

_Slytherin was a noted master of wandlore. The first trees planted on the Hogwarts grounds, which later became the Forbidden Forest, were a selection of native British wand woods: stout oak, hardy highland pine, supple willow, enduring yew, delicate beech, and resonant spruce. But Slytherin, who had carved wands for his newest students, those in possession of the qualities he espoused, would not make his own wand out of common wood. Being well-travelled, Slytherin carved his wand from a stave of Indian snakewood, a timber famed for its intricate and colourful endgrain, resembling the scale patterns of snake and lizard. His core, too, was also said to be unique. Not unicorn, of which one can purchase a spray of matched hairs from any huntmaster, but the forehorn of an enormous serpent that Slytherin encountered on his travels in the East..."

"See?" said Nott, pointing out the relevant paragraph. "The fellow was obsessed with snakes. They were his heraldic symbol, and he was proud of it. His pride was what got him banished from Hogwarts by the other founders—he wouldn't renounce his beliefs, not even when Gryffindor, his beloved friend, asked him to, a condition for staying on as a teacher."

"What's that?" Tom suddenly asked, picking one sheet from the bottom of the stack. The edges were curled, but Tom flattened them out to reveal a sketched image of a bald, bearded man clad in thickly embroidered robes, his flowing sleeves so long that their ends were cut off by the bottom of the paper.

Tom lit the tip of his wand, casting a soft yellow light over the finer details. The sketch was done in lead pencil, shaded in the manner of an engraving, with neat crosshatches to convey shadow and depth. As Hermione watched, the drawing shifted—it had been charmed into animation—and the bearded man blinked, his eyes dark and piercing under a pair of heavy grey brows. On his chest was a pendant hung from a chain, the pencil shadows wriggling and shifting to produce bright highlights on the inset jewels, a row of them curved in the shape of an S.

"That's Slytherin," said Nott. "If Slytherin built that hole in the girls' bathroom, then there might be a tapestry of him down there. It'll be sure proof that it's the Chamber of legend."

"The necklace he's wearing," Tom said. "What happened to it?"
"Necklace? That's Slytherin's locket," corrected Nott, lifting his nose. "Slytherin passed it down to his descendants, probably. I've made a few enquiries over the past week, while waiting for someone to write to me—" he sent a glare in Hermione's direction, "—and it went to auction years ago. It's now in the hands of a private collector."

"I want to see it in person," said Tom, raising his wand, the light glowing brighter as he held it to the page in his hands. In the picture, Slytherin winced and turned away, shading his eyes from the glare.

"Well, you're out of luck there," Nott replied, shrugging. "The collector doesn't offer public showings. Father's been asked to authenticate a few of her things over the years—he's an expert in wizarding heraldry, you see—but even he's never been shown the most valuable pieces in the collection, not with his own eyes. Just pictures. He's asked about buying them, and the old hag is only willing to trade them for artefacts of equal historical value."

"Equal value?" said Hermione. "What does that mean? Something from another founder, or something else that belonged to Slytherin?"

"The former, I'd imagine," said Nott. "Slytherin didn't own many famous artefacts. The Chamber, obviously, but it's not an artefact. The locket in the sketch. And his snakewood wand, which was lost in Ireland centuries ago. If the collector limited herself to things of Slytherin's, she'd never find out what treasures her rival collectors had hidden in their own collections."

"There are founders' artefacts at Hogwarts," Tom said, immersed in his own thoughts; he looked like he'd only vaguely followed the conversation between Nott and Hermione. "Dumbledore said that the Sorting Hat was Gryffindor's before he enchanted it. And the address quill—"

"The Quill of Acceptance," said Hermione.

"—Was enchanted by Rowena Ravenclaw," Tom finished.

"Merlin's staff, Riddle, are you really going there?" said Nott, his mouth gaping open in disbelief. "Every wizard and witch in Britain went to Hogwarts. I'll give you points for the audacity, but everyone and their mother will know where the Hat and the Quill came from if you nicked them. And don't forget that the Hat can talk."

"It was worth considering," Tom said stubbornly.

"And now that we've considered it and moved on," Hermione put in, "there's still the monster in the Chamber, and how we're going to get down there, fight it—or Stun it, preferably—then bring everything back up."

"I've a solution for that," Nott began, but the words died in his throat as a cone of harsh white light cut through the mist and hit him right in the face.

There was a crunch, crunch, scrape from the gravel path beyond the mausoleum, then a figure dragged itself out of the drizzle and roared at them.

"Damn children! This here's out of bounds for you damned little rascals! The constable will be told of this trespassin', you hear me, and so will the Riddles—let's see how much you like that!"

Frank Bryce, flatcap pulled low over his ears, brandished his walking stick at them. He had an electric torch in his free hand, and the blazing white beam swept past Nott's face, to Hermione's, then
"Miss Hermione! Master Tom!" Mr. Bryce sputtered, recognising their faces. "What're you lot doin' here, of all places?"

Nott nudged his Hand of Glory out of sight while Mr. Bryce was distracted.

"W-we were just going to," said Hermione, forcing herself not to look at the shrivelled hand in a jar, "um..."

"We're here to pay our respects to the dead," said Tom. "Did you know, Bryce, that my mother passed away giving birth to me? I'd wondered if it would be too bold of me to ask my grandmama about dedicating a plaque, a monument—something of that sort—to my mother. I'm told she was given a pauper's grave in London, and that no one around here liked her much... but wasn't she born here, in this village?"

Mr. Bryce lowered the torch, shifting uncomfortably on his walking stick. "She were a local girl indeed, sir."

"She was a northern girl," said Tom, nodding. "Grandpapa told me that northern blood ran thicker. And for all her faults, she was my mother and a Riddle."

"Right you are, sir," said Mr. Bryce. He scratched his jaw. "Er. When you're done here, Cook's got tea waitin' for you two up in the big house." He gave Nott a curious glance, eyes lingering on the fine wool of Nott's jumper, the starched collar of his shirt fastened with mother-of-pearl buttons, and the polish on the toes of his leather boots, which were, unlike Hermione's shoes, unfilmed by the white marble dust that had settled all over the floor. "I'll go up now and tell Mrs. Riddle to set an extra place at table for your little friend 'ere."

Nott blanched at that, while Tom held back a well-pleased smile, thanking Mr. Bryce for his hard work, taking such good care of the estate and so on, until Mr. Bryce ducked his head, his weathered cheeks flushed from the praise.

Together, they made short work of collecting the papers and returning them to the folio. Then Tom made to steer a clearly reluctant Nott past the gravestones and up the path to the top of the hill.

"What are you playing at, Riddle?" Nott snapped, jumping as Tom prodded him in the back with the point of his wand.

"I'm inviting you to luncheon," said Tom. "Muggles may be a barbaric lot, but some of them know a thing or two about cookery."

"Well, I respectfully decline your invitation," Nott replied, slipping his hand into his satchel.

"If you're looking for your wand, I've taken it," said Tom, lifting up the hem of his jumper. Sticking out of his trouser pocket was a carved handle of a medium brown wood, distinct from Tom's wand of white yew. Tom lowered his jumper back over it, smoothing out the wrinkles with the flat of his hand. "Now you'll be on equal terms with the Muggles."

"Granger, do something!" Nott hissed at Hermione, giving her a look of extreme alarm.

"The Riddles are... gracious hosts," said Hermione. "Don't worry, it won't be that bad."
Nott groaned and kicked the ground, causing pellets of gravel to fly out over the path. He groaned again as a chunk of gravel fell into a puddle and splashed his legs with muddy water.

Tom laughed. "An invitation to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Riddle is a great honour. If we're to be associates, Nott, then I suggest you adjust yourself to the idea."

Chapter End Notes

Post any typos you see, please!
Democracy

1944

Luncheon at the Riddle House was Tom's favourite meal of the day.

At breakfast, there was a buffet spread, allowing each person present to take as many slices of toast or bacon as they wanted. Luncheon, on the other hand, was served in proper courses, a level of refinement that elevated it above breakfast's humdrum assortment of bread and eggs and meat in a chafing dish. At the same time, lunch dispensed with the clutter of silver, porcelain, and crystal laid out on the table for each remove, a formality which stretched Sunday dinners past the ninety-minute mark. And yet, luncheon still distinguished itself above commoners' meals eaten by labourers in their canteens, the soldiers in their mess halls, or the students with their daily rations of National Milk.

It was the Riddle House that Nott found himself impelled to call on, convinced by Tom's argument, which was the most effective of all arguments: a show of overwhelming force.

It had been so easy. Nott and Hermione had been busy organising the papers, and Tom had seen the other boy's wand lying unattended; a quick shuffle, a silent Summons, and the wand had fallen into his possession. It had still been warm, the carved wooden ridges on the handle pleasing to his touch, and Tom wondered how it would feel to cast magic with it. His first trip to Diagon Alley, Tom had been told that wands chose their owners, but the ease to which this particular wand had come to him inclined him toward taking it as a meaningful portent.

Tom judged it a more diverting subject of consideration than listening to Nott air his complaints, first to him, then to Hermione.

"I..." said Nott, glancing uneasily at Tom, "I'm sure they're first-rate people, your Muggles. You needn't make an introduction; I trust your word that they're wonderful. In fact, I rescind every uncharitable comment I've made about them—"

"No need to go that far," said Tom.

"But it would be decent of you not to say that at the table," added Hermione. "And you should put your cloak in your bag. Muggles don't wear cloaks these days, unless they're spending the evening at the opera—and even that's limited to the people who can afford to buy a box seat."

"As an expert of Muggle things, Granger," said Nott, "shouldn't you be aware that inviting wizards into Muggle domiciles is a potential breach of the Statute?"

"It's a grey area," Hermione replied. "And you can't perform any magic, so that's the main issue sorted. Just don't mention magic, or call them Muggles, and there's no harm done."

"Except to my dignity," muttered Nott.

"You're better off without it," said Tom in a reassuring voice, but the smile he gave Nott was anything but. "Lestrange and Avery do perfectly well without."

"Lestrange and Avery are a pair of clods with not an original thought between them," Nott said,
"They think the days in winter are shorter because the sun moves faster."

"Their Astronomy essays really are quite riveting, aren't they?" asked Tom. "But I do admit to appreciating their... simplicity. They do what they're told, and they don't ask questions. It's a valuable attribute wherever it can be found." He looked pointedly at Nott. "If only it could be found more often."

"Tom," said Hermione. "You can't mean that, surely?"

"Well, we wouldn't be in this situation if Nott here had kept to his own affairs," said Tom, "instead of minding other people's."

"You'd have never found the Chamber if not for me," Nott protested.

"If not for me, you'd have never got it open," said Tom. "You ought to be more grateful."

"And you," Nott said, "ought to be more—"

"Civil," Hermione finished. "For someone who has so much criticism for the vulgar and barbaric, you're hardly a model of virtue yourself."

"So long as you remember your pleases and thank yous, I don't care whom you choose to criticise. You may find that I'm not unreasonable," said Tom, giving Nott a hard look. "Within reason, of course."

With that, Tom herded Nott up the stairs to the front door of the Riddle House, before ringing the doorbell and waiting for the maid to let them in. Nott, his hands shoved into his pockets, shivered as a chill breeze rolled in, heavy with a damp mist that had risen in the morning and had not yet been burned away by the noon sun. With a solicitous glance at Hermione, Tom cast a Warming Charm over her coat, then another at his own.

Nott cleared his throat.

"If you're thirsty, I can have the maid bring you a glass of water," said Tom.

The door opened, and the maid took his and Hermione's coats, but not Nott's. Nott had stowed his cloak in his satchel, and only had on a thin shirt of cream linen under a woollen jumper with an odd metallic sheen to the fibres. Tom gave him a quick inspection; Nott wore a gaudy gold signet ring on his right hand and his trousers had cords lacing up each side of the leg, but nothing about the boy gave him away as obviously magical. Eccentric, yes, not magical. Deprived of his wand, Nott couldn't perform magic, so in that regard he was no different to a Muggle. Tom was pleased to think of Nott, thus disarmed, as half a wizard.

(Tom, on the other hand, had magical abilities that did not depend on a wand. He could sense untruths and compel weaker minds to bow under his will, and had been doing so before he'd even visited Mr. Ollivander's wand shop. With or without his wand, Tom knew he was a wizard.)

Mr. and Mrs. Riddle had already been seated when the maid ushered them into the dining room, announcing their presence at the door, in order of precedence.

"Master Tom, Miss Hermione, and... a friend of theirs. No name given, sir, marm," said Frances, the first housemaid, with a little bob of her head. "I'll bring the soup out in a jiff—broth of chicken,
celery, and fennel, with prawns in cream sauce on toast."

The Riddles were seated at opposite ends of the rectangular table. When the door closed behind the maid, Mrs. Riddle rose from her seat, her thin-lipped expression somehow disapproving without her having to utter a single word. She gestured grandly to the place settings in the centre of the table, Tom and Hermione's usual seats. Today, there was a point of difference: an extra seat opposite theirs, for a total of five settings at the table.

"Tom, Hermione," said Mrs. Riddle, with the slightest incline of her head. Her eyes lingered on the third member of their party, Nott, before she asked, "And who might this be?"

There was a minor inflection of curiosity to her speech, but Tom doubted that it was an indication of pleasant surprise, as one would make when presented with flowers by an anonymous admirer. Rather, it was the lift in intonation one would hear from a physician, speaking the dreaded words, "Good gracious, now what's this?"

Nott wasn't cowed. He lifted his chin and approached the table with purposeful strides, his shoulders squared and his hands held behind his back in proper genteel form. Although he knew its intention was to be proper and courtly, such a display on Nott's scrawny figure put Tom in mind of lakeshore birds with their stilt-like legs and stiff necks, preying on the undergrown tadpoles, the mud-grubbing amphibians. They flapped their wings and joggled their feathered crests, comparing who out of the flock was the largest or the most flamboyant. They weren't starlings, but they were scarcely any better, for the entirety of their existence was dictated to them by a greater external force: the turning of the season, the ebb and flow of the tides, the trophic cycles of lesser creatures on which their livelihoods depended.

"Sir, Madam," said Nott giving them a shallow bow followed by an elegant flourish. The only discernible sign of agitation was the slow clenching of Nott's right hand, and the slide of his thumb over the bezelled face of his family ring, visible to Tom standing behind the other boy, but not Mrs. Riddle at the table. "If I may introduce myself? I am Theodore Erasmus Nott, of Broxtowe Abbey, in Nottinghamshire."

"And how, exactly," said Mrs. Riddle, a faint line forming between her brows as she struggled to place the name in her mental register of notable families, "did you come into the acquaintance of my grandson?"

"We attend the same school," said Nott.

"This must be Professor Dumberton's charity school, yes?"

Nott's head jerked to the side, but he caught himself before he could give Tom a Look. "Some people might have the misfortune of being charity students, but the school itself is not a charity school. My father attended, and his father before him; his brother served on the Board of Governors. Every single one of them attended on merit and legacy, not on the sufferance of the public purse."

"I see," said Mrs. Riddle. "And what does this school happen to teach so many generations of your family?"

"The same thing it teaches your grandson and Miss Granger," Nott retorted. "The classics, of course. History, languages, arithmetic, and natural philosophy."
"No sports?"

"Strictly voluntary, Madam," said Nott. "The school is in northern Scotland, and attended by both sexes."

"Hmph." Mrs. Riddle smoothed out her skirt before lowering herself back to her seat. "Very well. I see, then, that Tommy owes me an explanation as to why he comes to us for the holidays looking so peaky and unhealthily pale. I had assumed that Dumberton chose not to involve himself with the health of his students—but perhaps I have been, however regretfully, misinformed."

When Tom pulled out Hermione's chair and helped her to her seat, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Nott mouth the word "Tommy", a faint smirk dimpling the flesh of his cheek.

Tom aimed a mild Stinging Jinx to his thigh, under the table, and all signs of amusement quickly disappeared.

The dishes arrived not long after, a steaming tureen of soup and a loaf of bread in a covered basket, rolled in on a serving trolley and sliced at the sideboard by the maid. Mrs. Riddle requested her portion of bread be cut into paper thin slices, while she made sure Tom got the thickest pieces, maintaining a vigilant watch on him and refusing to signal for the next course until she was sure he'd finished every bite. The first course was followed by a poached bream, its skin scored with lines and packed with thin rounds of lemon, then by a breast of duck with chestnut-stuffed artichokes, and finally, a sweet flan poured over with a thick toffee syrup.

Over the course of their meal, Nott presented no complaint about the fact that his food had been cooked and served by Muggles, who, by his standards, barely qualified as human. Not that he was afforded an opportunity, as Mrs. Riddle interrogated him so thoroughly that his contributions to the conversation were limited to answers to a never-ending stream of questions.

*What was his best subject at school?*

"British history. I have a more than passing familiarity with the histories of England and Wales, though less with Scotland and Ireland."

*What was his sport of choice?*

"My father keeps a cote of falcons on our estate. We fly them on clear days; Mother much prefers how sedate it is, compared to the noise and fuss of coursing with hounds."

*Was he a patron of the theatre?*

"I rarely have a chance, except when one of the professors at our school puts on a student production—but it's all amateur, so they're never any good. But I did see *Le Chevalier Vert* with my mother last week, and having seen it before, was not disappointed by the performance of the second-chair understudies."

All of Nott's answers seemed to pass muster, but Mrs. Riddle didn't let up on him until she drew out the most important question during the consumption of their very sticky dessert pudding.

"And what do your parents do? Your father, your mother?"

Hermione coughed on a spoonful of flan. Hastily, she patted a napkin over her lips before turning to
Tom’s grandmother. "Mrs. Riddle, surely this line of discussion is more suitable for a vocational interview than a—a luncheon!"

"Hermione, my darling, when it comes to first impressions, one has a duty to present themselves to their greatest advantage," said Mrs. Riddle coolly. "And it is the duty of a good host to ensure that their guests are given the latitude to present themselves advantageously. Did you not think that you and dearest Helen were not given such an opportunity when we were first introduced in London?"

Mrs. Riddle took a long sip from her glass then set it down firmly; without a word, the maid at the sideboard scurried over to refill it. "Of course you were. And of course I found you satisfactory, else you would not be sitting here today, enjoying such an extension of my family’s hospitality."

At this, Tom gave a start; his fork clattered against the last scrapes of custard on his plate.

"Grandmama, I beg your pardon, but Hermione is here, first and foremost, because I invited her. Your leave and your hospitality, though appreciated, weren't necessary," he spoke in a forceful voice, his words taking on a hollow, echoing resonance that made Nott sit up and watch him eagerly. "And with all respect, I take offense to the notion that she's to be treated as an outsider, generously treated or not, when you've not known her for much longer than you've known me. I consider her to be my family as much you and Grandpapa are. Perhaps not in official terms—but just as easily as you found it, I, too, can find a form to sign and a witness to watch me."

"Tom!" breathed Mrs. Riddle, struck suddenly speechless. She clapped a hand across her mouth and glanced over to Mr. Riddle, then back to Tom, her eyes glistening with emotion. "If you really mean it, that is wonderful to hear!"

"Hear, hear," said Nott, setting aside his cutlery to clap his hands together in glee. "Well done, Riddle." His gaze darted over the table, to Hermione on the other side. "I can foresee a gay old time in trying to take that back, now that we've all heard it."

"Now listen here, lad," said Mr. Riddle to Nott, speaking up for the first time, "a gentleman who fails to honour his word becomes known to others as a scoundrel, and rightly so. If he takes action, then renounces it, he not only earns the reputation of a scoundrel, but renders himself a lesser man." To Tom, he said, "If you are to act, my boy, then think carefully before you do so. I won't have another scandal brought under my roof; it was only by His providence that your mother passed before your father could bring her here, and install her in my house." He jabbed an insistent finger to the crisp white tablecloth. "At least he had the common sense and the decency to make it lawful."

"I'm very fortunate to have more sense than he does," Tom declared. "If there was any whiff of a scandal, Grandpapa, let me assure you that its source would never lie with me." He leaned over to Hermione and brushed his leg against hers under the table, making her jump and splash water over the tablecloth. "At least he had the common sense and the decency to make it lawful."

Mrs. Riddle gave a high, tinkling laugh, before saying, "Oh, this is tremendously exciting. I suppose I'll have to smarten up one of the extra bedrooms—we can't have Hermione living in a guest room if she's to be family. And you, Theodore,"—Nott made a face at this display of familiarity—"When you go back up to Scotland, if Tommy is so hasty as to ask you to stand as his witness, I expect that you'll cable us a copy of the certificate. I won't have the announcement broken to us in The Post!"

"'Cable'?” said Nott in a weak voice.

"There must be a telegram office in the nearest town," said Mrs. Riddle. "Professor Dumberton sent me a slip to sign so Tommy could take day trips to the village by the school. Even the smallest
"outpost ought to have a wire service of some sort."

"That won't be necessary, Mrs. Riddle!" said Hermione quickly. "There's no need to rush things. After all, no one's made any decisions yet—if there's even a decision to be made."

"Of course there isn't," said Mrs. Riddle, brushing aside any shred of doubt. "Tommy likes you, that's clear to see. He's high-strung—he got that, I'm certain, from his father's side of the family—but you're level-headed and know just how to settle his nerves. You'll do well together. I know these things, my dear; I've been married for forty years."

"You see, Hermione?" Tom said. "How can something be a bad idea if everyone agrees with it?"

Nott gave an emphatic cough, but Tom ignored him, and continued, "I've always said that it's never too early to start planning for the future. Well, when is a better time to start than right now?"

Hermione sent a bewildered glance at Mrs. Riddle, Tom, then Nott, who had covered his mouth with his glass to hide his cackling. "There's a difference between planning things out and *rushing* them, Tom."

"Oh, I agree," said Tom amiably. "There's no rush; we still have a whole year of school left to go."

Hermione was struck speechless by this astute observation, and for the rest of their meal, could venture no other compelling opposition to his argument. Tom was pleased by this; at last Hermione was beginning to see sense. His grandmother had seen it first, and although he had initially thought it a silly scheme of hers, he had eventually come around to the light, once he'd had the time to consider its less obvious advantages. Soon it would be Hermione's turn to admit that there was no other future but one where they would enjoy each other's company, commit to each other's goals, and relish each other's success. They already did these things now, so what was so difficult about extending that into the far distant future?

They were only months from reaching eighteen years of age, a year from finishing their educations, and this would be the true start to their adult independence, which would last well over a hundred years and more, if Tom's estimation of wizarding lifespans was correct. From a young age, Tom had wanted his adulthood to be the fulfillment of certain expectations: greatness, renown, knowledge, and power. But now, he also wanted Hermione to have these things. He wanted her to affirm his greatness, share his knowledge, and bolster his power; he could not imagine a future where he had reached the pinnacle of his triumph—earned his laurels, as it were—and forgotten how he had gotten there in the first place: with a book about the Emperor of Europe and a discussion on the principles of political philosophy.

There was a sense of nauseating sentimentality about it all, but upon further consideration, Tom did not think such an indulgence was overly detrimental. He knew he was powerful and had the capability of attaining his goals without aid or assistance, but it wasn't an inherently bad thing to want something that *enhanced* the power he knew he possessed, helped him reach attainment faster than he could have gotten it alone.

And thinking deeply about it, Tom was reminded of how he'd been matched with his wand, an object that he considered an extension of himself from the very day it had come into his possession.
It had been the day after Dumbledore's visit to Wool's, and the delivery of Tom's Hogwarts letter. Supplies list in hand, Tom had visited the shops of Diagon Alley, and leaving each one, he'd counted and re-counted the dwindling supply of coins in the small drawstring pouch Dumbledore had left him along with the train ticket. The proprietor of the second-hand shonky shop had, at Tom's request, picked out a pair of dragon gloves for Herbology so old that the scale ridges on the palm had been worn smooth, and a battered folding telescope with a creaky brass stand for Astronomy, choosing the best out of the lot after a circumspect glance at Tom's money pouch, stamped with the Hogwarts crest, foiled gold on purple velvet.

"Sir," Tom had asked, after another peek at his supply list, "do you sell wands here? It's the dearest item on the list, and for that price, I could buy another seven or eight used spellbooks!"

Indeed, the ingredients from the apothecary, little paper twists of dried herbs and scarab wings, had cost him knuts, and the second-hand uniforms he'd paid for in sickles. But unlike the bookshop or the clothier, there weren't other shops that sold cheaper versions for less. There was only one shop in the whole of Diagon Alley that had wands in the window, and the labels pinned to the sides of the boxes had shown him their prices: four galleons and two sickles, five galleons and ten, all the way up to fifteen galleons for a worn wooden box on the topmost shelf in a dingy back corner.

"You're a new one to this, aren't you, boy?" said the shopkeeper, from where he'd been wrestling with a stack of wire potion racks; they had somehow merged into a single rusty knot of flaking metal. "A wand's matched to a wizard, the same as a pair of spectacles to the wearer." He tapped one grubby finger to the side of his nose, where a pair of round lenses in a tortoiseshell frame was clipped to the bridge. "A wizard can win and wield another man's wand, but he'll never be as strong with it, as precise with it, as he'll be with the wand that chose him. A good wand, y' see, recognises the hand of the wizard that owns it, no matter who's holding it at the moment. And a great one, boy, is loyal to that wizard—to the day he dies and past that, even. Where a wizard goes, his wand goes too, and if he's lucky, a tree will sprout over his bones and stand guard over him for the next thousand years."

The shopkeeper shrugged, dusting his hands off on his leather apron, then added, "Course, you have some folks keeping an old granddad's wand for the memories, but between you an' me, it's because they couldn't cough up the gold for a portrait to remember him by. But hear me, boy, if you're startin' school in September, you can do without a sparkling new cauldron or a hand-fitted robe—a leggy lad like you will grow out of it by Christmas, I'll wager—but the wand you buy today will last you the rest of your life."

At the end of the day, Tom wandered into the wand shop, somewhat reluctantly. His pockets were loaded down with shrunken parcels, his velvet money pouch empty but for a handful of gold coins. He'd been loath to part with them, after turfing out the silver and bronze pieces earlier; this gold was the first he'd ever held in all of his eleven-and-a-half years of life—he'd seen gold sovereigns a few times, and that was only at a distance, in the hands of well-heeled shoppers on Oxford or Piccadilly Street. Until now, he had never expected to have his own gold, heavy yellow circles that shone like little suns, minted with the face of a grinning goblin clasping a set of scales.

The shopkeeper's words lingered in the forefront of Tom's thoughts. He knew he could perform magic without a wand; he'd been doing it for years, and Dumbledore had confirmed that Tom's ability to sense thoughts and intentions was magical in nature, if so rare that it wasn't taught at Hogwarts. (Tom had taken this to mean that because it wasn't in the magical Defense class, few wizards had learned to protect themselves against it.)

Did he even need a wand?
"A wand and a wizard are one, Mr. Riddle," said the wrinkly shopkeeper in the wand shop, his pale eyes bright in the gloom of late afternoon, charmed measuring tapes whisking around the edges of Tom's vision. He hadn't explained how or why he knew Tom's name. "This wand, I think—" he opened the lid of a box, longer than the others Tom had tried, containing a wand of white wood that tapered to a sharp point, "—was always meant for you. Here, Mr. Riddle, take it!"

Tom had reached for it, expecting it to burst in his hand like a Catherine wheel, or spew putrid smoke like the past half-dozen wands, but this wand felt hot to the touch, and when he held it aloft, a blaze of glowing orange droplets erupted from the end, forming the shape of a stooping bird with angled wings and a brilliant plumed tail. For a second or two, Tom watched with rapt eyes, the wand warming his hand like a tin cup of hot milk pressed to his chilled flesh after a long walk back from an early morning Sunday service. Then the shape broke into flickering sparks that dissolved altogether, searing an afterimage of blue and violet beneath his eyelids.

"See? A wizard needs no wand to be magical, but even the best wizard cannot perform all feats of magic without one," said Mr. Ollivander, cutting brown paper and string to wrap what he'd deemed a sure sale. "And this wand in particular is a powerful one—powerfully temperamental. How could it not be, bearing a core of phoenix feather? Phoenixes are exceptionally rare and, out of all magical species, possess the most remarkable abilities."

"So it's true, then?" said Tom, who'd spent the first half of his day browsing the shelves of the bookshop, skimming through as many as books he could, for as long as the shopkeeper could count him a legitimate customer. "Phoenixes can live forever?"

"It would be more accurate to say that they live and die forever, Mr. Riddle," Ollivander said, correcting him. "But in the end, it is still nothing more than another name for eternity."

"I'll take it," Tom said, holding his new wand to the light and admiring the shape of its carved handle. He nodded at the roll of brown paper on the front counter. "Don't bother wrapping it up for me."

That wand had never left Tom's side from the day he'd gotten it. He kept it tucked into his waistband when eating meals in the orphanage dining hall, not trusting the other children to keep out of his room when he wasn't in it. He'd taught them long ago not to touch his things, but some of them might be tempted to open his door and look at his shelf of books, or the glossy theatre programme he'd propped up on the windowsill, because they were under the false assumption that it was alright to look as long as one refrained from touch. (They were, of course, mistaken.)

That wand, his wand, had chosen him.

The shopkeeper said that it was meant for him.

Those words never left Tom, and they reaffirmed his belief that Great Things were destined for him. And Great Things, he'd found, were more valuable than gold, or the dignity that an eleven-year-old boy in threadbare broadcloth thought he had. No, taking the wand didn't cheapen his magical abilities; he wasn't lessened—not in anything but the financial sense. He came to a swift conclusion: there was more to one's wherewithal than the weight of one's purse.
There was value, he saw, in Hermione Granger, who at some point—somehow—had become more than an overzealous little girl with too much hair and too many opinions. He'd recognised value, too, in the idea of companionship, the day he had watched a shoebox burn on a frozen lake. The night he'd watched a dog bleed out on his father's bedroom carpet, he had tasted the fruit of cultivated loyalty, and its flavour was metallic and bitter, rich with iron and a tincture of valerian.

And there was value, he admitted to himself, in Nott—a nuisance, a pest, an unwilling ally who had to be sworn into conditional loyalty, instead of offering his loyalty by principle. Tom would not go so far as to admit that Nott had... well, saved his life, but for all that he could alter the facts of reality to suit his needs, he couldn't deny that Nott had facilitated Tom's transfer to St. Mungo's during The Incident on New Year's Day. Nott had been the one—somehow—to discover the location of the Chamber of Secrets, and although this act had proven his usefulness, Tom's initial judgement had not altered: Nott was a scheming opportunist to the core, and required constant reinforcement of his relative standing to Tom Riddle and Hermione Granger if a productive relationship was meant to be maintained between the three of them.

After lunch, Tom and his "little friends", a charming moniker bestowed by his grandparents, retreated to the Riddle House's library.

The library was a room overlooking the back gardens, furnished in shades of brown. The furniture was of brown leather, the wallpaper striped brown, the shelves brown wood, and were ostensibly dedicated to holding the books collected by generations of Riddles, but had over the years become a repository of souvenirs and various trinkets. The Riddles had thought these things too nice—or too costly—to store in the attic without being seen, and yet, they must have lacked a certain personal appeal, for they had ended up in the library and not on display in the Riddles' living quarters.

From the spaces in between the towering bookshelves hung a series of travellers' trophies: a pair of curly antelope horns mounted on a wooden plaque; a Xhosa tribesman's cowhide war shield, six feet long from top to bottom; a black regimental banner with a tasselled trim; a cavalry sabre with a gold-plated handle, its matching scabbard etched with the name of its owner, T. RIDDLE. And other objects of uncertain provenance: a vase of blown glass flowers, each petal a twisted striation of colour; whimsical pillboxes in the shapes of eggs and sleeping cats and cuckoo clocks; little caskets of worked gold that contained corked vials and cloth sachets of a mysterious powdery substance—

"Don't touch that!" said Hermione, tugging on his elbow.

Tom pulled his hand back from the little bag. "Why not? This isn't a museum—it's my family's private collection. I can touch them if I want to."

"Those are reliquaries!" Hermione said, pointing at a cross design on one casket, and a hand with a hole punched through the centre of the palm on another. "They're used to hold body parts of saints and martyrs. They might not be from a real saint, since one person's finger bone looks the same as everyone else's, but most of the time, they were real parts!"

"Alright, Hermione," said Tom. "If you're so worried about it, I'll make sure to wash my hands before touching you."

"That is a complete mis-interpretation of my words, Tom."

"Oh, Hermione," Tom said indulgently, patting her on the shoulder. "I know you well enough to know what you mean."
"Muggles are allowed to keep these things in their houses?" asked Nott, setting his satchel down on a leather sofa and coming over to look at the display cabinet, a hinged glass case over a row of baize-lined shelves. "How fascinating. Last decade, a group in the Wizengamot tried to outlaw the possession of human parts in private collections, because they thought that kind of thing reeked of dark magic." Nott gave a loud scoff. "Obviously, they were voted down. Most families have a few questionable items in their cellars, even if they were never going to see use. A new law would have forced them to surrender their collections for Ministry inspection, and it would have been a bad look for everyone."

"'Questionable items',' said Hermione in a sceptical tone. "You mean, something like your Hand of Glory?"

"It's not illegal, so you'll get no credit for reporting me, Granger. And before you can object to it on, ah, moral grounds," said Nott, giving Hermione a pointed look, "the donor wasn't slaughtered for his parts. He was a Muggle murderer hanged by other Muggles for his crimes, so there's no defending him from that angle."

"You know how to make a Hand of Glory?" Tom asked Nott, trying not to seem too interested.

"Only theoretically, but I know more than most, I'd say," said Nott, his narrow chest swelling with the delight of being the sole person in the room to know something. "It's somewhat of a lost art these days. First, you've got to find the right donor. It can be either wizard or Muggle, but it can't be just anyone, you see. The donor has to be a criminal, sentenced to death, and the hand has to be cut at night. I've read that it works best if you harvest the 'guilty hand', that is, the hand that committed the deed—"

Hermione cleared her throat loudly.

"Go on," said Tom, leaning forward in one of the library's brown leather Chesterfield sofas. "How do you know which hand did the deed? It's not like the, hm, subject will tell you what he did and how he did it, since he's already dead."

"Well, I'd say the sensible thing to do is to take both," Nott answered, after a few seconds of careful deliberation. "Can't do any harm, can it? There are only so many people sentenced to death by hanging, and both hands should work if you prepare them correctly, with the right ratios of pickling solution, and so on. The only difference is that one hand will be brighter than the other—but Hands of Glory are so rare that it'd be worth it to make two, then sell the one you don't want for a tidy sum."

"Is that how you got yours?" Tom said. "Where did you get it?"

"Father knows a man who's an acquirer by trade," said Nott casually. "Mr. Caractacus Burke—he owns a shop off Diagon Alley. His son, Herbert, went to school with Father and they're old friends—cousins, too, though the Burkes are closer to the Blacks than us, after Mr. Herbert got married to an aunt of Lucretia and Orion. He's how Father gets his hands on interesting items that the Ministry inspectors and the DMLE are strict on. They'll look the other way if you're bringing in skins and talons from wild dragons and your papers are dodgy, but they come down hard on anything that makes them look bad. And for the most part, after the Confederation began enforcing a clearer separation between our two worlds, it's been enchanted Muggle things."

"Yes, I wonder why," said Hermione, closing the lids of the reliquary caskets and wiping her hands off on her skirt. "If I can't make an argument on moral grounds, can I at least comment on the lack of
hygiene?"

"Don't be silly, Hermione," Tom replied. "Wizards can't catch illnesses easily, and even if they do, all they have to do is drink a potion to be cured."

"He's right," Nott said. "If you're dealing in magical meats, what you really ought to watch out for is the grave wards. There's a reason why wizards go after Muggle parts instead of other wizards'." Nott reached for his satchel, but he stopped before lifting up the flap. "On the subject of the Statute, if you two are willing to break a rule or two for the sake of a good lunch, then I suppose there's no reason why I can't show you this..."

"What is it?" asked Tom.

"Have you made sure the Muggles can't get in?" said Nott, glancing at the door. "The old biddy, your grandmother—she seemed awfully interested in what you and Granger got up to behind closed doors. For a moment there, I think I almost felt sorry for you."

"I'm sure she knows that Tom and I aren't interested in whatever she thinks we're interested in," Hermione interjected, folding her arms. "We've been discussing the Chamber in private, that's all."

"She sounded too eager to rush you and Riddle into your marriage vows," said Nott, shrugging. "Though I don't quite understand it, personally. If she's worried about you two besmirching each other's reputations—and hers—why hasn't she gotten Granger's parents to arrange a betrothal? If you've an established arrangement, you can have all the fondling you want, and if anyone tries to condemn your behaviour, it will only be for your impatience, not your dissolution. After all, no one can complain about the goods being spoilt when they've already been bought."

Hermione's mouth fell open. "I've never heard such an archaic opinion about marriage!"

"But everyone thinks that," said Nott, blinking at her in disbelief. "What, Granger, you thought marriage was a tender union of love and romance?"

"Well, I'd very much like it to be," Hermione replied. "But do you mean to say that your parents don't love each other?"

"I certainly don't expect them to," said Nott, sounding unruffled despite the direction taken by their conversation. "My mother married my father because her father told her to. And Father married Mother because it was a duty expected of him. But he put it off as long as he could, so when he took his vows, he was well past fifty years old."

"And you..." Hermione ventured in a tremulous voice, "don't expect to marry someone you love? That if you do marry, it'll be out of duty and nothing else?"

"I will marry one day," said Nott impatiently, "and it will be out of duty. I don't see why you sound so upset—it's not as if I'm marrying you."

"I don't see why you aren't more upset," Tom remarked. "Since you'll be marrying someone you won't particularly care for, who is more than likely also your cousin."

"As I plan on waiting as long as I can—instead of jumping into it right after Hogwarts—I'll have decades to get used to the idea," said Nott. "And the benefit in generations of good matches is the eventual prospect of a flush inheritance: vaults of gold and an estate from both sides of the family. 
A wealthy husband and wife will never have to see or speak to each other if they so choose."

"A worthwhile use of a wizard's lifespan," said Tom. "But, obviously, I'm not one to judge a man's tastes."

"It'd be poor form to judge my inclinations," agreed Nott, "when you're the one who wants to spend the rest of your life with Granger."

Tom had spent most of his life in Hermione's company—it would be nine years this December—and he could not imagine a life where he hadn't known her. Where would he be; who would he be, without her? Likely sitting on his creaky bed in London, counting the hours until the matron served the next meal. Counting the days until he could return to Hogwarts, while looking forward to tea with Dumbledore and dinner with Slughorn—it was only natural that a man's standards would plummet when he ate porridge two meals out of three, and his conversational partners were limited to a drunken matron and a handful of spotty-faced, barely literate orphans.

(For a brief half-second, Tom wondered where Hermione would be without him. In her parents' home in London, perhaps. Or evacuated to the countryside; Mrs. Granger had mentioned taking Hermione away to Northamptonshire when the German air raids had been at their fiercest. Or even, and Tom felt disgusted even contemplating this, in the company of a bland Muggle suitor, a milksop of a modern gentleman, who called her 'Mione' and believed all her little lies about 'magical' housework skills that enabled her to stretch a single loaf of bread over a week's worth of meals. This thought turned Tom's stomach. He could scarcely believe that once, a mere half year ago, he'd thought nothing of allowing Hermione a Muggle husband to keep house for her, as long as she was available to act as his Foil. Now, after deciding that she was to be his Helpmeet, such a thought was... unthinkable.)

"I happen to enjoy Hermione's company," said Tom. "And since you're here, in her presence, it appears to me that you're easily capable of overlooking your objections. I can't recall you ever being this lenient toward, say, Walburga Black. Isn't she exactly the type of witch who would best fulfill your marital duties?"

Walburga Black was a girl in the year above them, and it was she who made Tom grateful that both he and Hermione were single children. Walburga, the second child of three, exemplified every unfortunate truism about middle-born children, in her attempts to distinguish herself from the pack of cousins and siblings competing for Professor Slughorn's favour and special privileges. The problem lay in Walburga's lacking Alphard's confidence and affability. (Alphard was the oldest out of all the Black cousins at Hogwarts; he'd graduated a year or two ago, and had taken up the traditional "bludge spot" in the Ministry's Department of Games and Sports.) Walburga also had none of Cygnus' guileless modesty. Cygnus Black was the baby of the family, a Third Year who'd made himself likeable in the Duelling Club because he never pretended to be more knowledgeable or talented than he was, solely on the basis of his family name.

It was thus that most members of Slytherin House, and not just the friendless hermits like Nott, politely abstained themselves of Walburga Black's presence, unless they were given no other choice. At least Nott, whom no one in Slytherin particularly liked, knew he was unlikeable. When he was ill-behaved, he did it on purpose; he acted in full comprehension of his behaviour and how he would be received by others. It was not so easy to deal with someone whose behaviour came from an absence of self-awareness; Tom could tolerate spite, but ignorance was another matter entirely.

"Walburga Black's not my duty," said Nott. "She's already been spoken for."
"What!" Hermione cried. "Someone wants to marry Walburga? I'm surprised I never heard her bragging in the girls' bathrooms about it. I always thought she spent half her time between classes in there talking about herself—or other people."

"There's nothing to brag about," Nott said. "The match is to Orion Black."

"Aren't they cousins?" said Hermione, sounding appalled. "I know all purebloods are related to one another, but this is a bit too far, isn't it?"

"Don't worry," Nott said, not concerned over the deepening colour of Hermione's cheeks; she was restraining herself from using the one specific term that she clearly wanted to say: inbreeding. "They're only second cousins."

"Second cousins makes it alright, then," said Tom, who was tiring of the conversation. He considered his future plans significant and important, but other people talking about theirs was just... gossip. Therefore, not worth his time. "If there's nothing further to discuss on the subject of consanguinity, can we proceed to what we came here to do?" He turned to Nott. "You said you were going to show us something."

"You've made sure that the door's locked?" Nott asked. At Tom's impatient gesture, Nott sighed, then slowly reached for the buckle closure on his satchel, taking so much time to undo the strap that Tom sighed and drew his wand, sketching out the beginning of the twist and jab movement of a Stinging Jinx.

His plan was impeded by Hermione jumping in front of him before he could cast the spell, gasping, "Oh, I've never seen one before! Is that real—?"

Out of his bag, Nott had taken out what appeared to be a folded lap blanket, which looked not dissimilar to one that the maids had laid on the foot of Tom's bed during his Christmas stay, intended to keep his toes warm during cold winter nights. He hadn't needed it since he could cast a charm or two, and in early January, Hermione had conveniently provided a secondary source of warmth when she'd stayed to listen to the wireless in the evening.

Nott's blanket, however, was of an unusual design: rich gold threads shot through a field of brown and rusty red, intricately woven into a Moorish pattern of tessellated stars around an arrow-shaped central motif. After Hermione unfolded it and began running her hands over the fabric, admiring it to Nott's visible satisfaction, Tom saw that its dimensions were not much greater than two feet wide and four feet long. Smaller than his bedroom lap blanket, which was thicker, and made of quilted wool padding inside an embroidered coverlet.

"You were worried about Muggles seeing your blanket?" said Tom in a snide voice.

"It's not just a blanket," Hermione said breathily, stroking the blanket. To his horror, she picked it up and rubbed it against her cheek. "Oh! I think I can feel it! Remarkable!"

"Hermione, you don't know where that's been," said Tom, taking up one edge of the blanket and tugging it away from her. "For all we know, Nott's spent years rubbing his feet on it..."

There was a strange resistance preventing him from removing the blanket from Hermione's hands, and it was even stranger when the blanket began to tug back, first softly, then harder, until Tom was holding on with only the tips of his fingers, wound around the knotted yarn cords at the edge. The blanket had silently risen a foot above his head, and it was still rising—
He slid his hand down to his pocket; Nott's wand was still there, as was his own. Tom whipped his head around, but Nott was still sitting on the sofa, his hands in his lap, looking rather pleased. He hadn't moved, spoken, and there was no indication that he'd done anything suspicious in the last minute or so.

"The enchantment is so smooth. Not even a hitch," Hermione sighed, looking up at the floating blanket. She glanced over at Nott. "Are you certain you can fit three people on it? I read that the top brooms have trouble with more than two."

"Racing brooms are optimised for steering and manoeuvrability, not lift," said Nott. "You could enchant one to carry five, but it comes at a cost of being blown off course in a mild breeze. Flying carpets, on the other hand, are built for a smooth ride. Father bought this one for Mother when she'd gotten too heavy to go up and down the stairs, and the midwife told her that it was dangerous to Apparate."

"Why are they against the rules?" Hermione asked. "They seem useful for wizards and witches in fragile health."

"The Ministry's started to come down on enchanted objects of Muggle origin," said Nott. "Although it's not a matter of ethics as much as it is about gold. If they put an embargo on artefacts of foreign make, they can keep British wizards buying British-made broomsticks and official Ministry Portkeys. Mind you, for now it's still alright to buy and sell flying carpets and enchanted samovars from other wizards, but they're making it harder and harder to import them from abroad, especially with the current paranoia of anything from Europe. Though there are some advantages to it—this carpet is now worth over twice what Father paid for it."

"Interesting," said Tom, who cared little for rules and laws. Unlike Hermione, he couldn't see them in terms of their social value, only as obstructions to his goals. "Even if the carpet can carry three people, how will three people fit? It's tiny."

"By squeezing in, how else?" answered Nott.

"Yes, but there's no way to keep from touching each other," said Tom, making a face.

"You were going to touch that sack of dried Muggle parts not too long ago. And you wanted a closer look at my Hand of Glory," Nott pointed out. "What's the problem?"

Tom looked at him meaningfully.

Hermione huffed and said, "You'll just have to budge up, Tom. There's nothing more to it."

The events that followed, to Tom's disapproval, bore an unwelcome resemblance to a comic pantomime.

In trying to determine how to fit three people on a small rectangle of cloth, there were more than a few instances of awkward bodily contact: tripping over legs, stepping on someone's hand, having his hand stepped on, and knocking heads. In the end, they settled on a solution of mutual compromise. No one was pleased by it, but the majority (who had out-voted him when he declared that this situation, whatever it was, was not a democracy) had agreed that it was leagues better than Tom's first proposal, in which he'd suggested that he should have the magic carpet all to himself. Hermione had called it unfair, and Nott had called him selfish, and it had resulted in a good five
minutes of bickering, wherein Tom, with as much patience as he could, tried to explain why he was the best suited, and the best qualified, for taking charge of the group as their leader.

Their solution was for Tom to sit at the front of the carpet, and Nott behind him, kneecaps poking into Tom's back, but that couldn't be helped. Hermione would sit in between Tom's legs (since she was the smallest of the three, and Tom was the tallest, with the longest legs), with her head tucked beneath Tom's chin. Tom had decided that if physical contact was inevitable, then it was better that it be with someone he actually liked. And it was better that Hermione sit with him than with Nott.

After the arduous process of determining the seating arrangements, there came the task of getting the carpet off the ground without anyone falling off. This was harder than it looked; Tom had to hold onto the sides and Hermione in front of him, while ensuring that Nott's hands stayed where they should have been, instead of wandering where they oughtn't—Tom still hadn't returned the other boy's wand, and could tell that Nott wanted it back. For now, his pride had prevented Nott from begging Tom for its return, which was just as well. Tom found amusement in drawing it out; he was hoping to see that pride fall at least a few more notches by the end of the day.

Their first attempt resulted in the carpet ascending so quickly that they cracked their heads on the ceiling, causing Hermione to squeak and go green in the face; she had never liked broomsticks or heights, and she'd hated the fact that flying lessons back in First Year had been a class where textbooks and studying could make no difference to whether she passed or failed. Their hair powdered white with crumbs of plaster, they tried again, this time at a slower pace, and Tom began to get a sense of how the carpet was enchanted to fly: the levitation enchantments were imbued into each thread of woven yarn, which lent it more stability than a broomstick, where the levitation was constrained to the twigs, and the steering and braking charms applied to the wooden shaft and handle.

This carpet, Tom discovered, was not as easy to turn and steer as a broomstick. Changing directions on carpet and broom was done in the same way, through leaning one's weight either left or right, but multiple riders leaning in opposite directions caused the carpet to draw to a stop and drift in circles. With a competent helmsman, Tom thought that a carpet could function as a duelling platform—perhaps not for exhibition duels, where martial magic was intended to be half performance, half sport, for an audience's pleasure, but for real battles where it was a lethal mistake for a wizard to announce his presence to his opponents.

By the arrival of the dinner hour, they were all three rather bruised and out-of-breath, Nott more so than him or Hermione. Tom had the presence of mind to cast a Cushioning Charm when it looked like they were in danger of bumping into the light fixtures, but it just so happened, now and again, that he forgot to extend the cushioning effect to cover Nott behind him.

His collection of bruises didn't hinder Tom's growing feeling of triumph. He had found the long-lost Chamber of Secrets. He had opened it, and now he had a means of entering it.

Over the next few weeks, Hermione compiled a list of preparations for their Chamber expedition. Through a combination of obstinance and insistence, she made each member take specific duties, explaining that it was for the sake of efficiency—that it was better to distribute tasks between three people in advance, instead of wasting time arguing about who did what whilst on location. Tom could be the main duellist, as he'd wanted, but Nott would take the lead as their main historian.

"Because," Hermione told him, "if anyone could prove that it's the Chamber of Secrets or an elaborate hoax, it's Nott. If anyone could tell what's valuable or what isn't, it's him—and he can't do it if you're blasting everything in sight. And you still have that oath hanging over him!"
Hermione herself would take the position of Mediwitch, and auxiliary duellist or historian, whichever the situation demanded. But she decided that everyone should carry a bottle of Dittany, a roll of bandages, a vial each of Blood Replenishing Potion and Pain Reliever Potion. She'd also decided, without consulting him, if any person was hurt to a degree that it couldn't be healed with emergency field treatment, they would abandon the mission to visit the Hogwarts hospital wing.

"But what if it's Nott?" said Tom.

"What if it's me?" Hermione demanded.

"You're more important!"

Hermione's lips pursed in disapproval. "Tom!"

"You helped me when I needed it," said Tom, "and I won't forget it. But we both know that Nott would never do the same for us, unless there was something in it for him."

"It's the right thing to do," Hermione said firmly, and hearing that, Tom swiftly dropped his line of argument. When Hermione used the words Right and Wrong, it was an indication that no amount of logic could change her mind. Only an appeal to emotion could sway her at that point, which was exhausting to Tom; he had to force himself to feel empathy in order to construct an argument from that angle.

Preparations, assigned duties, flying practice: these activities occupied the final weeks of their summer holiday. They were solid, substantial projects to which they could dedicate their time and attention, instead of speculating about what lay in the Chamber—beyond the mystery of Salazar Slytherin's monster, what treasures had Slytherin left to aid his apprentices in carrying forth his great work?

The one thing, Tom noticed, for which Hermione hadn't made advance preparations was the division of spoils. Perhaps it was too much to hope that there would be anything of value in the Chamber, or perhaps it would create too much dissent in the ranks, because she knew that Tom would immediately object to granting equal shares for everyone (including a portion for Hogwarts!), or anything, really, that did not accord the greatest share of the prize to Tom Riddle, whom he saw as the most indispensable member of their group.

The days rushed past, and soon the end of August was close upon them. With all their successes in learning to fly the carpet, casting spells while someone else was flying the carpet, and their rehearsed excuses for any Prefect or teacher who might come across them in the girls' bathroom during evening patrols, it was something of an unmemorable occasion to receive their Head Boy and Head Girl badges from a school owl, a fortnight before the start of term.

Hermione's had blue enamel, and Tom's had green, but they were not much different than their Prefect badges, and neither of them mentioned it to the Riddles, who had accustomed themselves to Hermione's presence, and had begun seeing her as a part of their family, for better or worse. They had even started to warm to Nott, who had taken to calling on the Riddle House twice or more a week during the holidays, bringing token gifts with every visit—bottles of berry wine and sweet cordials from the family cellar, half a haunch of smoked venison shot by his father last autumn, a bundle of silk floss from his mother's sewing room for Mrs. Riddle to use in her own embroidery projects.
To the Riddles, it affirmed their assumption that Nott was of "good family", if his crisp enunciation and his well-tailored clothes hadn't been enough to convince them. They were pleased—and somewhat relieved, Tom perceived from the shape and pattern of their thoughts—that although their grandson had been born to the village tart and raised by beggars in London, he hadn't been ruined by them, proving himself capable of distinguishing suitable companionship from undesirable influences.

(Overhearing one of his grandparents' private conversations, Tom hadn't liked knowing that they considered Hermione's background to be 'nominally respectable, but at least her father is a doctor—imagine if he was a merchant!'. But Tom did agree with their opinion that standards had fallen these days, and one had to make use of what they were given.)

"It's such a vulgar way to buy someone's regard," Tom muttered to Hermione, after watching Nott present Mrs. Riddle with a large jug of honey from the estate hives. He was reminded of how his grandmother had lavished gifts upon him in the summer before Sixth Year.

"I think it's nice that they get along," said Hermione, smiling and holding her glass up for another pour of gooseberry cordial, which Nott had informed them was made by the servants to a centuries old family recipe.

"To my expense!" Tom hissed, put out that every time Mrs. Riddle called him "Tommy", Nott would glance over and smirk at him.

"Not everything is about you, Tom."

"She showed him the family portrait gallery last week. Next week, it'll be the picture album!" said Tom, rather incensed. Hermione's mother and Mrs. Riddle cooing over his childhood photographs was not a memory easily forgotten.

Tom dragged Nott away whenever he saw the boy insinuating himself too intimately with the Riddles, and forced Nott to leave before they could invite him to stay for dinner.

When September arrived, Tom wasn't surprised to see that Nott had reserved a compartment on the Hogwarts Express hours before it was due to depart London. It was so early that the steam boiler was cold, the Floo fireplaces hadn't been lit, and the platform was empty of other students. Yet that didn't stop Nott from making a big show of locking the compartment door, casting silencing charms, and closing the window curtains—as if one covered window on a carriage of open ones didn't stink of suspicious behaviour.

"Tonight," said Nott ominously, meeting their eyes in turn.

"We can't!" said Hermione. "We have the First Year welcome speech in the Common Room after the feast, then Slughorn's going to invite us to his office for congratulatory drinks."

"We'll find a way to beg off," Tom said reassuringly. "You wrote speech cards. Hand them off to Fitzpatrick; he's useless at everything but following directions. I'll make my speech and have Orion Black take the dormitory tour for the Firsties. They're eleven year olds, not babies; they ought to know how to flush a toilet and bathe themselves, and if they can't, Orion's bright enough to explain it to them. It'll be good practise for him, since there's no chance that he won't be nominated next year—Sluggy's had such a streak of picking Heads that he's got to have the Board stacked in his favour."

"And drinks with Slughorn afterwards?"
"I'll explain to him that each of us made plans with the other," said Tom. "He'll know how to complete the picture."

"I'm not sure that I want him to have that picture."

"Trust me, Hermione—it'll work."

"That isn't the issue here..."

"Then what's this doubt?" Tom asked. "Don't tell me that you've suddenly changed your mind."

"I—I haven't," said Hermione quickly. "It's just a touch of nerves. People are going to be talking about us, Tom."

"People are always going to talk," Tom said. "But it's not as if they're spreading lies about us, are they?"

Nott, who had been eating a breakfast of boiled eggs on buttered toast during their conversation, gave a soft snort. "If anything's been spread, it's certainly not lies."
1944

If there was any benefit to the Chamber of Secrets, it was in making the prospect of being this year's Head Girl much less terrifying.

Arriving at King's Cross Station five hours before departure, Hermione had plenty of time to rehearse her introductory speech, a tradition of the Heads to help usher the Fifth Year Prefects into new and unfamiliar duties, while also acting as a reminder of what the Sixth Year Prefects had forgotten over the summer. The task was made easier by virtue of Tom sitting by her side, chin propped on her shoulder as he read her speech cards, brows lifting up whenever he parsed out a particularly complicated sentence.

"You're much too authoritative, here," said Tom, pointing out a line on the slip of paper. "And here. Here, too. You say 'You must do this', or 'Students shall do that', when people would be more disposed to co-operating if you made them feel part of a collective. 'We should' works better in this instance, or 'We want'. Yes, you're the one assigning the work to them, and they've no option to refuse it, but for this kind of speech, the intent is to maintain an illusion of solidarity. You want to motivate them, present them with the idea of being a member of an élite group—not frighten them with a year-long to-do list of drudgework."

"How will the new Prefects know what to do, if we don't tell them?" asked Hermione, jotting notes on the back of the paper.

In most circumstances, Hermione would hesitate to take Tom's advice. However, on the subject of rhetoric, it would be negligent of her to forget that Tom, by trade, was a journalist. What had once been a summer job for him was now an official vocation, acknowledged not just by the publishers who bought his articles by the page, but by the dozens of devoted readers who thought him a curator of a sophisticated wizarding lifestyle. During the holidays, Hermione had seen first-hand the amount of mail Tom was forwarded from his post box in London, including a letter or two from Madam Leonora Gardiner, the receptionist from the Ministry atrium. In that correspondence, Hermione was astounded to see that there existed people who couldn't form their own opinions without the approval and guidance of another. And Tom, as wise as he was benevolent, had happily volunteered his own services in dictating their life decisions.

Hermione wouldn't let Tom dictate her life, but in this arena, his expertise should deserve her attention.

"The Seventh Year Prefects will show them," Tom assured her. "They'll be put out that they were passed up for the Heads' badges, but it'll heal the wound if we offer them some other form of authority."

"May I see your speech, then?" said Hermione, crossing out a line that Tom had pointed out as extraneous.

"I didn't write it down," said Tom. "I don't need prompt cards."
"How are you going to speak, then?"

"Oh, I'll be alright." Tom tapped his temple. "My speech is in here."

And indeed, after the Hogwarts Express' journey to Scotland had gotten underway, his lack of notes didn't present any sort of handicap to Tom's Head Boy speech. Tom waited until Hermione had finished her revised speech before he'd gotten up from his seat and began his own, taking an approach different to hers. He dispensed with formality and addressed the Prefects as individuals; he threw scraps of praise left and right, congratulating the new Sixth Years on their O.W.L.s, the Slytherins for the previous year's House Cup win, and the Gryffindors for their excellent—if futile—efforts on the Quidditch pitch.

Nothing he said was untrue ("doing well" on an exam could have any number of meanings), but the way he looked people intently in the eye, giving them a brief nod of the head or a light clap on the shoulder, depending on who they were and what achievements they'd earned over the past year, to Hermione seemed somewhat calculated, if not entirely insincere. She didn't think Tom cared about people whose names and accomplishments never passed his lips when he was no longer in their presence. But she did think that Tom cared about cultivating relationships that might benefit him one day; even if he saw value in Hermione beyond her usefulness or utility, their classmates hadn't earned enough of his regard to recommend them to anything but mercenary interest.

Over the next few hours, every time Tom left the compartment, he was stopped by people congratulating him on his badge. It made a gauntlet of venturing out to the bathrooms, the snack trolley, or the compartment commandeered by the Slytherin Seventh Year boys, but Tom didn't seem to mind the inconvenience. In fact, he preened over other people's admiration, was exultant over their envy, and revelled in their bitterness. That last one was the rarest of reactions that Hermione saw in their classmates, but was evident in the more ambitious of the Seventh Year Prefects who'd thought themselves better suited for Headship over Tom Riddle and Hermione Granger.

But Tom's solution worked to soothe their pride, despite Hermione's reservations about the matter. Wasn't it cheapening their office to hand away their responsibilities to others?

"Nonsense," spoke Tom, addressing her doubts. "It's called 'delegating', and all great leaders do it if they don't want to waste every hour of every day accounting for the ha'pence and farthings. We leaders have more important things to do with our time."

"'Our' time," said Hermione, her voice rising in disbelief. "You're using oratory technique on me?"

Tom gave her a fond smile. "It's what leaders do. And it's what elevates you, Hermione, to leadership. You recognise when it's being used; ordinary people don't. In fact, they're rather obtuse, but that only makes them easier to steer." He laughed and added, "In fact, they think they're being honoured by the privilege of doing my work for me."

"But it is an honour," Hermione retorted. She pointed to the badge pinned to her robes. "And a Hogwarts tradition!"

"I suppose I spoke too soon," said Tom, shaking his head. "But not to worry—we'll have to work on that, you and I."

When the train pulled into Hogsmeade Station, she and Tom were tasked with gathering the students and escorting them to the carriages. Then, once they'd arrived at Hogwarts, there came the Sorting,
the feast, and Headmaster Dippet's after-dinner announcements. This included an updated list of banned joke items and cheating-related paraphernalia to be confiscated on sight, tryout dates for Quidditch, and changes to the staff roster. And, to Hermione's surprise, the introduction of new safety regulations: Aurors would be present during weekend Hogsmeade outings, and students were expected to follow any directions, the same as from any professor or Prefect.

At the Slytherin House table, on the far end of the Great Hall, she saw Tom and Travers conduct a low and heated conversation. Travers leaned in to whisper in Tom's ear, then Tom glanced up at the High Table, before he waved Orion Black over from where the other boy sat with the Sixth Years. At the Ravenclaw Table, no one seemed to care about anything but the specifics of acceptable quills; Dictation and Self-Inking Quills were apparently still allowed, but Repeating Quills were banned, and any quill or ink with magical properties was not permitted during formal exams. (Someone had tried writing on their arms with invisible ink in last year's O.W.L.s, and the proctors of the Wizarding Examinations Authority would be inspecting everyone's arms for that this year.)

The rest of the evening was routine. Hermione organised the Ravenclaws by year group, sending the Fifth Year Prefects to take the First Years up, because the whole House going up to their Common Room at once would inevitably lead to a long queue of people, all of them waiting at the entrance to take their turn with the word puzzle. At the other House tables, the Prefects of Gryffindor and Slytherin passed along the week's passwords, while the Hufflepuffs organised themselves into mentor groups, one older student to three Firsties. Tom, sitting at the head of his table with the other Slytherin Seventh Years, looked as if he was already tired of his responsibilities; he listlessly picked at a plate of quince cheese on water crackers. On either side of him, Hermione noticed two of his dorm mates topping up their pumpkin juice goblets from a silver flask they were keeping out of view of the teachers.

When their eyes met, Tom lifted an eyebrow and jerked his head at the doors.

Hermione shook her head, sliding back the sleeve of her robe to tap her wrist. She didn't think wizards would recognise what it meant, as most—those past their seventeenth birthdays—carried pocket watches instead of wearing timepieces on their wrists. During the holidays, Tom had worn the wristwatch given him by Mrs. Riddle, for convenience, and to ensure that Nott was ejected from the premises on the dot of seven o'clock. Any longer, and Nott would have garnered an invitation to dinner at half-past seven, which Tom took pains to avoid. Tom didn't wear his watch at Hogwarts, but he understood her meaning, for he inclined his head and tapped his fingers on the table.

One, two, three, four,

Hermione counted. Twelve taps in total.

Nott, who was sitting opposite Tom, twisted his head around to observe Hermione's reaction. Tom must have scolded him for it, because he quickly turned back around, shoulders hunched.

The evening passed thus, in secret messages sent across crowded rooms, in guarded looks alternating between the door and the High Table, until it was time for all the Houses of Hogwarts to part ways. When Hermione finally reached her dormitory, it was near ten, and she was grateful to see that her trunk had been brought on from the train and laid at the foot of her bed. With shaking hands, she dug through its contents to find the collection of potions she'd prepared for the expedition. The glass bottles were intact, cushioned in several paper-wrapped bundles of clean bandage.

At a quarter to midnight, Hermione cast a Disillusionment Charm over herself, then slipped out of her bed, fully dressed in the Muggle coat she'd worn that morning, and a pair of winter boots. Nott had theorised that the Chamber went under the Lake, so it was bound to be cold at the bottom. A much more sensible choice than her soft-soled uniform shoes, of patent leather with an open top and
a strap over the instep.

Her dorm mates had their bed canopies closed, and after waiting at the door for a good twenty seconds, she saw no ripples in the curtains and heard no creaks of the mattress springs. The Ravenclaw Common Room was just as silent. There was a cat curled on the armchair nearest the fireplace, a few empty bottles of butterbeer on a reading table, and a handful of wrinkled sheets of newspaper scrawled over with games of noughts-and-crosses, but all the students had gone up to their rooms. (This was somewhat unusual for Ravenclaw; Hermione recalled that in May and June of last year, students had used the Common Room to study at all hours of the evening and early morning. However, tonight's triple combination of a late meal, heavy food, and being too early in the year for exam panic, must have presented an unassailable argument on the importance of proper rest.)

Without groups of students, robes and neckties flying all over the place, rushing to get to class without lost points or detention, the corridors were eerily quiet. The torches in their sconces were dimmed of their usual cheery yellow flames, the portraits dozing within their frames, mumbling an occasional word or two in their sleep. Hermione held her breath in passing several suits of armour, drifting from shadow to shadow in between the guttering circles of torchlight. Down one set of stairs, a pause on a landing to wait for two staircases to connect, carrying her from Ravenclaw Tower Entrance down several floors to the Library wing.

When she opened the door to the girls' bathroom, she saw that the room was dark, a shaft of silver moonlight falling onto the tiles, broken into a pattern of diamonds by a leaded window frame. Silhouetted in front of the window were Tom and Nott, who must have arrived before her; they were standing in front of the sinks, whispering furiously to one another.

"I'm steering, so I should be in charge of the carpet," Tom said, reaching for something held in Nott's arms. "And you have your hands full already."

"I'll give it back, trust me," said Tom.

"That's the thing, isn't it" Nott said, sniffing. "I don't."

"Wouldn't you trust me to take care of it?" Tom asked. "It's a valuable magical artefact; of course I'd keep it in good condition. You've seen my enchanted lunchbox—I've had it from Second Year, and it still works as good as new."

"You'd only take care of things if they belonged to you," said Nott. "I can't imagine that you'd give a single bronze knut about Lestrange's new Cleansweep, top of the line or not."

"That's an unfair ju—" Tom stopped, then glanced up at the door. "Hermione? Is that you?"

The Disillusionment Charm fell away from Hermione's body with a swish of her wand. She made her way across the bathroom, cautiously finding her path in the dark, not daring to light her wand in case it could be seen from the corridor outside. From years of living at Hogwarts, she was aware that the public areas of the castle, lacking the carpets and fireplaces of the living quarters, were always draughty. The doors to each classroom were great weathered things bound with heavy iron bars, the ancient wood shrunken in their frames over the years, instead of sitting flush to the wall.

(In Potions, she and Tom had learned to avoid the work station closest to the door. The constant
"You're here early," Hermione remarked. "Did you have any trouble with your dorm mates?"

"I told them I was going out. They didn't ask why," said Tom. He glanced over at the sinks. "Are you ready?"

"No," said Hermione. "But today is a Friday, and we won't have classes until Monday, so there's no better opportunity than now to see what's down there." There was a moment of hesitation before she added, "And it's about time you nullified that oath. This is a collaborative effort, and I don't like the idea of anyone being here under duress, not when we might be risking our lives."

"If all goes well, then I'll forgo the oath," said Tom reluctantly. "I suppose you're right, Hermione. If you're on my side, then you've chosen to be. And if you aren't—" he locked eyes with Nott, "—then so be it. But I won't tolerate cowardice. And I certainly won't reward it."

"As if a real coward would have the gall to admit it," Nott muttered. "Well, go on then, Riddle. We're all dying of anticipation."

When the bells in the clocktower began to ring for midnight, Tom leaned over the broken tap and spoke the password. The low grind of stone moving against stone faded away with the final peal, and then, just like that morning in late June, the hole in the middle of the drainage grates was revealed to them. In the dark, it was an empty black void in the middle of the floor, a bottomless well in which one could fall and keep falling forever. Hermione swallowed, fingers tightening over her wand. She hadn't thought it could look worse than how it did in the daylight, slimed down the sides with thick green strings of algae.

They got the carpet aloft, making last minute adjustments to their belongings—Hermione ensured her potions hadn't shifted in her bag, while Nott cast a Cushioning Charm to the jar containing his Hand of Glory. Squeezed as close as they could together, it was still a tight fit down the vertical tunnel. Hermione, lighting up her wand and holding it up, saw that its diameter was scarcely wider than the outer edge of the carpet, and Tom had to take pains with steering to keep the tassels from scraping along the damp green walls.

*No more than four-and-a-half feet across,* she estimated. If the monster was a dragon or a Cerberus, and if Salazar Slytherin meant for it to be able to come and go from the Chamber, then it had to be a very small one.

The carpet drifted down, down, down into the gloom.

The further their descent, the lower the temperature fell, until they could see little wisps of breath around their mouths and noses. The air grew damp, taking on a strange loamy smell, the smell of something organic and decayed, and beneath that was a whiff of something else, sour and pungent, reminding Hermione of a jar of eel eyes that had gone off when some careless student had used it and put it back in the ingredients cupboard without properly securing the lid. Rotten fish disintegrating in a foul brine, that was the smell, and Hermione contemplated casting a Bubble-Head Charm. But she still needed her wand for light, or for self-defence...

Without warning, the bottom of the carpet smacked against a hard surface, and Hermione felt, rather
than heard, a *crunch* from beneath her folded legs. With only one hand holding onto the carpet—the other one held aloft her wand—she lost her balance, toppling forward.

A pair of arms tightened around her from behind, and the solid warmth of Tom's chest pressed against her back.

"It looks like we've reached the bottom," breathed Tom, drawing his wand and pushing himself upright. With a murmured *Lumos*, the tip of the wand flared a brilliant white, blinding them at first, then giving Hermione a brief glimpse of the black shaft rising up, up, up above their heads, and another black tunnel before them, with no end in sight. Tom dimmed his wand from white to a ghoulish red, before settling on a colour somewhere in between, a dull pink that shed illumination, but would still allow them vision in the gloom.

Nott scrambled to his feet, shooing Hermione off the carpet, before dusting it off, rolling it up, and shoving it into his satchel. "There's something on the floor..."

He leaned over, adjusting the angle of his Hand of Glory.

"What is it?" asked Hermione, who couldn't see anything—the Hand only gave light to its owner, making it a useful tool for criminals, but inconvenient for everyone else.

"Bones," Nott proclaimed, kicking at them with the toe of one shoe. Something clattered in the darkness. "Rodent. A rat or a vole." There was a moment of silence, some more kicking, a dry rattle of objects sliding over each other on the grimy floor, then Nott said, "Otter, by the looks of the teeth. And... hah, interesting. *Veeery* interesting."

"We're not here to play games," Tom snapped, lowering his wand to cast light on the floor. Nott was correct: it was littered with bones, along with other bits of unrecognisable detritus, but to Hermione's eyes, they looked like shards of broken china dishware, and there was nothing she could label as the parts of a human skeleton. "What is it?"

"I thought it was a fish at first. The shape of the spinal column and flattened rib extensions is unmistakeable. But there's no fish that has this sort of pelvic structure," Nott trailed off, leaving them in suspense.

"Well?" prompted Hermione.

"Whatever it is that's down here," said Nott, "killed a mermaid."

The silence was punctuated by a slow and measured *drip, drip, drip* of water falling in the far distance.

Tom cleared his throat and said, "A *Grindylow* could kill a mermaid."

"By a stroke of fortune, not by intent," said Nott. "And any Grindylow that managed it would be hunted down immediately by the rest of the merfolk village, as any village of wizards would put down a wolf who bit a child."

"If we can infer anything from this," said Hermione, "then it's your assumption that the Chamber goes under the Lake. We found a mermaid here, so perhaps there’s a secondary entrance that connects to the Lake. It must be very cleverly built, since we're about half a mile underground, and there's not a sign of leaking or flooding." She pointed at one wall, which curved over her head in a
high arc, forming a tunnel of perfect cylindrical proportions. "If water passed through here on a regular basis, there would be tide marks on the walls. Lines of sediment or caked mud, because it's obvious that this place has never been cleaned. But there aren't any."

"That's good news," Nott remarked. "Of all the ways we could die down here, drowning isn't one of them."

"Only an incompetent wizard would allow himself to drown," said Tom scornfully.

"And an overconfident wizard only exposes himself to disappointment," Nott retorted. "If a flood suddenly comes rushing through here and you drop your wand, you'd stand as much of a chance of surviving as a Muggle."

"Even if you kept hold of your wand, you'd still need to be able to cast spells non-verbally, you know," added Hermione. "It's not that easy to visualise a destination when you've water past your head. That's if the Hogwarts anti-Apparition enchantments don't extend this far down."

"Level of difficulty has never stopped me before," said Tom stubbornly.

"And neither has common sense, I see," Nott snorted. "Let's keep going—this tunnel has to lead somewhere."

"I'll have you know that I'm very sensible, Nott," said Tom. "In fact, you'll be walking in the front."

With a few prods of Tom's wand, Nott was persuaded into leading the way down the echoing tunnel, swearing and muttering to himself every time he tripped over an unstable mound of bones or a slick patch of algae. It wasn't a charitable act on Tom's part, choosing the leader in lieu of letting someone volunteer for the job, but Hermione had to admit, very reluctantly, that she enjoyed walking in the back. Instead of being propelled forward and rushed along by a clearly impatient Tom Riddle, she could take her time inspecting the architecture of the tunnel. Built of a smooth and seamless carved stone, it was different, but just as effective, as the standard galvanised pipe, brickwork, and interlocking cement of modern Muggle sewerage channels. And all this had been built centuries ago!

Nott stumbled along the downward sloping tunnel, the path twisting and bending. At several intervals, they had to cross a dip in the floor in which had collected a silted puddle. Tom had cast Incendio at it, but it filled the tunnel with a stinking mist that obscured vision and hearing, so from there on, Hermione cast Glacius. It didn't much improve the footing, but at least they could skate over the top of the frozen mud, rather than sinking in ankle-deep.

After a few more minutes of walking, the tunnel began to level out, and the floor became drier and more crowded. Where they'd had layers of sticky mud and calcified silt beneath their feet, there were chunks of bone, gravel in several different grades, and pale flakes of what looked like crumbled asbestos. Nott, hefting his Hand of Glory into the crook of one arm, bent down to inspect the flakes. He picked one up and ran his thumb over it, turning it over and over in his fingers. Then he shoved it into his trouser pocket and straightened up.

"We're almost there," said Nott. "I can feel it."

And around the next corner was the big prize: a greenish pile of something resembling an unrolled bolt of cloth or a runner carpet, shapeless and crinkled like the magical tent in her parents' cellar before Mr. Pacek had helped them set it up. Its surface was broken into a regular pattern of layered
ovals, smoother and flatter than the angular diamond-patterned ridges of dragonscale.

Nott scrambled over to it, sweeping up a great swathe into his arms and crowing, "I told you it was a snake! Look at it! It's got to be at least twenty—no, over thirty feet long! A beast this size—do you know how rare that is?"

Tom was less enthusiastic; he took up a handful of the shed snakeskin and peered at it, hefting its weight. "I expect someone would want to buy this..."

"I would," said Nott. He coughed and went on with, "Ah, for a fair price, of course. Just as a curiosity, as it were. There aren't any inherent qualities to this skin that couldn't be replicated with dragonhide."

"Hmm," Tom replied, setting down the section of skin. He tapped his wand against his thigh. "If the skin is here, then where's the beast? We should keep going; the tunnel extends further down."

"B-but," Nott sputtered, "what about the skin? We can't just leave it here!"

"It won't go anywhere."

"Yes, but can't I take some with me?"

"We'll come back this way."

"A tiny piece—just so we don't go back empty-handed!"

"Not now," snapped Tom. He turned to Hermione. "Let's go. Nott can stay here if he likes, but we're going to see what else is down there."

He marched forward, wandtip glowing, and Hermione scurried after him, with a glance over her shoulder at Nott.

"If it's a creature of a magical nature, like a dragon, then a Diffindo won't do it," she said. "Spell-resistance. You'll need a proper knife, or goblin silver, if you want to take a clean sample without damaging the rest."

"Yes, thank you, Professor Granger," Nott grumbled, putting down the skin after one last forlorn look at it.

Tom was already a fair distance away, his light bobbing metres ahead. When they caught up with him, he was standing before a wall—no, a door—with carved snakes knotted around each other. A twin-leaved sliding door, the two sections drawing apart as they watched. The gap in the middle grew wider and wider, until there was neither wall nor door, only an entrance to a long chamber of grey stone thickly coated with lichen. Two long channels framed the chamber on either side—Hermione saw that they were ponds of still water, black and murky and tinged with the nose-wrinking fragrance of rotting kelp. Out of the water rose a line of stone columns, wrapped around with snakes whose emerald eyes and polished fangs glinted in the light of their wands.

But it was the centrepiece of the chamber that drew their attention. A man at the far end, an imposing forty feet high, pose and bearing like that of a patron god in his temple of worship.

*Salazar Slytherin.*
Or an image of him, at least.

The statue looked like the picture Nott had showed them that summer: a stern, bearded wizard with a forbidding expression and elaborate robes, but even without the animation charms of the picture, the moss-darkened stone face was still incredibly unnerving.

*Although anything that size would be,* she thought.

"It's empty," said Tom, staring open-mouthed, his voice rising in mounting incredulity. "There's nothing here!"

"There's Salazar Slytherin, right there," said Nott. "So, about that oath..."

"No!" Tom shouted, and his voice boomed hollowly along the length of the empty chamber. "We can't have come all this way for nothing!"

"The skin," said Hermione, stepping forward and laying a gentle hand on Tom's shoulder. "We still have that—"

"Beast of Slytherin," Tom yelled, ignoring her, "*present yourself!*"

Nothing happened.

Nott scratched his nose, shifting awkwardly. He inspected his cuffs and flicked off a few crumbs of dried mud. "Riddle, if you don't mind—"

"Play some music," demanded Tom. "We haven't tried everything. You brought your harp; I saw you put it in your bag before we left the dormitory."

Nott scowled. "What good will that do?"

"If there's a beast," said Tom, "then there must be a means of waking it up."

"Yes, but why do we want to wake it up?" Hermione put in tentatively.

"It serves no benefit to us like this," said Tom. "And we can't just leave it to hibernate forever."

"Can't we?" asked Nott. "I'm sure it wouldn't mind; it's been there for a thousand years already."

"We can't," said Tom firmly. "You'll do what I say, Nott, or the oath will stay as it is. We came here for the Chamber of Secrets. The Chamber of Secrets contains a beast of legend. I won't confirm that it's real unless I see a sign of the beast's existence."

"The skin—"

"Mere coincidence," said Tom. "Anything could have crawled its way out of the Lake in the last millennium. I want irrefutable evidence."

And at Tom's insistence, another entry was added to Nott's growing list of indignities.

Nott, grumbling in a low voice and shooting meaningful looks at Hermione every time Tom turned
his back, set his Hand of Glory on the floor of the chamber and rummaged in his satchel for his harp, buckled inside a polished leather case with embossed Celtic knotwork. It wasn't a tall concert-sized harp that Hermione had seen in the orchestra pits of the London theatres, but of a size to be held in one's arms, and if the player was so inclined, played and carried at the same time—though it would be very awkward unless one had a good sense of balance.

Hermione had only heard from Tom that Nott could play a musical instrument, and had never heard Nott admit to it himself, as she and Nott had always maintained a practical relationship, with neither of them discussing subjects unrelated to the pursuance of their goals. It was strange and rather unexpected to witness it confirmed now, in the Chamber of Secrets—deny it fervently as Tom had, Hermione believed it to be the real thing—and even more unexpected to see that Nott was good at it.

She was no expert in the arts (primary school music class was still a sore memory to her standards of perfectionism), but Hermione was an expert in studying and training, and she could tell that Nott's skill was the result of time and effort. Still muttering about Tom, Nott plucked at the strings, listening to one note ring out, then another, tightening a lever, cocking his head and closing his eyes every now and again. Tom waited, impatiently tapping his feet or pacing around in circles, as Nott drew a small whistle out of his harp case to test the pitch.

"How long is that going to take?" asked Tom.

"You can't rush art," Nott replied. "And the acoustics of this place are terrible. The ceiling's too open and the water will cause reflections..."

When he finally began to play, Tom stopped his pacing and looked to the statue of Slytherin, eyes narrowed.

"Sonorus," he incanted, and the music began to double, then triple in volume. Hermione, standing in front of Nott, could feel the tangible ripple made by the sound as it passed through her body.

Listening to him play, and play very well, Hermione found herself wondering why Nott had never shown interest in joining Hogwarts' music club. Hogwarts didn't have many extracurricular activities for students, and of those, Gobstones, Quidditch, Wizards' Chess, Music, and Duelling had presented no personal appeal, but Hermione did agree that they were a way to form friendships for those who wanted them, or a way to learn something not taught in class lessons. Nott might not desire friendship with "riffraff", but at the very least he would have a venue in which to flaunt his ability. (Hermione disapproved, naturally, in the name of good taste, but there was less shame in showing off an earned skill versus showing off an inherited attribute.)

When Nott finished playing, Tom turned to the statue of Slytherin, his eyes dark with expectance.

"Did it work?" Nott asked.

"Shhh!"

For a minute or two, Tom stood listening intently, his eyes half-lidded. For what exactly, Hermione didn't know: she heard only the steady plink of water falling on stone, Nott shuffling his feet on the grimy floor, the rustle of robes, and the sigh of her own breathing.

"Did you hear that?" said Tom suddenly, staring at the statue's face.
"What is it?" Hermione asked.

"I thought I heard something moving..."

"Are you going to stand there and keep listening, then? Or can we start turning back?" Nott suggested, slipping his hand into his satchel and pulling out a pocket watch. He pressed a catch on the side and the lid flipped open. "It's just past four in the morning."

Hermione ignored him. "What do you mean, 'something moving'? Did the statue move?"

"Are you going to tell me that statues can't move?" said Tom. "I know what I heard!"

"I wasn't going to say that it was impossible," said Hermione. "I know that magic can animate statues, and there are animation enchantments set by the founders that have lasted until today—the winged boars on the front gates are an example. But that statue didn't move—we'd have noticed if it had!"

"But I heard something," said Tom stubbornly.

For the next twenty minutes, Hermione and Nott watched Tom approach the statue, pace several times in front of it, and begin working his way through his mental catalogue of revealing charms. They ranged from the simplest ones in the Prefects' Handbook, spells to reveal the writing on notes passed from hand to hand beneath classroom desks, to spells that negated the properties of pre-mixed invisible inks, to more complex spells that Hermione had only read about in books, used by wizarding enchaners to apply maker's marks to their merchandise, without marring the finish of fine jewellery pieces or the inlay of delicate cabinets and caskets. These marks were hidden during daily use, but were able to be inspected for purposes of authentication and accreditation.

After some time, Nott reached into his bag and drew out a tin cup and a small pouch. From the pouch, he pinched out some brown powder, dropping it into the cup. He then raised his wand and pointed it to the rim.

"Aguamenti," said Nott, yawning. "How long do you think he'll take, Granger?"

"What on Earth are you—" Nott answered, twirling his wand above his cup and casting a spell to heat the water. "Did you not bring any food with you? I'd expected that you'd be more prepared than that."

"I did!" said Hermione. She fumbled a parcel of waxed paper out of the pocket of her Muggle coat. Mrs. Willow's ginger biscuits, from the packed picnic lunch Mrs. Riddle had made them take with them on the train that morning. Or rather, last morning.

"Oh good," said Nott, plucking the parcel out of her hands and unwrapping it. "Are these the ones with the molasses sugar? I like those the best—it gives them a good texture. Firm, but not too crumbly."

Tom had done all he could during the summer to guarantee Nott's ejection from the house before dinner, but Mrs. Riddle had a few times successfully rounded them up for a spot of afternoon tea. For some bizarre reason, Nott had relished accepting Mrs. Riddle's invitations, even though he
displayed more fondness and warmth toward the food than to the people joining him at the table. Then again, it wasn't as if he'd ever extended fondness or warmth to anyone. In the end, Hermione wasn't sure what to make of it. She knew that people like Nott thought Muggles, even the well-spoken and civilised ones, were natural curiosities, in the same fashion of British explorers who'd met pygmy tribesmen in the wilds of Guinea or Malaya. So she'd kept an eye on him, with the intent to correct Nott on his manners if they slipped in front of the Riddles, but to her surprise, he hadn't.

Hermione had caught him asking Mrs. Riddle leading questions about her family, the circumstances of Tom's relocation (was he mis-remembering, or was Tom from London, and not Yorkshire?), and the mystery that was Tom's parentage. Neither she, Tom, nor Mrs. Riddle were willing to indulge that subject of conversation, much to Nott's disappointment.

And as disappointing as afternoon tea with Mrs. Riddle had been during the summer, this very early morning tea had to be just as anticlimactic. Nott had anticipated uncovering magical artefacts in the Chamber of Secrets, and all they'd found so far was a long roll of dirty snakeskin. Valuable to the right buyer, but what was more money to someone who already had plenty of it? It was a far cry to what he must have been hoping to find: long-forgotten knowledge from the days of the founders, powerful spells lost for generations, or ancient secrets about the workings of the castle.

Crunch.

Nott had broken a biscuit in half. Now, his hand outstretched, he offered her a piece. "You're thinking about something, Granger. What is it?"

Hermione took the biscuit. "The audacity of offering me a biscuit that was mine in the first place! Why did you even take them, then?"

"Because sugar isn't good for you," said Nott in between bites of his half of the biscuit. "Father says that sugar is only for children and invalids, and if Riddle gets what he wants..." He nodded in the direction of the Slytherin statue, which Tom was attempting to climb, his wand held between his teeth. "Well, I think we should appreciate the time we have as people who can eat and enjoy solid food instead of subsisting on potions."

Hermione's brows knitted together, and she spoke in a hushed voice, "Tom can speak to snakes. If the Chamber opened for him, doesn't that make him the master of Slytherin's monster?"

"Who knows what kind of controlling enchantments Slytherin left on it," Nott said, shrugging. "Or even if they've lasted until now. If Riddle, for all his troubles, finds the monster, we can't discount the chance that it'll listen to him instead of eating him outright. But neither of us are Parselmouths, and the only thing keeping us from being eaten alive... is him."

"I'm sure he wouldn't let it eat us..." said Hermione.

"If he had to choose between himself and us, who do you think he'd pick?" asked Nott.

"He won't have to pick anyone. We'll make certain that he's never put in a position where a decision like that is necessary," she decided.

"Is Riddle aware of how much you interfere in his life?"

"I don't see how that's relevant!"
"Because he seems just as determined to interfere in yours," Nott remarked. "I can't help but predict a lifetime of mutual insufferability for the two of you, based on his, shall we say, 'excessive familiarity'. Have you not realised what Riddle wants of you?"

"I am well aware of what he wants, thank you," said Hermione briskly. "Or, what he says he wants. Let me assure you that there's nothing to speculate about. Yes, it's true that we've made a private arrangement of sorts, but it's not nearly as exciting—or as dire—as you think it is."

"You're not going to take him up on his offer, then?" said Nott, giving a close inspection of the tea leaves floating in his cup, and definitely not trying to sound too interested in her answer.

"Is there any reason why I should?"

"You could hardly do better, if you ask me," said Nott.

"Good, because no one asked you!" said Hermione, quite affronted.

"It's true, isn't it?" continued Nott in a casual voice. "He's willing, eager even, to take you on despite your lack of name or property. And if it's a future as a respectable working witch that you desire, then there's nothing that squeaks of respectability like having a respectable husband." He darted a glance over to where Tom was scaling Salazar Slytherin's stony beard. "Even if he doesn't find anything of value, this Chamber still makes him the Heir of Slytherin."

Hermione scoffed in indignation. "I fail to see why a husband makes a witch more or less qualified for a position in the workplace. It seems so unfair—does anyone ask wizards if they're married when they apply for employment?"

"For any position where steadiness and reliability are essential, yes, of course. A legal executor of wizarding wills and testaments. Or a Healer that dispenses advice on, ah, starting families. Depending on what they're applying for, whom they're married to is just as important as if they're married at all," said Nott. "A proper understanding of responsibility is the sign of a proper wizard, Granger. It encompasses a man's integrity and honour, and also includes his duty to perpetuate his legacy. If you can't judge a man's integrity by what he writes and submits on a form, then you can judge it by the state of his house and how well he keeps his family."

Listening to Nott talk, Hermione couldn't stop herself from wrinkling her nose, or wondering how much of it Nott actually believed. He had admitted that he didn't care much for the prospect of having a wife and future children, and what he'd just spouted off sounded like a plain contradiction.

But, she thought, how well a man keeps his family is not the same thing as how much cares for them.

"I'm afraid to ask," she said, "whether or not you consider Tom a proper wizard."

"Oh, I could fault Riddle for one thing or another for the next thousand years," said Nott carelessly. "But upon evaluating his character, one can't deny that he values what's really important. You see, Granger, we're all wizards here—yes, yes, you're a witch, no need to remind me—but what we have in common is magic. Most wizards will hold up their magic as proof that it elevates them above the intelligent beasts: Muggles and goblins and centaurs and so on. And there's nothing wrong with that, except when it's all that they do with their magic.

"Riddle, on the other hand," Nott continued, his words rushing out faster and faster, "knows that
there's more to being a wizard than squandering his talents on talk and bluster. The others will content themselves to sitting in their dormitory and arguing about who's got the faster broomstick or the longer wand, but Riddle believes himself to be capable of more than that." He nodded over his shoulder to Tom, clinging to Slytherin's nose and peering into the statue's blank and stony eyes. "Not that all his endeavours will turn out successful, but he's got ambition, and that's not insignificant when the rest have got none at all."

"What about your ambition?" Hermione pointed out. "You mightn't have the title of 'Heir' that Tom has, but the Hat sorted you into the Slytherin, when I'm sure it knew that you could've done just as well in Ravenclaw."

Nott's eyes narrowed. "How do you know that—you must have—no," he muttered to himself. "So, the Hat offered you a choice, too?"

"Yes, it did, actually," said Hermione proudly. "It said my sense of justice was worthy of Gryffindor."

"No doubt you took it as high praise," snickered Nott, to Hermione's affront. "I'm in Slytherin because I accept that knowledge in itself has no purpose beyond personal satisfaction. Applying knowledge requires action and leadership. And the nature of leadership means that not everyone can be the leader—but neither should one allow themselves to be relegated to a mere factotum when he's capable of more than that." He gave her a measured look. "I suppose you know that already, since you've attached yourself to him closer than everyone else."

Hermione returned his look with disapproving glare. "Are you implying that my interest in Tom is based on his utility?"

"I'm not implying it—I'm saying it," said Nott. "You're doing yourself a disservice by ignoring it, Granger. And before you try to moralise on me, I don't see any difference between marriage and a mutual exchange of utility. A thing given, a thing taken; a co-operative effort to usher in the future; all parties satisfied. I'll admit to lacking Riddle's, hah, special touch, but you can't tell me that he makes it any more flattering."

Observing the shift in her expression, he added, "You can hold firm to your ethics for now, but when you leave this castle at the end of next year, you'll find that it's only scholars and academics who care how many books you've read or how many theoretical principles you can quote. The real world, the offices that determine what potion ingredients you can buy in the apothecary, the department that sets the questions you're asked in the final exams—that world is run on patronage and connection. Out there, righteousness and ideals make for a meagre form of currency."

"What grounds have you to tell me this?" said Hermione in a sharp tone. "Your father's an academic."

"He maintains friendships with the right people," said Nott. "And because of that, no Ministry inspector has ever—or will ever—come knocking on our door."

"T-then," Hermione stammered, "how do you benefit from this? The whole time we've been acquainted, you've never given me any information without expecting that it'll turn to your advantage at some point."

"I'm not blind, even if you so obviously are," said Nott. "For some reason, it pleases Riddle to indulge your fancies, no matter how fanciful they happen to be." With his wand, he Vanished the
contents of his tea cup and shoved it back in his bag. "You know, I heard Orion Black mention that you weren't as dismal at the Prefects' meeting like everyone had been expecting you'd be—I even heard that Hipworth had prepared a Dictation Quill in the event you'd bungle your speech."

"They thought I'd bungle it?" said Hermione, aghast. Tom had never mentioned that. "No one said anything..."

"It's all in good humour," said Nott, ignoring her audible concern. "But if you're to learn anything from it, it's that politics is no natural talent of yours—but with the right guidance, you're not completely hopeless. With the right counsel, you'd be capable of making great improvements."

In that instant, Hermione saw where Nott was angling. He'd couched his advice in terms of her own interest, but in doing so, he'd presented himself as the expert, and Hermione as the novice. Which wasn't strictly incorrect, but it was galling to acknowledge her own lack of experience with Magical Britain. Throughout the entirety of their conversation, she'd perceived no trace of dishonesty in Nott, and even now, she couldn't see any reason why he would lie to her, not on this subject. While Nott had delivered his argument in a tone of sage condescension, the most troubling acknowledgement was that his points were not wholly groundless.

In her career advisory sessions with Professor Beery back in Fifth Year, she'd been told that perseverance and pluck were requirements of a successful professional career, but thinking about what Beery had actually said, she couldn't recall him giving any solid advice on Ministry careers. He had been very considerate, assuring her that she didn't have to limit herself to conventional careers. Plenty of wizards chose to dedicate themselves to crafts or scholarship, and there was no shame or disrepute in that compared to the more traditional paths of working under a formal employer.

"In fact," Professor Beery had told her when she'd come to his office during her appointed time slot, "I myself have thought about leaving Hogwarts to pursue my own interests. I enjoy teaching—even thought it was my calling when I was younger. But Herbology, forever? Oh, I think my spirit yearns for more than that, noble profession that it is. And you, Miss Granger, so fresh and full of potential—you'd do yourself no favours to waste that youthful spirit on something that brings it no joy."

It had been wonderfully inspiring in the moment, but Professor Beery hadn't given her any advice on which departments to address her letters of introduction, her references of character. Now she began to wonder that if she sent those letters as she was planning to do next year, would they end up lost in the mail sorting office, and only discovered years later, crumpled and covered in dried owl droppings? Nott had warned her, the year previous, of the standards she could expect from wizarding bureaucracy, and that meeting with Miss Leonora Gardiner at the Ministry had been a disturbing confirmation of Nott's veracity.

And there was the rub: Nott's truthfulness was one thing—and his knowing of Tom's special ability to discern lies must have given no choice in the matter—but his trustworthiness was another. She couldn't trust that anything he said was solely in her best interests; at best, whatever advice he offered her served his own in some fashion.

He'd go against her interests, if it served him better.

But, thought Hermione, would he go against Tom's?

It was half-past five o'clock when Tom gave up trying to extract Slytherin's thousand-year-old secrets from his statue. At some point, Nott had cast a Cushioning Charm on the floor and rolled up in his
cloak to nap, so only Hermione was awake when Tom climbed down from the statue, grey powder in his hair, his trousers stained green from the knees down.

"Did you find anything?" asked Hermione politely.

Tom, a deep scowl on his face, shook his head. "There was what looked like a seam carved under Slytherin's beard, but I couldn't find a way to open it."

"It could just be a seam, you know."

"I won't give up," said Tom. "Not until I know for certain. I'll have to chart the progress of Hydra, or match it to the tidal cycles; maybe the ponds drain away during certain times of the month..."

"The library will help you there," suggested Hermione. "Are we leaving now? It's not a good showing for the Head Girl to be caught sneaking into her dormitory at dawn. On the first day of school, no less!"

"If you're seen by your dorm mates, just tell them you were with me all night," said Tom. "That'll answer all their questions."

"And bring up plenty of new ones!"

"Oh?" said Tom. "I was under the impression that as explanations went, saying you were out with a young man was rather self-explanatory."

"Not for my dorm mates," Hermione said. "They'll pester me for days, asking me silly questions. For instance, if I got to stick my hand up your jumper."

Tom looked blank. "Is that a euphemism for something?"

"No, I'm afraid not," sighed Hermione. "Some girls are really just curious about what the boys in our year look like with their robes off. It's the Quidditch players most of the time, if that makes you feel any better."

"How disturbing," Tom remarked. "Well, do you...?"

"Do I—what?"

"Want to stick your hand up my jumper?"

"N-no!" spluttered Hermione.

"Is there something wrong with my jumper, then?" said Tom, sounding quite distressed. "Or something wrong with... me?"

"No! Of course not—I mean, I didn't meant to—"

Tom patted her on the shoulder. "You know, I've said before that 'gullible' was the deplorable natural state of the proleteriat. But on you, Hermione, it somehow becomes amusingly pleasant."

"I don't find it very amusing," said Hermione, sniffing.
"Then you're welcome to take me at my word," replied Tom, plucking at the hem of his woollen uniform jumper and lifting it up to reveal an inch of the shirt he wore beneath, along with a brief silver flash of his belt buckle. "You should trust that I wouldn't make you an offer that I don't mean to honour."

At that point, Nott woke up and his nasally, sleep-hoarse voice broke into their conversation. "If you two are going to be engaging in that sort of thing now, must it be in here?"

In the ante-chamber, the stretch of tunnel that opened into the Chamber of Secrets, they collected samples of snake skin. They limited themselves to picking up pieces of torn skin, rather than trying to cut sections from the main pile, several dozen feet long: none of them had brought a suitable knife, and they weren't going to risk tossing Cutting Charms about, not when they all knew dragonhide was famous for its ability to deflect spells.

"I can't see people using this for shoes," said Nott, holding a metre-long strip of skin up to the light. "A beast this size has such a broad scale pattern that anyone wearing boots made of it would look like their feet had caught Spattergroit. But luggage or saddlery, definitely. And I couldn't refuse a custom snakehide book binding with a coat of Peckling's high-sheen."

That seemed to raise Tom's spirits; he'd been restless about having to leave the Chamber of Secrets and its secrets for another day. Already, he was planning another trip back, not even caring that she and Nott were exhausted from the last six hours of underground exploration.

"I haven't slept for over a day," said Hermione, as they stumbled through the dark tunnels, back to the vertical shaft that led to the Second Floor girls' bathroom. "How can you have the energy to want to keep exploring?"

"Because I know there's something down here," said Tom. "It can't be empty; Slytherin wouldn't have built a secret chamber and filled it with... nothing!"

"He left a bloody great statue of himself, Riddle," said Nott, unrolling his carpet and ushering them onto it. "I'm quite certain that he wouldn't like you calling it 'nothing'."

The sun was peeking through the dormitory curtains by the time Hermione fell into bed, extremely grimy from head to toe, her socks soaked through and smelling of mildew. But she was too fatigued to care about that, or even her recent journey to the Chamber of Secrets, and what it meant that Hogwarts had a creature living under one of its bathrooms, a snake over thirty feet long, or even longer than that—didn't snakes shed their skins when they'd outgrown them?

When classes resumed on Monday, Hermione was better rested, but no more curious about the Chamber than she was the day they'd left it. She could appreciate the workmanship that had gone into building the tunnels, hiding the entrance, and the Chamber itself, but she couldn't understand Tom's obsession with unravelling its "mystery". It was a historical site, and after seeing it, she'd got no indication from what the Divination textbooks called her "Third Eye" that there was a mystery. No one visited the ruins of a Roman frontier fort or a Celtic chieftain's burial mound and expected that the long-dead inhabitants had hidden a cache of gems for the benefit of some lucky future explorer.

Tom was convinced otherwise. If the legendary Chamber was real, why wouldn't the legendary monster be, too? If the legend had survived for all these years, then surely it had to be true.

Hermione's response was blunt: "The legend says that Slytherin meant for the monster to kill
"Slytherin's dead, so what he meant doesn't matter anymore," said Tom. "But you don't have to sound so worried, Hermione. When I find the monster, I won't let it hurt you."

"How are you going to do that?" asked Hermione. "It's not a monster, it's an animal. It can't listen to reason. If it'll listen at all—if the legends are true, then it hasn't been near a human in the last thousand years."

"I'll make it listen," said Tom, and refused to explain how he'd manage that.

Over the next month, Hermione delved into her studies, because the N.E.W.T.s were just around the corner; the Chamber was interesting, but there was nothing it could offer her in terms of exam marks or career prospects. It bothered her that Tom barely paid attention in class, scribbling down notes on his parchment that she saw had nothing to do with the lesson of the day. He was the Head Boy—he ought to set a good example for the other students! But the teachers never appeared to catch on that there was something different about Tom's recent shift in attitude toward classroom participation. Whenever they called upon him, he answered their questions without hesitation, and so his reputation as an excellent student remained untarnished, as pristine as it had been for the past six years.

His obsession with discovering the mystery had not only led to Tom delegating most of his Head Boy duties to the Prefects, but hosting official meetings of his homework club less often. It had gotten to the point where the members approached Hermione at breakfast or in the corridor to ask when they were going to revise N.E.W.T.-level Defence theory, or if she could proofread their Charms essays—they'd have asked Tom, but they scarcely saw him in their shared dormitory these days, outside of sleeping, bathing, and changing his clothes.

They weren't the only ones to have seen less and less of Tom in the passing weeks. Tom always disappeared after the end of class, taking a looping, circuitous route to the next class, or to mealtimes in the Great Hall. She'd followed him once, at the risk of being late, and had seen him wandering the halls, fingers brushing against the stone, stopping every so often to inspect a suit of armour or poke his wand at a flue set into the wall, built to ventilate the lower sections of the castle.

He'd looked distracted, and Hermione had been tempted to call his name and ask him what he was doing, if she hadn't thought it would be too... too interfering.

When she thought about it, it was obvious what he was doing: exploring the castle, as they'd done back in First Year, and Tom had had that trained rat of his, the one he'd taught to collect coins and sit on his shoulder. Peanut had died a few years ago, and Hermione still felt bad about it. Her parents had bought her an owl when she'd asked for one, and having Gilles had made the Grangers' home feel that much more wizardly. Tom, who was just as talented and magical, could only afford a rat. Even now, he hadn't replaced Peanut, and perhaps—Hermione hesitated to assume too much—he wanted a replacement that he believed to be as special as he was.

The Heir of Slytherin is only a courtesy title, she reminded herself. There's no possibility of that. Tom is greedy, but he's learned to be careful, and he's not stupid. The last time he was careless, we had to take him to St. Mungo's.

The mystery of the Chamber aside, one minor detail of their underground adventure had become lodged within her thoughts over the following weeks: that conversation with Nott, and the importance of the right connections in securing a successful career, or in merely getting one's foot through the door. She'd attended Professor Slughorn's dinners for the last two years, though not as
religiously as some of the other Slytherins; nevertheless, she was counting on Slughorn to put in a
good word for her, whatever she chose to do. But was he the only one who would, other than
Professor Beery, her Head of House?

As the last warm days of summer slipped away, leaving behind a chilly Scottish autumn, the question
continued to linger, and the more she tried to think up reasonable justifications for why Nott was an
unreliable source—if not wrong—the more it festered. What did he know? His commentary on the
state of wizarding politics was always heavily biased and never anything but disparaging, too cynical
and narrow-minded to be taken at face value. What reason had he to present such a cynical view?
He was only a boy, younger than her, at that! (They were all adults, but Hermione's September
birthday made her older than everyone in their year, so she thought that counted for something. Tom
would disagree; of the three of them, he was the youngest.)

Hermione, deciding to settle things, put aside her stack of practice exam questions and drew out a
clean sheet of parchment, weighting down the curling ends with an inkwell.

Dear Madam Gardiner,

You may remember that we met in April of last year, when Thomas Bertram introduced
me as his editorial assistant, Hermione Riddle. As a dedicated reader of Mr. Bertram's
articles, you'll know that his articles are directed toward improving the efficiency of
household management, and conveniencing the lives of housewitches across Britain.
But as a witch, I have long thought Witch Weekly should cater to all witches, and not
just those witches who dedicate their toil to the family hearth.

As a working witch, I'd like to ask you about employment conditions in the Ministry of
Magic...

Solidarity, thought Hermione. She wrote the letter with Tom's explanation of convincing rhetoric
lurking in one corner of her mind. It felt inauthentic to do this—not quite deceitful, since her
arrangement of words was made to be ambiguous, but not false—but some part of her struggled with
the guilty weight of this deliberate misrepresentation. Her logical side won out: it had been Tom
who had spoken for her, Tom who had called himself 'Thomas Bertram' in the Ministry atrium, and
he who had called her 'Hermione Riddle'.

And she signed 'Hermione' at the bottom of the page, her own name, so that wasn't a lie either.

When she tucked the folded letter into her planner to send off with her next batch of letters to Mum
and Dad in London, she found a new message written in Nott's handwriting at the back of the book.

Riddle's left the dorm again. 11.52

She wrote back, Do you think he's gone to the C?

Hermione underlined the letter, just in case Nott couldn't guess what she meant.

He hasn't asked for the carpet. Nott wrote a quarter-hour later. Hasn't come back smelling like a
toilet, either.
That's not a sign that he's given up on it...

*Have you ever known him to give up on anything?*

Chapter End Notes

Wasn't happy with the chapter, so I re-wrote the ending to give more setups for Tom's PoV.
Parsley Juice

1944

The Chamber was empty and it was all a lie.

That statement lingered in Tom's mind. It echoed, grew, and transformed with each iteration, until its original meaning dwindled in his conscious thoughts, and the surface began to slough off, revealing to him the true shape lurking beneath the façade of unpleasant truth.

An accusation.

Every morning before lessons, Tom ate his breakfast at the far end of the Slytherin table, under the House banners, velvet serpents in green and silver rearing on sinuous coils to hiss at the other animated banners—frolicking lions, slumbering badgers, and haughty eagles. On his way back to the dormitory, he passed the Entrance Hall, and the torchlight flickered off the row of hourglasses, the piled emeralds in one bottom bulb marking Slytherin's continued progress toward another House Cup. Together, these images were an unspoken reminder of what he'd glimpsed in the Chamber of Secrets; they became a wordless taunt of what he lacked.

Every evening, he took his reserved armchair by the fireplace, the best seat in the Slytherin Common Room, and surveyed his Housemates. They had no idea of the existence of Salazar's legacy, the Chamber of Secrets, a legend among Slytherin students. To them, it was nothing but a First Year Hallow's Eve tradition, an idea whose continued circulation depended on those wistful few who dreamt and believed that it just might be real.

That number did not include Tom Riddle, who knew the Chamber of Secrets was real, and who had seen the face of Salazar Slytherin with his own eyes. Tom's hands had touched the founder's stone likeness, had discerned the lack of chisel marks marring the stone eyelids and the creases of the earlobes, an indication that the statue had been created through Transfiguration, smooth and seamless as the Transfigured tunnels outside the Chamber. Such power, and at such a scale! On any other day, Tom would have marvelled at it; he would have spoken of it to Hermione, and caught her up in an enthusiastic debate on how it had been done then, and if it was possible to replicate now.

But today, the last few days, the past week, theoretical Transfiguration was a passing afterthought to the real matter that occupied his thoughts, which whispered to him through all hours of the day. In the waking dreams of the hour before breakfast, the watery windows glowing green with the risen sun, to the silent hours past curfew, when Tom showered away the grime accumulated from a day's exposure to other people, he heard the Chamber calling to him.

The Chamber has been opened...

It whispered to him when Tom stood under the dripping shower head, one hand upraised to Summon his towel from the rack. He hardly dared to breathe, ears straining to catch another hushed word in the haze of writhing white steam.

Released from slumber, awakened to air and sky... Awakened and awaiting...

The whispers continued. In class, on the way to dinner, after a meeting with the Prefects. No one
else heard the softly spoken words, let alone made any sense of them. Hermione's face had remained blank and confused when he had asked if she'd recognised the speaker.

Awaiting...

Tom sought the source of the whispers, not quite allowing himself to believe that they had originated from the depths of his own mind. He couldn't have imagined it; he knew he wasn't mad.

...And searching.

It wasn't madness. It couldn't be.

There had to be another explanation: magic.

His careful questions to Hermione hadn't produced any tangible result, and he wasn't going to ask her about symptoms of wizarding diseases without arousing her natural instinct for interference. The last time Tom had been physically indisposed, Hermione had forced him to take potions and go to bed at set times every day, smothering him in well-meaning concern. And Tom, though admittedly liking special attention given him on other occasions, did not appreciate being treated like a child whilst in that state, but he'd been too weak then to resist.

Tom's dorm mates hadn't noticed any strange sounds, either—not that he'd bothered to thoroughly question them. Nott, the most observant of the Slytherin boys, hadn't appeared to have heard anything, though it was difficult for Tom to keep track of him, when Nott put quite a bit of effort into strategic avoidance. Nott had developed an odd habit of vacating the Common Room whenever he saw Tom step through the doorway; in the evenings, Nott ducked behind the curtains of his four-poster instead of joining the other boys in playing cards or coming up with the answers to the day's load of homework. However, that wasn't too unusual when Tom recalled that Nott preferred studying in the library, where he could work by himself without having a dorm mate lean over his shoulder to read his answers.

In a quest for alternative sources of advice, Tom dug through the bottom layers of his trunk until he found the loose parchment pages copied from the Healing textbook he'd borrowed from Rosier back in Fourth Year. _Medicamenti Magica_, the sixth of a seventeen volume set: he'd had Rosier bring him this one in particular for its focus on mind-related magical Healing. Before Dumbledore had begun offering him Occlumency lessons in Sixth Year, he had searched through more and more obscure textbooks for information on mind magic. It had been a futile endeavour in the end, but he'd learned about various forms of magical mental damage, an affliction that most commonly came as a result of amateur Obliviations and brewing potions without reading the directions.

Skimming through his notes, he ticked off his list of symptoms.

Severe mood fluctuations?

No more than usual, he decided. That ruled out having an adverse reaction to potion ingredients. He wasn't taking any potions, nor had he been dosed without his knowledge.

Minor to mild emotional fluctuation, accompanied by tender muscles and food cravings on certain times of the month?

The last he checked, he wasn't a woman, nor a werewolf. This was useless; he skipped down to the bottom of the list.
Visions, illusory figures, or voices?

Tom turned over to the next page, his hands shaking.

Missing time within recent memory; hours unaccounted for in the past week?

The good news, Tom found, was that he wasn't a victim of possession, through unwitting contact with a cursed artefact or a malevolent spirit.

The bad news was that Tom, being very certain that his dilemma had nothing to do with a mundane illness of the mind or body, was probably being haunted by a ghost.

It was... absurd.

He didn't know what to make of it, but the longer he considered it, the more it made sense. Hogwarts was one of the most magical sites in the British Isles, steeped in a thousand years of history. For a thousand years, students had cast magic in its halls, dozens of Headmasters had laid on fresh enchantments over old, hundreds of professors had wandered in and out, leaving behind portraits and books and odd teaching props that found their way into broom cupboards and dusty classrooms.

Couldn't his explorations in the Chamber of Secrets, one of the oldest structures in or under the castle, have created some odd phenomenon of magical disturbance? The Chamber of Secrets, a founder's artefact in its own right, was bound to have mysterious and powerful properties. Perhaps Salazar Slytherin had built a mechanism to transfer a sliver of his power to whomever was worthy of continuing his legacy—but somewhere along the way, the instructions were forgotten, or the instructor itself lost in a maze of renovations and wardwork.

If Hermione and Nott hadn't noticed any voices, then it was only because it had been Tom who had opened the Chamber of Secrets, spoken the password to both the magical entrance built into the bathroom sinks, and the entwined serpents before the Chamber itself. The other two had provided some, yes, minor contributions, but it was Tom who found the Chamber and granted them access.

There was no chance he was going to ask Dumbledore for advice, or turn himself in to the Hospital Wing. With these limitations, and knowing that whatever this was—a ghost, Slytherin's monster, a magical imprint of the man himself—it was something he wanted to see with his own eyes. And thus, he sought the company of his own monster.

For what better way was there to catch a monster, than with a monster?

The room he'd dedicated to Acromantula storage had remained undisturbed over the summer holidays. Since the start of term, he'd cast Hermione's intruder repelling ward over the door, the one she'd perfected to keep the maids out of her room—or as he thought of it, their room. The ward was anchored to runes (Nauthiz and Isa, to restrict and reinforce) carved on the inside of the door, by the hinge and latch, and carved in reverse on the outside (to impair and impede). The runes wouldn't do anything to keep the Acromantula secured inside the room, but they would keep other people from stumbling in and letting it out by accident.

Entering the room and closing the door behind him, Tom lit the sconces, cleared the dust that had accumulated in the corners of the room, and kicked the top of the trunk.
He heard a dry rasping sound from the inside of the trunk, but the lid failed to rise.

"Are you awake?" asked Tom, drawing his wand. His fingers traced the line of the yew handle, and the grooves scored down the shaft, left by the teeth of his father's dog.

"I am resting," came the muffled words from the inside of the trunk, followed by a few sharp clicks.

"You've had enough rest," said Tom impatiently. "I have a task for you."

"I am happy to stay here."

"That's not an option!"

Rustling came from the trunk, then a sudden and pointed silence.

Tom blasted back the lid of the trunk, to a loud tirade of angry chittering.

"I won't repeat myself, Spider," said Tom. "I'm being haunted, by a ghost or spirit."

The Acromantula's body was folded within its legs. Its large jointed limbs were furred with thick black hair that had grown thicker in the years since Tom had captured it from Hagrid's cupboard. One by one, the legs stretched open like the blade of a pocket knife, until the Acromantula's eyes were revealed to him, shiny and lidless, a liquid black that glowed orange in the wavering torchlight.

Its pincers clicked. "It is not a ghost of which you speak. Nor a spirit."

"How do you know?"

Hairy limbs shivered in agitation; Tom had spent enough time in the Acromantula's mind to have learned some of the simpler hallmarks of arthropod body language.

"It travels under stone, passes through it, and the stone tremors in its wake. The water changes its route where it goes, when it rises from below. It does not hunt, not as yet—but it searches. And it hungers."

"Well, that's helpful," Tom remarked. "What is it?"

The spider drew its legs up, twitching furiously. "We do not speak of it! We do not name it!"

"I bet you don't even know," Tom scoffed. "How would you, in any case? You haven't seen the outside of this room in years."

"Our kind know to fear it by instinct, foolish man," said the Acromantula. "You seek your death if you dare to look for it."

"'Instinct'?" Tom repeated. "Does this mean your kind know of its existence? Is it some species of magical creature? A predator?"

"Not just any creature—a great and mortal enemy!"
"A creature, then," said Tom, relieved that it wasn't a ghost. He wasn't sure what spells would be effective against ghosts. He had read of exorcism rituals, but most of them evicted ghosts from the physical sites of their death, instead of banishing them to their Next Great Adventure. There was no way to force that to happen until the ghost itself chose to leave for good. The ghost of Sir Nicholas, for instance, had been executed in London but had somehow ended haunting Gryffindor Tower in Scotland. "One that eats spiders. Is that what it's searching for? A snack?"

The Acromantula shuddered and a ripple moved across its body, its eight outermost limb joints flexing and bowing, followed by the next, until they reached the lumpen shape of the thorax in the centre. To Tom's distaste, it looked like the clenching of a hairy black sphincter.

"It does not pursue prey," said the Acromantula. "One such as it bides and strikes; it moves now in too regular a pattern, searching for something. A mate. Nesting territory. Hatching grounds. The last warmth before the turning dark."

"So you won't tell me what it is," Tom mused, "and yet you happen to have a good idea of how it hunts. Hmm, interesting... Is it a snake?"

The Acromantula chittered in fear.

"That's not an answer," Tom said. He raised his wand. "Imperio."

Acromantula spoke, its voice taking on a peculiar squeaky edge, like the sound of air being let out of a punctured bicycle tyre. "It is the greatest of its kind. So long as it breathes and feeds, it grows. It is the One Who Passes in Silence."

"What sort of name is that?" said Tom. "How can it pass in silence when you can sense its movements?"

"When it passes," said the spider, "all is silent."

"Is that a riddle?" Tom demanded, increasing the pressure on the spider's mind.

"That is how it is known to us," said the spider, forelegs clicking erratically against the stone flagstones. "The Bringer of Silence."

Tom flicked his wand; the curse dissipated. There was no use in continuing. The spider knew something of the mysterious creature's nature, but couldn't name it by the standards of human taxonomy. This was one of the weaknesses of the Imperius Curse—its use in gathering information was limited by the intelligence and education of the target. And despite the Acromantula possessing some form of primitive biological memory, the entirety of its life experience revolved around sleeping in a box and being fed table scraps.

"You once asked to see the sky," said Tom. "I refused you then, but perhaps I've changed my mind about it."

"I cannot leave this room!"

"You'll go if I tell you to go," said Tom in a cold voice. "Where and when I tell you."

The spider's pincers snicked together, tips glistening with venom. Its head lowered between its
forelegs, the rest of its hairy legs curling defensively around its body. "You make a perilous choice to seek it out. Better to wait until it feeds and returns to dormancy."

"I'm not afraid of it," said Tom, and that was the end of the argument.

He slammed the lid of the trunk shut and left the room, considering how best to use the Acromantula's ability. The ability to sense vibrations—that could be useful in tracking the passage of 'The Bringer of Silence' around the castle. But it would only be useful in following it. He wanted to see it, with his own two eyes, not just feel the echo of its movements whilst borrowing the senses and faculties of another. He wanted to... to catch it.

It.

A creature so powerful that it made others shiver in terror at the very mention of its name. What could be more fitting for Salazar Slytherin's legacy than 'The Bringer of Silence'? (Tom personally thought it was a cumbersome name—too long, too vague—but if it inspired fear in lesser beings, then its effectiveness was undeniable.)

How on Earth could it be made possible?

...On Earth.

"The water changes its route where it goes..."

Tom remembered the journey down, down, down into the tunnels beneath the castle. The hours of trudging through cold silt and shattered bones, and the brief stop where Nott kicked at the floor with a booted foot. The bones of a mermaid, broken into pieces—the curved set of human-like ribs, the pin-bones of a fish-like tail and desiccated fins, as fine as the vanes of a plucked feather.

No one hunts tigers by poking them in the face, Tom recalled.

He had a guide, didn't he?

Now all he needed was the lure.

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On the last clear day in October, the students of Hogwarts rushed off en masse to Hogsmeade, emptying the shops of bottled butterbeer, sweets, and firecrackers for Hallowe'en festivities in their Common Rooms after the official school supper. The enchanted carriages rattled past all morning, carrying students from the castle and down to the front gates, bursts of red and blue light flashing from the windows.

Tom, having checked both ways down the corridor, floated the Acromantula's trunk out of its room, casting a Disillusionment Charm on both it and himself. The portraits, habitual eavesdroppers on the
best of days, noticed nothing out of the usual as he passed. A few stragglers lingered in the Entrance Hall, but Tom slipped past them, and they remained none the wiser. As he'd expected, the viaduct was deserted, and he met no other students descending the slippery rock stairs carved down the side of the castle's foundations.

The boathouse sat at the foot of a sheer escarpment, a squat longhouse roofed in wooden shingles, grey and weathered with age. The interior smelt of watery things, kelp and fish and something unpleasantly briny, which Tom thought strange since Hogwarts had a freshwater lake. Then again, Hogwarts also had a giant squid living in the lake, and Tom had read that cephalopods, squids and octopi, were saltwater organisms.

Inside the boathouse, dozens of boats were stacked five deep on wooden racks, keels pointed toward the roof. Inspecting them closely, Tom observed that both the racks and the bottoms of the boats had been carved with runes, worn but still readable: endurance, preservation, movement, direction.

The rune for 'direction', Raidho, turned out to be rather convenient, as a simple tap from his wand to the carving resulted in a boat sliding down the rack and onto a set of tracks that sloped to the water's edge. Tom set the trunk into the boat before getting in himself, lifting up the hems of his robes to keep them from dragging in the water.

Once he'd gotten into the boat, it rocked in the water from the added weight, but to his relief, no water slopped in. It was cramped inside, smaller than he remembered from his First Year memories. Ten feet long from front to back, it could easily fit three or four eleven-year-olds, but two adult men would have trouble keeping their knees from brushing against each other. The front narrowed to a pointed vertex, and the back was flat, set with a wooden handle that turned from side to side when he poked at it, and when Tom looked closer, saw that it was carved with runes for movement and direction.

A rudder.

He hadn't remembered that from First Year, but then again, he recalled Mr. Ogg, the groundskeeper, thumping the back of the boat after ensuring the children had gotten in and weren't dangling anything over the sides. Tom had been too entranced by the view back then to pay attention to other things, for what a view it had been! The high turrets and crenellated towers spearing up out of the rocky cliff base, a rippling constellation of reflected lights bobbing over the Lake's dark surface, the windows of the Great Hall aglow with welcome and warmth, and every inch of stone imbued with power and grandeur and magic.

In the daylight, the castle was no less magnificent, but the wonder and beauty of Tom's first impression had faded over the years. Some part of him would always be fond of Hogwarts, the place where he had learned what it truly meant to be a wizard. But more and more often these days, he looked forward to beginning his life outside those stone walls, without the added inconvenience of teachers, schedules, and unruly children. And to think that he had once dreaded leaving Hogwarts, dreaded re-entering Muggle world after his final year of schooling, and returning to London with nothing but his wits, a handful of old textbooks in a battered trunk, and the clothes on his back.

For now, his battered trunk contained a live Acromantula, very unhappy about being wobbled about through the corridors and now tossed into a boat. And the unhappiness would naturally be compounded by the fact that spiders didn't do well in the water, since they had no way of holding their breath.
"If you try anything," said Tom, opening the trunk, "I'll push you off the side."

"What are you doing?" the Acromantula asked, in no hurry whatsoever to leave its container.

"Fishing."

Tom reached into his pocket and brought out a case of chocolate frogs, traded from a Fourth Year in exchange for a re-scheduled detention. (Professor Merrythought was a strict supervisor who demanded physical labour of student delinquents, but Professor Binns allowed students to do whatever they wanted, as long as they didn't make any noise.) Ten frogs, each box fresh and the seals intact—he'd checked, and the boy who'd given him the set had assumed it was to ensure that the cards, the most valuable part of every frog pack, hadn't been nicked.

The cards didn't matter. The frogs' animation enchantment, mass-produced but still durable and well-made, was the reason for his interest. Of course he could Transfigure and animate frogs of his own, but why bother, when someone else had done the work for him? Hermione would have cited something called 'personal integrity', but Hermione's personal integrity meant that she would interrupt a professor who'd mentioned some minor detail that was contradicted by three other authors on the subject. Because her conscience wouldn't allow an error to stand, uncorrected, even at the detriment of the other students in the class, or the teacher's lesson plan.

Tom, on the other hand, wasn't burdened by so troublesome a notion as a 'conscience'.

He cracked open a chocolate frog box, and the frog popped out, leaping for freedom. Tom didn't attempt to catch it. Eyeing its trajectory, Tom lifted his wand and hit it with a Featherlight Charm just as it hit the surface of the water, limbs extended.

*Plop!*

The chocolate frog broke the surface with a tiny splash, and an equally tiny wave lapped against the outside of the wooden boat. The animation charm had a few minutes before it faded, but until then, the frog splashed about in the water, its chocolate skin glistening.

"The Great One does not feed on such objects of wizarding artifice," said the Acromantula, peering over the side of its trunk.

"I'm not trying to feed 'the Great One'," said Tom. "Keep watch on the other side and tell me if you can sense anything underneath the boat."

When the animation faded, Tom let the soggy chocolate frog sink into the water, before he cracked open a new box and repeated the technique. The useful thing about these novelty sweets was that their movements were modelled on those of real frogs, and from a distance, looked quite lifelike. Animation charms cast by the average amateur tended to be stiff and jerky; someone unfamiliar with the shape and structure of an animal's body could not hope to replicate their behaviour with any real accuracy.

(Tom had, over years of observation, noticed that most wizards used the simplest of animation charms. Pictures moved in a short, repetitive loop, a dustpan had but a single sweeping action, a ladle only stirred a cauldron in one direction. Anything more complex required actual thought, and it was for this reason that wizards bought their household potions at the local apothecary, and visited the grocer to buy their daily bread. But, Tom didn't hesitate to clarify, he himself visited the grocer not because he was incapable of the proper charmwork, but because he had more important things to
do with his time. It was solely a matter of time, not capability!)

The sixth frog disappeared into the black depths of the Lake when the Acromantula, which had dipped its forelegs into the water, began to stir.

"Something approaches," it spoke, drawing back to the centre of the boat.

"How large?"

"Longer than you."

The seventh frog gave one earnest leap for freedom before it was abruptly caught. A grey-skinned hand surged out of the water, long-fingered and clawed, crushing the frog within its grip. The hand had membranous webbings between each finger and opposable thumb, and in its clutch, the frog gave one hopeful twitch before the charm failed for good.

Beneath the surface of the water, something pale and silvery twisted to and fro, as sinuous as an eel, with an intelligent air of menace possessed by no fish species he knew.

The Acromantula shivered and let out a shrill whistling noise.

Tom broke open an eighth chocolate frog, peeling back the pasteboard lid with his left hand. His right gripped his wand, lifting it out of his lap and up to the side of the boat, taking care to make no sudden movements.

This time, when the frog jumped out of the boat and a flash of silver rushed to meet it at the water's surface, Tom was ready.

"Stupefy!"

Tom slipped his wand up his sleeve and pushed past the Acromantula, seizing the rudder and nudging the boat several yards to the left—he almost heard Hermione's voice reminding him, in her charmingly pedantic way, that it was properly named port, larboard, widdershins, or some other nautical term he couldn't care less about—and the wood creaked under him, swaying as the bow turned against a rising wind. The tail of his robe caught the wind like a sail, and for an instant Tom was blinded as his necktie flapped across his face. But soon he'd brought the boat up by a length of sparkling silver bobbing on the water's surface, and when he turned it over, grabbing it by the nearest limb, he saw a mermaid up close for the first time.

She looked nothing like the mermaid in the stained glass window that graced the Prefect's Bathroom, which looked more appropriate for the sultan's bathhouse in Le Jardin Parfumé than a student bathing facility. That mermaid was a dewy-eyed maiden with a mane of red-gold hair that she combed with a bit of shell; when she wasn't dressing her hair, she lounged on her rock and watched the passing bathers with an innocent expression of curiosity.

This mermaid, as Tom dragged it by the hair over the side of the boat, looked like it was half fish. Its hair was green and matted, its skin smooth and slimy to the touch, covered in a viscous, slug-like layer of clear mucus. Its mouth was wider than a human's, a gash that opened from cheek to cheek, and inside its mouth, its teeth were set in rows like those in a shark's jaw. The more Tom looked, the more differences he saw between it and him: the gills on its grey throat, gasping and fluttering once he'd pulled the creature out of the water; the silver-scaled tail, adorned with a row of sharp spikes that followed the line of its spine; the cold, hairless skin mottled with markings over the back and
shoulders, resembling corpse-flesh after the blood had pooled and settled...

*The Ministry names these things* beasts, thought Tom. *Well, now I think I can understand their reasoning.*

"Tell me if you sense any others," Tom said to the Acromantula, who squatted on its side of the boat, watching Tom drag the front half of the mermaid over the side. Back in the tunnels under the school, Nott had mentioned that mermaids grouped together to hunt down and neutralise mortal threats. When he'd arrived at this plan, Tom accepted that he couldn't just kill the mermaid, even if it would be the easiest thing to do—and the most profitable. So he'd planned accordingly.

From under the wooden plank seat, Tom drew out a small pouch containing the emergency supplies Hermione had gathered for their journey into the Chamber of Secrets. Vials of potions, bandages, scissors, and a brown glass bottle containing a tincture of iodine, whose paper label indicated that Hermione had filched it from her parents' clinic. Tom had supplemented the pouch with his own potion supplies, empty vials that he'd used for collecting Acromantula venom to sell at the tavern in Hogsmeade.

He began his "harvest" with methodical efficiency, clipping first the fingernails, and then the green hair, squeezing water out of the hanks with his fist, before he shoved it into a vial. He took samples of the scales, the spines, and when he was finished, he took out his silver-bladed potions knife and, turning the webbed hand this way and that, spent a moment contemplating where best to draw the blood.

The Acromantula wandered over, claws clicking on the wood. "The pulse runs warmest at the joint."

"The elbow?" asked Tom.

"The top joint," said the Acromantula, running its foreclaw down the mermaid's shoulder, to its underarm. "Here. Warm. Can you not feel it?"

"No," said Tom, turning the mermaid's limp body to inspect the place that the Acromantula had indicated. "Show me."

A quick slash of a claw, and blood began to flow sluggishly from the incision. Thick blood, darker than human blood, a shade of red that was not quite violet, but couldn't be described with any of the terms—*scarlet, crimson,* or *vermilion*—that people often used for fresh human blood. Tom settled on calling it a dark wine colour, and wondered what magical properties it had. Acromantulas had blue blood, useful in testing potions—the colour of the blood would change depending on the potion with which it was mixed, and it had become a way to gauge the strength of commercial potion batches.

First one vial, corked and stored away, then a second, then a third. Tom siphoned the blood with the help of his wand, while the Acromantula watched him with its eight unblinking eyes.

"Will you keep it?" the Acromantula asked.

"No," said Tom. "I'll throw it back when I'm done."

"Such a waste," it said. "It is so very fresh..."
"If you want fish, then I'll get you a fish," said Tom, too pre-occupied with the harvesting to make much of a counterargument.

"But I am hungry," whined the Acromantula. "And I can feel how tender and warm it is. So warm; I feel it leaking. It moves like nothing I have tasted before. It moves, ah, it moves..."

And as it spoke, Tom felt under his hand the slightest twitch of muscle from the mermaid's shoulder—and then the mermaid's eyes opened, amber sclera with a flat, oval-shaped pupil, and it stared at Tom, at his hands full of blood-smeared crystal vials.

The next second, the boat gave a huge heave, and the crystal vials went flying out of Tom's hands, clattering to the bottom of the boat. Tom himself was thrown to one side, his head cracking against the edge. His head rang; his mouth tasted like salt and iron; when he pushed himself to a sitting position, the boat was still swaying, the Acromantula was shrieking at an ear-splitting pitch, and the mermaid was struggling on the bench seat, gills flapping open and closed, open and closed, like storm shutters blown loose in a howling wind.

Its tail thump-thump-thumped, drumming on the outside of the boat. In the blood-soaked chaos—for the boat's interior was splattered with wine-red blood—the drumming was the only steady thing Tom could grasp in his disoriented state, while blood, his own crimson-red human blood, trickled from his split lip down to his chin and collar.

"No," moaned the Acromantula, scuttling around its trunk, which Tom had left open on the floor of the boat, but had been thrown shut after the mermaid had woken up and tried to make good its escape. "No, no, no!"

Shut up, thought Tom. I can't think with all this damned noise.

"A-Accio," he murmured through crusty lips. Tom coughed, cleared his throat, and spat a mouthful of bloody phlegm into the water. "Accio wand."

His wand flew to his hand. "Stupefy."

The drumming stopped.

Tom dropped to his knees, peeling back the mermaid's eyelid with one hand, the other hand jabbing his wand to its temple.

A garden of kelp fronds wafted in the invisible currents of the Great Lake. Cold water, crisp fresh melt carried down from the distant snow line, mixed with warm water, sun-bright and white-frothed in the singing wind, bearing a peaty taint of the land-dwellers' waste. But—here, now, high above—there came an inexplicable tremor near the surface, a burbling voice of dissonance in the familiar harmony, almost recognisable, but something about it felt... alien.

The disturbance came in the form of a small brown frog, and was easily subdued. But there was another source of disharmony, a vessel on the water, and something within it—something dark and unfriendly—stirred.

Was this creature responsible for the changing currents, beyond the usual swell and surge that followed the rising moon and falling stars? A tide cycle ago, the flow of the waters had shifted, and it had taken on an odd brackish flavour, bone ash and acrid marshwort. Soon after, there had been a disappearance of the pincer crabs and the ambling shells that populated the lakebed...
Tom tore his consciousness out of the mermaid's mind, feeling the dull throb of an oncoming headache. There was a distant ringing in his ears from striking his head on the side of the boat, and it wasn't helped by the squeaking of the Acromantula, scurrying from one side of the boat to the other.

"Obliviate," he muttered, swiping the blood still dripping from his torn lip. He turned to the shivering Acromantula. "Will you stop that?"

"We must leave," it said.

"Not yet," said Tom. He gestured to the mermaid, its top half draped limply over the bench. "I have to throw this back."

"Make haste," said the Acromantula urgently. "The water is changing."

With the help of a charm or two, Tom lifted up the mermaid and heaved it over the side. It sank slowly into blue depths, and a trailing ribbon of blood stained the water a rich violet hue. Tom dipped his hand into the water, rinsing its dark blood off his skin and from under his fingernails; he scooped up another handful of water and washed the drying crust of blood from his chin. He couldn't help but wonder what feature of biology had allowed the mermaid to know when the currents had changed. If their species was a fusion of demi-human and fish, could a real human bestow their abilities unto his own body with a precise sequence of internal Transfigurations? What exactly was the source of their abilities? Was it morphology—or magic?

A trained wizard could Transfigure himself into any animal, if he could visualise it well enough. If he had detailed knowledge of the internal workings of a mermaid, then shouldn't it be possible, in theory, to re-create their innate abilities? From Grindelwald's decades old pamphlets, Tom had read the man's assertion that wizards were as inherently magical as any magical creature, with the gift that ran in their blood and gave them longer lives than any common Muggle. But, Tom supposed, if a wizard tired of Transfigurations and wanted to return himself to his original form—for a wizard's form was the natural superior—then he ought to be quite sure of the structure of his own anatomy...

Something shivered, far, far, beneath the surface of the Lake.

At first glance, it looked like nothing more than the glimmer of sunlight on the lapping wavelets. When the sun retreated behind a screen of wisping clouds, there were signs of subtle movement: it was an oddity in the texture and interchange of the light, as if a black blanket were being unfolded in a darkened room. Tom's senses, in their narrow human capacity could, to his frustration, only perceive the motion and not the form.

"The water is changing," he breathed.

"Then it is time to depart," urged the Acromantula. "It is coming!"

"What is?" asked Tom, his voice sharp.

_Blood of my blood_, he heard, a low and distant murmur that could have been mistaken for the sough of the wind, or the creaking of a weather-beaten wooden boat.

"The Great One!"

"Good," said Tom. "We can't leave until I see it."
The entirety of his present misadventures—the boat, the frogs, the mermaid—had been for one purpose: a means to compel the beast of Slytherin to reveal itself to him. After his initial disappointment with the Chamber of Secrets, Tom had planned to return another day, by himself. If he couldn't find the legendary monster inside the Chamber, then he decided he would have to lure it into the open.

From his extracurricular reading—and he had been pleasantly surprised by the offerings of his grandfather's library—catching large game was a matter of following proper procedure. Boars were flushed with hounds, bears baited and snared with hidden traps, crocodiles speared from the deck of an outrigger boat, and tigers lured with live goats tied to stakes.

Tom considered himself an expert in a number of subjects, but there was no subject in which he had as much experience as the care and management of animals. He knew animals. He had spent years living with them, training them; he had spent countless hours projecting his own consciousness inside their minds, until there was no longer a line of demarcation between native instinct and magical coercion. He had learned that an animal, a wild beast, was driven by the basest of urges—a trait that designated them as inferior to wizards, and made weak wizards the lessers of exceptional individuals like Tom Riddle.

Regardless of how great or terrible Slytherin's beast was reputed to be, in the end, it was nothing but a beast, which made Tom confident in his ability to master it.

(That slow transition of his desire to see the beast, to wanting to subdue it, went unremarked upon.)

Blood of my blood...

Tom glanced over his shoulder, to the Acromantula. "Did you hear that?"

I can smell you... I can taste you...

"It rises! We must leave now!"

"Can you hear me?" Tom hissed, leaning over the side of the boat.

I can hear you, spoke a voice, a faint and hollow voice that sounded like it was speaking to Tom from the bottom of a well. I hear you, speaker of my speech.

"What," said Tom, "are you?"

There was a long pause, as if the creature was contemplating what answer to give to Tom. I was hungry. Now I am fed.

"Can I..." Tom asked. "Can I have a look at you?"

Is this your will?

"Yes," said Tom eagerly. "It is!"

As you will it, you shall have it.

Tom was taken aback. The beast listened to him; it had obeyed him. Had he mastered it? Was it
that easy?

He began to reconsider this thought after the passing of a very tense minute. The seconds, as marked by the ticking hand of his wristwatch, made one full circle, then began another, with no appearance of anything out of the ordinary. But then he heard a low rumble—he felt it, too, as he had felt the rumble of grinding stone when the doors before the Chamber of Secrets had opened for him—and the boat began to quiver, the charmed wooden planks creaking against each other, while the Acromantula ducked beneath the seat, forelegs lowered over its eyes, screeching incoherently.

A dark shape rose out of the water, water pouring off in waves down its scaled sides. A long column as thick around as a tree trunk, it ended in a great triangular head set with a row of bony horns at its base, an arrangement that resembled the points of a crown. The head split open to reveal a mouthful of dangerously sharp teeth, yellowed spikes smeared with a thick red paste that dripped down the side of its jaw...

It took an instant for Tom to recognise that it was the colour of mermaid blood.

"Do not look at it!" the Acromantula shrilled from behind him.

"Why not?" asked Tom.

"Its eyes!"

Tom inspected the creature as it coiled itself around and swam in languid circles, ripples of water in its wake causing the boat to rock back and forth. In direct sunlight, the serpent had a hide of dark green scales, with a lighter colour around the belly. It looked like it had a natural affinity to water, and indeed, the shape and position of its nostrils was similar to that of a crocodile's, placed at the end of its face—Tom could easily imagine it spending hours lurking unseen, with the bulk of its body hidden underwater, ready to propel itself in a deadly strike...

The creature's eyes, set in ridged sockets on either side of its face, were closed.

"They're closed," said Tom.

Why are they closed? he thought. Is it blind? The spider wouldn't fear it if it was blind and useless. No, it's something else; the eyes, they're—

The realisation struck Tom right then. Salazar Slytherin's monster of legend is a Basilisk.

He had spent the summer reading his Magical Creatures textbooks from cover to cover, and had produced a number of theories of what Slytherin might have chosen to guard his Chamber of Secrets. A Hydra, a Runespoor, perhaps a species of eastern sea serpent that wizards in the Orient believed brought good fortune and seasonal rainfall. Basilisk had been low on his list of possibilities; its name derived from 'Basileus', Greek for 'Emperor', and Tom had thought it a species too suited for warm climates to thrive in the perpetual gloom of northern Scotland.

But as he looked at the Basilisk, really looked, he began to perceive the extent of its imperfections. There were small pale marks scattered over its body, bubbled patches not dissimilar to the look of popped blisters, where loose scales were on the verge of falling away. The raised patterns across its back and belly were uneven, scales flattened and ill-formed, as if they had been crushed together or ground flat. Tom ventured a guess that this had occurred due to the Basilisk's massive size and lack of physical activity—it must have been sleeping for years at a time, within a confined space, heavy
coils piled on top of each other and exerting great pressures to the lower parts of its body.

"Will you keep your eyes closed?" Tom asked.

_I will_, hissed the Basilisk, and this close to it, the sound wasn't anything like the little snakes he'd seen in the window of the pet shop in Diagon Alley, nor the common grass adder that had been left in the train compartment before the Christmas holiday of last year. Their voices had been weak and soft and whispery, and Tom's ability to understand them came not just from hearing their words, but observing the lift and movement of their heads, the twisting of their bodies, and the flicker of their tongues. The Basilisk, when it hissed, sounded like the dry rumble of a sand dune collapsing in the aftermath of a wild storm; its voice had a low, throbbing resonance to it that Tom perceived through his ears as much as he did through the whole of his body.

_I can taste you_, it said. Its head lowered, and a shadow fell over the boat, over the figure of Tom sitting inside.

Tom glanced around; the Acromantula had tucked itself under the seat, chittering to itself, of no use to anyone at present. He looked up, up to the Basilisk, which was drawing nearer and nearer to him. Craning his head backwards, Tom could see pearly, red-tinged flecks of its latest meal clinging to its jaw; he saw the inside of its nostrils, pits sunken into the front of its face, wet with lake water and glittering in the sunlight. Water dripped from its sides. Tom could easily imagine it as the carven figurehead on the prow of an admiral's flagship, and for an instant he wondered how he'd ever thought Salazar Slytherin would ever have chosen a dragon, a creature of fire, to—

A forked tongue flicked out of the Basilisk's mouth, and before Tom could raise a hand to defend himself, the tip scraped against his chin and jaw.

It felt like being whipped in the face by the tendril of a rogue Tentacula.

"What are you doing!" said Tom angrily, clapping a hand to his jaw. "You—you licked my face!"

_Your blood_, rumbled the Basilisk. _It is for this that I have waited so long._

"You like the taste?" said Tom. He didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad one, but he could use it. "You will do as I order, then?"

_What is your order?_

"Will you present yourself to me if I summon you?"

_If you will it._

"Good," said Tom. "Then you should go away until I summon you. Stay hidden, don't make noises, don't eat anything else—I'll find something else for you—and..."

The Basilisk waited patiently, tongue poking out every now and again to taste the air and the side of the boat stained with mermaid's blood.

"—And may I have some of your venom?"

Tom was pleased to see that the Basilisk didn't even question the order. It bent down low over the side of the boat—close enough to risk its capsizing—and opened its mouth, its breath hot and fouled
with the awful ammoniac odour of a fishmonger's offal bucket. The inside of its mouth was pink and fleshy, set with a pair of prominent fangs on the upper jaw, and a row of smaller teeth angled inward on the lower jaw.

It took a loin-girding combination of pluck and persistence to milk the venom: Tom held a pair of crystal potion vials under the tips of the Basilisk's fangs, tensed and prepared for a quick withdrawal, in the event it tried to close its mouth while his hands were still within range of its teeth. The muscles within the Basilisk's pink fleshy mouth pulsed, and out squirted a stream of fluorescent green venom. A single wayward drop sizzled where it had fallen on the boat.

Browsing through Professor Slughorn's private textbook collection, Tom had learned of the rarest and most valuable potion ingredients. Mermaid blood and Acromantula venom were both rare and relatively hard to acquire, but there were licensed purveyors, and a small black market that operated in the shadows of Knockturn Alley and the outdoor privy behind Old Ab's goat shed.

Then there was the flesh of human and unicorn, neither of them rare in their raw form, but impossible to find rendered down into usable ingredients. (Many wealthy wizarding families who had a grove of magical woodland on their estates set out salt licks to attract unicorns, the same way Muggle gentry kept swan ponds—they were considered to be the height of tasteful garden ornamentation.) The rarity of human flesh and unicorn meat was due to nothing more than simple moral censure, because there were some vague superstitions, on equal standing to old wives' tales, surrounding their harvest. A curse, a pox on one's house, excommunication from wizard Heaven, something in that vein. Tom was uncertain of the exact details, as he'd skimmed through the handwritten pages of ominous warnings in the back of Slughorn's potions book, in order to get to the good parts. The part of the book that listed the rarest ingredients of all.

Phoenix tears and Basilisk venom.

Phoenix tears were sold by the drop, and collected from wild phoenixes that shed their tears if a wizard recited a profound poem or sang a heartfelt song. The creatures were, if not sentient, then extremely sentimental; they sensed the intent of the heart, and rewarded those whose creative endeavours were delivered with sincerity. (Tom thought it silly and beneath the dignity of a proper wizard to indulge the whims of a mere animal. When had anyone ever curtseyed to a cow before taking its milk, or thanked a tree for sprouting an apple? Never.)

Basilisk venom, according to the book, was not sold in any market in the British Isles. There had been no reports of a British Basilisk sighting in centuries, and no confirmed sightings whatsoever. The bestiaries had classified Basilisks as wizard-killers, impossible to domesticate, and dangerous to approach—the same classification as Acromantulas, but the entry came with a long list of additional warnings shared by no other creature in the book. Breeding them had been unanimously banned by the magical governments of Europe, even before the Statute, and the few samples of venom allowed into the country, after a generous application of Ministry levies, were imported from Asia.

And to think that Tom Riddle had now come into the possession of such a rarity.

After the Basilisk had been sent away, its sinuous body descending into the black waters of the Lake, Tom sat down in the boat. It disturbed him to find that, in the sudden release of tension, his hand trembled in returning his wand to his robe pocket.

"You can come out now," he said, kicking the bench. "It's gone. The... Basilisk." He savoured the word. Basilisk. He liked the sound of its name. It was only natural; he had always been fond of the titles of Basileus, Imperator, and Princeps.
The Acromantula crawled out. "You spoke to it. You can speak to it."

"I told it what to do," said Tom. "And it listened. You ought to take it as an example."

"Will you feed me flesh, too?"

"Fresh meat is a privilege to be earned," Tom said. He pointed at the trunk. "You can start earning it by getting in."

He locked the Acromantula in its room and returned to the Slytherin quarters, pressing his hands to his pockets to keep his potion vials from rattling around. The vials were of premium crystal and he'd made sure that the corks were secure, but he hadn't liked the idea of the Basilisk venom spilling open in his pocket. Nor had he liked the idea of carrying a vial in his hand; he doubted that anyone would be able to identify its provenance in the few seconds it took to pass someone in the hall, but there were few potions that came in such a bright, noxious colour—and those that were, were known to be rather deadly. And not something he could explain away as a special Head Boy errand.

The Common Room was occupied by First and Second Year students too young to visit Hogsmeade, playing draughts or copying each other's homework. As he passed, they scrambled off the armchair by the fire—his armchair—but he made no expression of reproval, proceeding directly to the Seventh Year boys' dormitory.

The dormitory was empty, but the room had been cleaned and the beds made during his absence, the pyjamas that Tom's dorm mates had thrown over their bedposts washed, cleaned, and folded at the foot of each bed. Tom's pyjamas were there as well, folded so that his initials embroidered on the breast pocket were facing upward. His grandmother's work—she seemed to fear that while Tom was away at school, he would forget that he was part of the family, and so it was her duty to remind him.

The embroidery matched the initials embossed on his school trunk, another one of Mary Riddle's indulgences. Tom flipped the lid back and dug right down to the bottom of the trunk, where he'd stored his potions chest.

Within it, arranged in gleaming rows, was his collection of potions. Acromantula venom, labelled from the date of harvest, the earlier samples thin and watery and too weak to fetch a good price at market. Draught of the Living Death, fed to the Acromantula when the holidays arrived and Tom couldn't bring it meals or Vanish its wastes. And a few experimental brews of his Confusion Concoction. He'd won Slytherin a Quidditch Cup with it in Fourth Year, and although he was an adult who could cast Confundus Charms whenever he pleased, he was reluctant to discard something that had worked so well, and had given him so many good memories. (He hadn't forgotten Mrs. Cole from the orphanage, not by any measure.)

Tom set the bottled mermaid's blood into a few empty slots in the corner, rearranging the older vials to make more room.

It was then that he came across a scroll of parchment that he hadn't looked at in many months, since the beginning of the summer holidays.

File #DI-682. Persons of Interest.

There were names on the list that he'd marked after speaking to Mr. Pacek at the Grangers' home in
June. Bührmann, Eglitis, Gerdt, Grozbiecki... The names of those who sympathised with the likes of Gellert Grindelwald. Reading over the list, Tom recalled the dream he’d nurtured from Second Year, that of the fat golden medallion strung on a silk ribbon, the premier accolade of Wizarding Britain.

"How easy do you think it is to get an Order of Merlin in peacetime?"

It wasn’t peacetime now, but Tom didn’t know how long that might last. From interrogating Travers, the Ministry and the Board of Governors had stationed Aurors in Hogsmeade for the protection of the students. There was an Auror liaison who had, several times, been invited to meals at the High Table by Headmaster Dippet. Watching the table, Tom had observed the Auror’s valiant efforts in catching Dumbledore's ear, and their passionate debate which involved plenty of finger-jabbing, beard-stroking, and tablecloth strategising with salt cellars and drinking goblets.

Tom set the scroll back in the potion chest, organising the vials of Basilisk venom in the remaining slots, just as the dormitory door swung open with a creak.

"What's that smell?" came Nott’s voice from the threshold. "Who's in here?"

Tom stood up, tucking his last vial of venom under his sleeve and out of sight. "What are you doing here? I thought you were spending the afternoon in the village."

"The others wanted to try the dragon's blood whisky," said Nott, scowling. "Never liked the stuff—it gives me indigestion. What are you doing here, Riddle? Why do you smell like... is that fish?"

"Nevermind that," said Tom quickly. "Am I mis-remembering, or did the Prophet say you scored an Outstanding O.W.L of ninety-six percent in Arithmancy?"

"Ninety-six, brought up to ninety-nine with the advanced extension questions," Nott replied. "If you want help with your homework, why aren't you asking Granger? She doesn't shy away from telling everyone that she got full marks."

"I don't need help with homework," said Tom coolly. "I've more important things to attend to."

"Things like..." Nott glanced over his shoulder, then shut and locked the door. "Like the Chamber, you mean?"

Tom gave an unconcerned wave of his hand. "More important things than the Chamber."

"What!" Nott gaped at him. "But we spent—I spent—the whole of last year looking for it. And we found it! What could be more important than that?"

"The future of Magical Britain, maybe?" said Tom.

Nott didn't look impressed. "You're going to take up Sluggy's offer to join the Aurors, then."

"And sign up to spend years sitting behind a desk, memorising rules out of a book?" scoffed Tom. "I don't need to tell you that my future takes precedence above anything else."

"No, you don't," Nott agreed. "So. You want my help with an off-the-books project, without Granger. No Granger, no Aurors. I don't think I'd be wrong in guessing that this scheme you've come up with is either very dangerous, very risky, or very stupid."
"It's very worthwhile," said Tom.

"Oh, is it?" said Nott. "I'm not convinced."

"I have a plan," said Tom. The vial of Basilisk venom dropped out of his sleeve, and coming to a swift decision, he tossed it to Nott. "Catch."

"Wha—" Nott yelped, as the small glass bottle, three inches long and no broader than a man's thumb, flew through the air. Nott caught it by the tips of his fingers, a graceless fumble unworthy of the greenest reserve Seeker. "What's this, Riddle? What kind of game are you playing?"

Tom watched him, a humourless smile forming on his face. "What do you think it is?"

"What have you done now?" asked Nott, sighing deeply. He rolled the vial between his fingers, tipping it upside down, then swirling it to inspect the viscosity, clarity, and hue of the liquid within. "It's... no, it can't be..." He looked up at Tom, his eyes narrowed. "There's no possibility of flogging this off without the Department of Magical Creatures putting you at the top of their list."

"I'm not going to sell it," said Tom. "I want to use it."

"'It'," Nott said, sounding contemplative, "is under your control?"

"Unquestionably."

"Since you managed this—" Nott tapped the vial, "—and didn't get yourself killed, then I suppose I'll have to believe you."

"There's no doubting the word of an honest man," said Tom amiably. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to have a wash."

"Wait, Riddle," said Nott, holding up the vial. "Don't you want your... ah, 'parsley juice' back?"

"I told you our arrangement could be worth your while," Tom replied. "Keep it. There's more of that where it came from."

Tom picked up his pyjamas and strode to the dormitory bathroom, closing the door. When he turned on the shower tap and let the warm water rinse away the evidence of the day's labour, he heard a low, whispering voice rise up from the drainage grate beneath his feet.

_Blood of my blood..._

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