The Dark Lord's Playbook of Nefarious Misdeeds

by airgloweffect

Summary

Albus Dumbledore had a plan, it was a smart plan, a good plan, some say a great plan- to imprison the Dark Lord once and for all. He had used a page straight out Tom's playbook, except it all went to hell when Hermione got sucked in along with him. Now they are stuck together somewhere outside of time and space. Can they survive together while figuring out how to return home? Will an unexpected relationship blossom out of this hopeless situation?

Notes

This is a new story I am working on. Obviously I do not own Harry Potter and this is a work of fiction. It is not canon compliant in terms of some events. I have chose not to include dates/years as such because in the story I have referenced things that were not around in 1998. This story is fun not serious. Hope you enjoy! Your comments and feedback is much appreciated. I apologise for mistakes that I have missed.
Third Person POV (Albus Dumbledore)

A point in the past

Albus Dumbledore thought he was a good man, someone to bring order and a little bit of control to the wizarding world. After all he did beat his previous nemesis Gellert Grindelwald and in such a spectacular fashion one must say, that he found himself a little bored. So, what was one to do if one found himself in need of another nemesis -a challenge?

Create one.

However, this is not as easy as it sounds. Sure, there were plenty of dark wizards running around but none that had the right.... chutzpah. Such a shame really, that no one was intelligent enough, powerful enough and had the right je ne sais quoi. Until....

Until...Tom Riddle Jr.

Yes, Tom Riddle Jr such weird boy, an outcast. Orphan. Misunderstood. Bright intelligent eyes. Perceptive and bullied. A perfect combination if Albus thought so himself to be crafted into the ultimate opponent. With some time and manipulation. Everything would fall into place as if it was meant to be. Of course, he could have used his position and power to better the situation for the boy, but no he already had it all and besides where's the fun in that? The Order of Merlin Medal and full carte blanche as Chief Warlock, no what he needed was to remind these puttock's that he still is the best wizard since the founders. Cement his position for the rest of his life.

And this is perhaps were the plan started to unravel. He got too overconfident. Too cocky from being comfortable, too long resting on his laurels from Grindelwald's defeat. He tried to play the long game successfully....but things didn't entirely go to plan. However, he could learn to adapt to the situation, he was a great chess player. A master manipulator and tactician. He was good at reading the opposition and anticipating the moves. However, what he hadn't counted on was Tom
Riddle being just as good at the game as he was. It was frustrating.

It was infuriating.

So, the plan was put in motion, then adapted, then adapted again. Everything was going along relatively fine, except getting 'cursed' and 'murdered', was not on the cards, but Albus played them to his strengths. A year of uninterrupted planning. Plotting. Scheming the demise of the most brilliant student he had ever had not that he would have admitted that out loud to anyone. Ever. A worthy adversary. Even more so than Grindelwald. Which is why this required his most ingenious plan yet! A specially developed…curse? Well he doesn't know if it is a curse per say but a perfect prison built outside of time and space. Trapped inside a time turner. Yes, it is rather the best he has come up with and took, a lot of work. A lot of calculations. Perfecting the 'walls of the cell', the illusion. Yes, when the Wizengamot find out what he did he will be hailed a hero once again, not just a dotty old man. Powerful, but still dotty. He did have to maintain his 'for the greater good' persona after all. No one could be suspecting of his darker side. If it was up to him with no repercussions, he would have murdered that snake faced idiot years ago. Most likely at Hogwarts, when it would have been quick and clean. But then things wouldn't have led us to the situation everyone is now in. Regrettable sacrifices on both sides. Unfortunate collateral damage. That is the price of war. They knew what they were signing up for. Did they think everyone was just shooting sunshine and rainbows? He snorts at that imagery. Idiots if they truly believed just because they were on the good side then everyone would miraculously survive. With their ridiculous self-righteous moral code. While he has to push this code, he doesn't truly believe in it. No. It is a good theoretical exercise on paper but doesn't work well in practice. The problem lies with human nature. We are still savages at heart. No matter how intelligent we are as a species. We are still 98% genetically matched with chimpanzees. We haven't come that far down the evolutionary tree just yet.

But some people believe otherwise- ignorance is bliss…as they say. While two wars were not entirely what he had planned, it did frame up what he was about to do quite nicely. The endless suffering of Harry James Potter who lost both his parents to the insufferable snake faced madman, getting saved by Albus Dumbledore riding in on his metaphorical white horse to save the day. Yes, he could get behind that.

Saviour of the Wizarding World.

Has quite the ring to it. Now….the plan how to set this plan in motion.

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Hermione POV

Battle of Hogwarts
I find myself on one of the upper levels of the castle looking out at the grounds watching as some of the professors work to put up the dome of magic, a pretence of safety, though each of us know that if you think about it hard enough that this dome will only delay the inevitable. I don't mean to be pessimistic but when facing down death at the hand of Lord Voldemort's army it's hard to keep up the perky optimism. I feel Ron come up behind me, also to look out over the castle grounds. I can make out the figures of Voldemort's army gathered just beyond, but further enough away that you can't make any discernible features.

"Hermione, I was thinking..." Well that is a dangerous activity, "you know how Harry destroyed the locket, which was a horcrux with the Sword of Gryffindor and that was coated in Basilisk venom...couldn't we destroy the cup in the same way?", Ron said quietly as if just in case people could be listening which is unfortunately a very real possibility.

I turn wide eyed to Ron...understanding dawning on me on how utterly stupid we have all been in not figuring this out sooner. I whack him on the arm with an excited grin. "Ron that's brilliant".

We run off down the corridors, eventuating with us coming upon the large Hogwarts staircase that is the central hub for the chaos. Other students are panicking, their movements stilted and the look of sheer terror in their eyes, gives way to common sense. Self-preservation is the main element with all the shoving and wands raised flicking in every which way expecting a surprise attack by Death Eaters. I get shoved rather roughly from behind and nearly fall to the ground but at the last minute I stick an arm out and manage to brace myself against the side of the stairs. Saving myself from most likely being stampeded by the frightened students. I crane my head to try to find the shock of red hair, to see if Ron is still in my vicinity or got caught up in the frantic movements of the students. I see him wading his way through the throngs of students to get back to me so we can make our way down to the second floor to get to chamber of secrets through the girl's lavatory.

I feel him grip my arm and I let him pull me along silently, once we manage to get to the stairs that go down wards, we are free to ran, as we are heading in the opposite direction to everyone else. While running down the corridors dodging and jumping over fallen statues, portraits, flaming tapestries, it feels like this will never end and I come to realise how bone tired I really am. Explosions from outside light up the sky, the varying colours casting a kaleidoscope of light on the walls and floor. They rock the foundations of the castle in a relentless onslaught, a terror filled reminder of the ominous clock ticking down until they manage to breach the shield. I can feel my heartbeat wildly at the thought of having to face down hundreds of death eaters. I'm scared. I blink away tears, so I don't lose my footing. We have to move faster. The cup needs to be destroyed quickly. We are running out of time not just because of the domed shield but also because of Voldemort. He will come after Harry.

We look around frantically once we reach the entry to the girl’s bathroom. No one is around as another explosion rocks the castle. It sounded closer, thus louder. You can see the dust heavy and thick in the air. I cringe at the thought of having to breathe that in. We walk in and it looks much the same, almost a time capsule of the era that once was when Voldemort was a boy. I catch sight of us in one of the mirrors, we look a sight. Cuts, bruises and dirt coating every inch of us; my braid half pulled out and matted. We looked worse for wear. But now was not the time to think about appearances.
Ron moves forward towards the tap with the Slytherin sigil on it and has a few torturous attempts at getting the parseltongue correct. I shiver as he finally gets close enough to the pronunciation that it startles me a little once the scraping sound of the sink moving out of the way revealing the hole in the floor permeates the air. Do we really have to go down the hole? I was so not looking forward to this. Ron waves for me to go first, and I close my eyes and drop down into the hole and am immediately sliding down the twisted tunnels and being deposited on to a rather large pile of bones. I quickly shift out of the way as much as one can while sitting on bones when I hear Ron coming. There is an 'ompf' and the displaced air creating a small breeze of dust and we cough.

"Doesn't look like much has changed since it was last opened, if there is that much dust floating around down here", I remark as we walk around another pile of bones, and the tunnel opens up into a small entry way- a wall covered in serpents entwined together. I remember that piece of information when Harry recounted the battle with Tom while saving Ginny. The hatch itself is still open, thank god because there was no way we probably would been able to fake enough hissing sounds to get it to open.

"Ready?", I look to Ron who is has a serious look on his face, this the most serious I have ever seen him. We are well aware of the stakes here if we don't destroy this horcrux. Ron helps me up onto the platform, why there is not an extra step I'll never know. A small innocuous observation delays, the fear welling upside me. I feel Ron come up beside me and he takes my hand. Like holding on to each other will anchor our fear and stop it from running away and becoming unmanageable. It's comforting. I gulp. We cross the threshold into the main chamber. It was nothing like I had imagined. I was expecting it to be more… villainous in the interior…. but it was dark, dank with stagnant water that hadn't returned to wherever it goes. Instead it was a shrine, a homage to the Slytherin house symbol. It was still unsettling in atmosphere with Salazar's angry bearded face agape at the end of the pathway. It was lined again with many serpents rising from the water, all posed like they were on the verge of striking at us as we walked past. The bony skeleton of the enormous Basilisk lay like an offering it was, just off centre. I'm surprised I didn't notice it sooner considering the size, but I was too caught up with themed decor.

"I'll get it", Ron broke the silence, of just our laboured breathing. I hadn't realised how close I was to hyperventilating. This place while humorous in its own way still absolutely scared the living day lights out of me.

I watched as Ron tentatively gripped a fang being careful not to nick himself on the tip. He yanked sideways and the tooth snapped cleanly off. He turned holding it up like a prize and I reached into my beaded bag to get out the Hufflepuff cup. The Horcrux must have sensed its impending demise and let out a shriek. I cupped my ears to sound and let the goblet clang ungracefully against the moist concrete. I reached out gritting my teeth against the sound, in an unsaid directive for Ron to hand me the fang.

He relinquished it looking like he was unaffected by the noise. I breathed in a deep breath and brought the fang down in one swift movement, ignoring the images flashing through my mind's eye. It pierced the cup in a way that it naturally shouldn’t, and blood oozed from the wound.
Another ear-piercing screech (which Ron was also affected) and a upswell of rising water came crashing down out of seemingly nowhere, drenching our clothes. I felt like a drowned rat, at least it cleaned off some of the dirt clinging to our flesh like a second skin. I laughed, I was so twisted with emotion that I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Ron caught up in the small joyous moment in this otherwise depressing situation, moved to try to kiss me. I turned my head away and he caught my cheek. I never had any romantic notions towards one of my best friends. Contrary to popular opinion. Some bouts of jealousy, looking back could be construed as jealous romantic affections. But it is more to do with being left behind, a fifth wheel if you will.

"I'm sorry Ron I just don't feel that way", I honestly didn't want a pity kiss, or caught up in the moment kiss that either of us will regret later. Besides if Ron honestly felt that way about me, he should have done something sooner. Not saying I would have returned the sentiments, but I didn't want to have to reject him right now in this moment. It makes me feel like dirt.

"Sorry Hermione, I just thought that you always felt that way, and since we could you know like die soon that we should express those feelings", Ron looked hopeful, but it slightly annoyed me that he would bring it up now. And I would be the bad guy in this situation. Just because we could potentially die soon, doesn't mean we need to start shouting from the roof tops about our feelings. Well you never know it may drive Voldemort away with all the fluffy emotions. But getting off track with that thought train.

"Ron, I haven't had those feelings, but can we discuss this later? Time is rather of the essence in this situation. We can talk about it after we defeat Snake-Man Ok?", I rubbed his arm reassuringly, he just nodded. Phew, I dodged a bullet there. He is my friend I don't really want to hurt his feelings, but in the middle of a battle is not the time. I'm sure some people would disagree with me on that.

We walked silently back to the bathroom, I turned had one last look at the tunnel hoping that nobody will ever see the Chamber of Secrets again. Dust and debris exploded inwards as a spell shot through the wall. We ducked with our wands raised ready to fight off whoever shot the spell. But no one came through the wall so it may have been a ricocheted spell.

"Come on let's keep going we need and go and find Harry", we remained a high alert shooting off spells here and there to assist people as we ran past, but never directing engaging anyone. It made me feel guilty, but Harry was the priority.

We ended back at the main staircase and nearly ran into Harry at full pelt.

"Harry!", I grabbed his jacket, him skidding to an abrupt halt but slipped backwards because of his forward momentum.
"I destroyed the tiara, did you-"

"Yes we did it. Do you have any idea what the last one is?"

"I'm pretty sure that it is Nagini"

"That giant snake? Damn", Ron said looking surprised by this revelation. I wasn't all that surprised, it made sense that he would have turned that snake into a horcrux….he loved that thing for lack of a better word.

"Ok, well how are we going to kill it? It rarely leaves his side and that in itself is the crux of the problem-", I was cut off by screaming and then dead quiet. You could feel the magic burrowing inside your mind. It was unpleasant and a little painful. Then a voice, his voice amplified almost like he was using a large megaphone, but instead it was all in our minds. I couldn't help but be slightly impressed by that feat of magic alone.

"You have fought valiantly…. but in vain. I do not wish this. Every drop of magical blood spilled is a terrible waste. I therefore command my forces to retreat. In their absence, dispose of your dead with dignity. Treat your injured" the violent coiled serpent hissed into the minds around the castle, the insistent hiss pressing down upon our consciousness. It makes me feel nauseas to have this unstoppable intrusion. There is a beat of silence, louder than any scream from battle. "Harry Potter, I speak now directly to you. On this night you have allowed your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. There is no greater dishonour. Join me in the forbidden forest and confront your fate. Should you do so I give my word that no other life will be lost on this night. You have one hour. If, at the end of that time, you have not given yourself up, then I shall punish every last man, woman, and child who tries to conceal you from me" Voldemort releases our minds from the corrupted magic stifling the air and it recedes much like a storm clearing.

"Harry you can't go and sacrifice yourself; we haven't destroyed all the horcruxes!" Ron virtually screamed in his face. I knew by the look on Harry's face that this wasn't up for argument, he had already made up his mind about what he was going to do. Honestly, I was feeling like I was drowning. Either way people were going to die, it was a lose- lose situation. We just needed to get that damn snake away from his side.

"We're coming with you", I said raising my voice. I lifted up my beaded bag and fumbled around trying to find the D.A galleon. Maybe with all of us there we could distract, it was really our only shot at this. Voldemort himself was the strongest of the lot even in his currently weakened state. I secretly had admired his strength and commitment, just not the way he was using them.

"Hermione what plan are you cookin' up?" I rolled my eyes, holding up the galleon I had retrieved from my bag.

"I'm going to call the D.A and we can all go down to the forest or whoever wants too. I realise that some people are going to want to check on loved ones…. But we just need a couple more people so we can try to distract Nagini”, it wasn't a great plan, but it was something.
Perhaps thirty minutes had passed in the time we decided on a plan and wandered into the Great Hall. There were already lines of people who had died in the first half of the battle. I tried not to let it distract me from our current predicament. We needed to focus if we had any hope of this hair-brained plan succeeding.

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Out in the Forbidden Forest

We stood out in a clearing that Voldemort had created because it just didn't seem natural. Harry was out in front with Ron and I on either side along with members of the D.A and some Order of The Phoenix. We came with the aim to distract and perhaps finish this once and for all if it came down to it.

"Harry you came….I admit I am surprised", he had a hissing drawl, it was a strange combination but he made it work somehow. I kept inquisitive eyes on him. It was hard to look away, he drew such a presence around him it was little wonder so many people followed him. He had a natural charm that Dumbledore didn't have. I wonder if it was a pre-requisite for villains, part of their playbook. Or just him. I felt his eyes flick to mine, and he held my gaze for what seemed like eternity but was actually mere seconds. I felt a mild thrill run up my spine at having his attention, but also scared beyond belief- the feeling akin to being prey to his predator. Harry moved slightly in front of me to stop Voldemort from looking at me again. Almost everyone caught the subtle movement. No one dared say anything.

"Well you gave me no choice Tom", Harry said reeling for his attention to return to focus on him. Tom/Voldemort scowled at being referred to by his given name. His unusual red eyes flashed in fury- barely restrained. Was Harry trying to provoke him into losing his control? Because that could either be a really good strategy or essentially condemn us all to death. Voldemort is more than capable at duelling multiple people at once, whereas most of us can barely keep up with one person.

Caught up in my thoughts I didn't notice what Harry had said and was the only one to not have raised my wand. I felt Voldemort's eyes on mine assessing… calculating something. Most likely if me not raising my wand meant anything. Nope, just me not paying attention to the male posturing. I tried to play it off as something I had meant to do. I looked around taking the whole scene in….something felt off but I couldn't pin point what it was.
I caught the attention of Harry’s best friend the girl Granger… or something, a mud blood but an attractive one at that. She was smart, and I was rather partial to a keen mind. In another time and place I would have tried to secure her as an apprentice. She would have done rather nicely. She seems intrigued by me and I cannot help but preen slightly under her inquisitive gaze. I watch her out of my periphery, while keeping my main focus on Potter and whatever he is yabbering on about. I see her look around and frown, she looks perplexed. Something is wrong… I pull my full attention on to the girl. Taking notice of her body language and minor non-verbal cues. I send tendrils of my magic out, making some of my people shudder at the feel of it. I can feel it now, the magic is…off. I raise my hand for Potter to cease talking, only earning more shouts of protest in return. I cannot help but roll my eyes. Their stupidity astounds me.

"Something is wrong", I project my voice loudly, most people listen to what I am saying the 'light' side seem to think it is a rouse of some degree.

"No, he's right, can't you feel it?", Miss Granger, says whipping around looking at her people. They stop talking and look at her like she has grown three heads. Finally, someone can talk some sense into these imbeciles. I will look back on this moment and realise what a stupid and amateur mistake I made. I turned my back on my enemy.

I _turned_ my back.

I heard a few yells and screams behind me, I slowly turned to see what the all the ruckus was about. I see Harry running towards me and the girl trying to grab him. Everyone just watched like a train wreck about to happen that you couldn't take your eyes off. I vaguely heard Bellatrix cackle something and shoot off a few spells, but I lazily redirected them. I didn't want this all to end because of some hasty decision. Hermione managed to grab Harry and pull him back, however this made her trip on her footing and I ended up with an arm full of mudblood.

This is what you get when you let school children make all the decisions. Where there seriously no adults running the show? Do they think that I am not worthy enough for more than school children’s attentions?

I looked down at her and she was looking back at me with comically wide eyes, I raised a brow. Neither of us moved. Everyone was stock still and silent, unsure with how to proceed. My mind was whirring at a million miles an hour trying to work out how to use this situation to my advantage. Because of this odd occurrence everyone was caught off guard…when…well I could barely process who the fuck I was looking at but none other than Albus grey-bearded arsehole Dumbledore. In the fucking flesh. I had subtly pushed Miss Granger behind me and
moved to completely face this supposed dead man. I could still feel Miss Granger clutching the back of my robes, but I will analyse that at another time.

"Dumbledore!", Harry yelled out, scampering off the ground to a standing position looking just as shocked as everybody else was. Mmm…. So, this was not planned. Because I focused on Harry for a split second, I missed Dumbledore throwing something at me, it was on a glittering gold chain. I just watched it sail and land in front of me. I didn't move to retrieve it off the ground. He chanted something, swirling his wand in the air and I tried throwing up a shield, but it was no use and then I felt myself being unceremoniously sucked into a portal the size of a key hole, much like a portkey. And all I could think was fuck.

Albus Dumbledore POV

As I watched Tom disappear into my perfectly crafted prison, I felt a great sense of satisfaction at ending this war. That it all worked out. Everyone was stunned at seeing me alive and that is why I chose this particular moment to strike. To catch Tom off guard. I took a page out of his playbook.

What I was not expecting was the angry face of Harry Potter staring up at me.

“What the hell did you do? Where did you send him?”, I was taken back by the venom in his voice, I was confused was this not what they wanted to rid the earth of Voldemort for once and for all?

I summoned the time turner to my hands wandlessly and placed it around my neck, nobody was having access to this chain.

“That is information that nobody but me is having”, I looked down sternly at the incensed boy.

“Did you not see Hermione? She was right there with him! He stood in front of her (he frowned)… which was weird in itself but nonetheless she got sucked into” he swished his hand around the time turner “where that went. So, we need to get her out or both either way I want Hermione back!”

I stared back at Harry thinking this was not planned. If it wasn’t for all the yelling and the fact that I had an audience, I would have just left the situation as is. Like I said previously casualties of war and all that. One person’s sacrifice for the lives of many.

“Let me think on it”, and this was me being honest. I did have to think on it because Voldemort was never supposed to get out of this prison. I needed to think of how to reverse this.
A/N: the next chapter and the aftermath of being sucked into the time turner. This story is sort of the case where the readers know a little more about what is going on than the characters. I did my best to describe historical London, so I hope I set the scene ok (but really just try to imagine the Sherlock Holmes movie with Robert Downy Jr). The painting series I referenced by William Hogarth is real and really depressing. I left the chapter where I thought it should end. Not much Tom in this one, mostly about Hermione dealing with the situation and getting caught up in something.

BACK IN TIME?

Hermione POV

Inside the time turner

I could feel myself get sucked into the portkey well at least that is what it felt like. One minute I am standing behind Voldemort clutching at his robe like a frightened schoolgirl and the next I am deposited…where exactly? How did this happen? I felt stupid for not paying attention in the Forbidden Forest completely. Dumbledore caught us all completely off guard and something was definitely wrong. He was supposed to be dead and so I found myself clinging to the back of Voldemort's robes, even more surprising was that he had let me. Even gently nudging me behind him…it was an odd gesture for someone so cruel and ruthless. I couldn't process this. It…. just…. I need time and space to think. I was so overwhelmed.

I looked around at where we are, everything was so foreign but strangely familiar at the same time. There were no skyscrapers cutting into the skyline or motor cars honking at the traffic congestion. No there was still plenty of buildings and the bridge being built across the river, there were sailboats and coal powered boats that chugged on the water emitting thick black smoke. The roads were semi paved, what wasn't paved was covered in a thick layer of horse manure. Horses neighed, their hooves clopping rhythmically, men shouting and bells ringing. We looked down at the city scene before us. I knew where we were and roughly the time period.
London, England

Possibly late 1700s early 1800s.

I sucked in a deep breath to try to prevent the panic that was rushing through me, to get a full grip on myself before I had a full-blown panic attack. This was disastrous, how were we going to get back? How the fuck did we end up in here in the first place? What were we going to do for food? For shelter? We had no money and no possessions on us. I slumped back on the ground. I really wanted to be repulsed by sitting on the filth and grime, but I just couldn't summon the feeling to care.

Anger simmered underneath. It was his fault, if he didn't start this/that stupid war then we wouldn't be here, and I would be back at Hogwarts. I knew it was completely irrational, but I needed to direct my anger somewhere and he was the only person around for it.

I turned my head ready to spit fire at him, rip him to shreds with my words; cut him down. At first, I blinked, my anger on hold as I took him in. He didn't resemble the snake faced man Voldemort was back in the forest. No...this was a man in his late thirties, with dark curly hair, steel blue grey eyes, soft pink lips, chiselled jaw and high cheek bones. He was devastatingly gorgeous. So, this is what Voldemort would have looked like if he didn't make all those horcruxes. Still...he is the one to blame. I narrowed my eyes and he glared back at me; jaw clenched.

"You villainous arsehole, this is all your fault. With your war mongering and pitiful attempts at trying to take over the wizarding world. You got us into this mess and so you better be working on a way to get us out of it!", I was so worked up and overwrought, that I didn't care that I looked like a petulant child chucking a tantrum on the ground. I looked weak, the one thing he absolutely despised.

I was frightened, more so than I have ever been before. And here I was stuck in the past with the Dark Lord.

"I hate you", I sobbed my voice cracking. I picked myself up off the ground, clutching at my skirts trying to brush them off. I turn to run off so I can think and process this whole event, but the chill in his voice stops me momentarily.

"Miss Granger, don't go doing anything stupid now. Realise what time we are in", his face was stoic like perfectly sculpted granite, betraying nothing of how he felt about the situation. There was a hardness in his eyes that was promising retribution once he caught me again. I shook it off and ran off, after 10 minutes of running and having some time to cool off and as the reality of the situation started to sink in, I realised what a mistake I had made. I was lost and alone, here in historical London. It would have been better to stick with the devil I know than be faced with a night on the streets, alone. I was a young unwed woman; I was little more than property to men. I could end up kidnapped and sold. The reality of the situation once again, looming heavy on my
conscious. I stopped and sunk low gripping my hair, I couldn't help the sob that escaped my throat. I just needed a minute. Anyone would panic if they were thrust back into the past and ripped away from everything they ever knew.

I felt a hand touch my shoulder, and I jerked back looking up from my hands, wide eyed. It was a woman, so I relaxed marginally.

"'Ello dearie, you look like you could use a pick me up", I took stock of the woman with her hand held out for me to take. She was blonde haired with brown eyes and not much older than me. She had on a tight corset which showed her assets (breasts) off in a rather...well I guess the word would be display? And a long pale blue over skirt with multiple layers of petticoats. She looked relatively clean compared to some of the people I had passed, covered from head to foot in soot. I hated feeling dirty and I was used to a level of cleanliness that far exceeded their hopes on the matter.

"What's ya nam' girl?", I reluctantly took her proffered hand and let her pull me up, she was a fraction taller than I was and I had never before felt like a young girl until now. She pulled me along down some back street and I started to get worried was this a ruse?

"Hermione, and yours?", she smiled a blinding smile, except her teeth were alot left to be desired. I felt bad being the daughter of dentists and how much I am unwittingly going to stand out amongst the poorer class.

"'Ngela, come met the girls, 'ermione. They'll 'ove sweet innocent you", she tugged me along down some more streets with all types of men leering and jeering as we walked past, I swear I even felt a hand grab my arse at one point. A small part of me a rather traitorous part wished that the dark lord? Voldemort? Tom? (I wonder what he would call himself in this time) was here. I would feel safer as ridiculous as that sounds.

"Where are we going Angela?", we take another left and I am faced with buildings a few stories high, with washing slung over the balconies or just in general flung out the windows, chamber pots stacked in rows, general filth everywhere. It smells horrid. We are just missed by someone tipping their laundry water out onto the street, I squeak as I duck out of the way. This must be the slums of London, or at least a slum. I don't want to be here; I can feel tears prick at my eyes.

"Druary Lane", my blood pressure plummets as I swear all the blood goes to my feet. I stumble apparently on nothing and nearly trip face first into the back of Angela. Oh god, I must have looked like the delicious innocent prey about to be served up. If the look on these men's faces were any indication- fresh meat has arrived. I lamented the loss of my wand which I hadn't had to think about until now. I could feel the magic thrumming underneath the surface of my skin itching to get out, but something was blocking it. I for all tense and purposes was a normal muggle. I

We stopped out the front of a building with multiple men loitering out the front. Oh god, I must have looked like the delicious innocent prey about to be served up. If the look on these men's faces were any indication- fresh meat has arrived. I lamented the loss of my wand which I hadn't had to think about until now. I could feel the magic thrumming underneath the surface of my skin itching to get out, but something was blocking it. I for all tense and purposes was a normal muggle. I
shuddered under their lecherous gazes. This reminded me of the series of paintings done by William Hogarth titled 'The Harlot's Progress', where the woman gets tricked into prostitution with a sad end of her dying of venereal disease. Coincidentally on Drury Lane.

"Ome on you'll be fine 'ermione", she tugs me up the steps and I hold my breath as one of the men grab me round the waist. I freeze up at the unexpected touch. I'm by no means a blushing virgin, but I have no attraction for any of these men.

"Let me go!", I yell angrily as I stomped down on his roes with the heel of my shoe. He yelps and pushes himself off me. He raises a hand to slap me, but Angela stops him.

"Now now Henry, this isn't a new girl she's just a friend", I hope her statement means they'll keep their word, but I doubt it as I see the look in Henry's eye. He will come for me if I'm not careful. I let out the breath I was holding.

"Thanks for that Angela", she beams another impossible smile at me. We enter the establishment and I desperately tried not to stare. In the main area, lines of men were waiting outside doors and paying up their tabs. I was gobsmacked with the amount of people. I had never been into a brothel before, nor had I even thought about what it looked like on the inside. For the most part people were waiting patiently for their turn, somewhere a little drunk and promptly escorted out by the 'brothel bully'. I guess the modern term would equate to a bouncer(?)

A couple where giving a show against a wall, clearly, they liked to be watched. It was eye opening; I will have to wash my brain in bleach to extract that mental image. His pants around his ankles, bucking wildly into the willing woman. Her loud pleasurable exclamations were clearly put on because no one would scream that loud or just in general sound like that. It was too pornish. Very over the top. I wouldn't have been surprised if she was faking the entire thing. Then he grunted at his own release. I felt disgusted and a little violated. And I was the one transfixed. Angela tapped me on shoulder and shook her head. I schooled my features to look as neutral as I could.

Angel pulled me along, she held my hand steadfastly this time in case I got knocked or pulled aside. I assumed we were going to her room and I wondered what I would see. Did Angela take her clients there? Or was there another room? I wasn't sure of the etiquette in a brothel. I laughed to myself etiquette in a brothel. We climbed a set of rickety wooden stairs narrow enough for only one and a half people to pass. A fire hazard of I ever saw one. The walls were thin so you could hear all sorts of moans, groans, screams, slaps and other sexual assorted noises. I felt like a voyeur intruding on peoples most intimate moment, but that's just it isn't it? These weren't intimate encounters, just a business transaction. The men getting the better part of the deal, a warm body for the night and the women having to service multiple clients, trying to earn money anyway they can to feed themselves. The inequality galled me. Women were nothing in this society and it made me angry.

There were a couple of men hanging around outside the various rooms and even one getting fellatio by a middle-aged cubby woman who appeared to have sores on her face. I cringed at the thought of what STDs these people had. They seriously needed sexual education. I will never be having sex again at this rate. This experience has scarred me for life, because there was no way I was letting a guy wearing sheep intestine as a condom let his penis anywhere near my vagina. Yes, that is what they were using as prophylactic for pregnancy. I felt the sudden urge to reach for a bar of soap. As
we approached the couple, I got my arse slapped hard- what is it with these people and touching my arse?

"Hey lil lady up for some fun on my cock?", I turned to glare at this deviant, but found myself momentarily stunned- he had his pants undone with his penis out of his breeches and waving it around like a fun toy. I was scandalized. I was speechless at the shamelessness this man had to flap his penis out in public and it wasn't even that impressive. Besides I don't even want to imagine were he has been sticking that thing.

"She's speechless by tha sigh' o' ya dick Micah", I scrunched my face up in revulsion.

"Ah no-", before I could finish my scathing retort, Angela cut me off. "Jus' move along Micah, Mel will be ready soon", she squeezed my hand letting me know this interaction was over and to keep moving. We took a couple of steps only to see the man receiving oral sex to pull out and come all over the face of the woman. I sighed and looked to the ceiling for guidance. Could this day get any worse?

Don' worry 'ermione, it's just sex. Are you still pure?", she asked as we paused in front of what I gathered to be the door to her room. I was taken aback not expecting her to be quite so blunt.

"No no I'm not. I'm just not used to sex being quite so open and men making sexual overtures like that. I find it a little offensive and degrading", she gives me a funny look, like she can't quite decide what to make of me. I am still a modern independent woman at heart even though I am currently stuck in a society designed to squash that.

"Jus be carful what you say. You're smart but innocent people will try to 'ake advant'age o' that. This is my room, you can stay 'ere the night or two, get fed and decide what ya doin'", I walked over to the second empty cot and sat on the edge. It looked semi clean and I needed a place to stay for the night so I could find Tom in the morning. I doubted if I was going to get much sleep.

"Ermione I 'ave to go work now I'll see ya later? Just don' open the door for anyone, ok?", I nodded. There was no way in hell I was opening that door to anyone. I didn't want any of those men outside to think I was 'in business'. I would keep myself occupied somehow. I watched her walk out and close the door; I couldn't help but feel the sadness come over me at her situation. She looked to be only a few years older than me and had to sell herself to live. Was she forced into this lifestyle? Where are her parents? I sighed and curled up on the bed, my hand touched the simple unremarkable gold chain around my neck. I had completely forgotten about my transfigured beaded bag. Touching it made me feel safer; a comfort from home. I closed my eyes. I felt bone weary; I can't even remember how long I've been awake for, a couple of days at least. I thought perhaps I should have a nap to refresh myself, maybe I would think a bit clearer and not be so strung out emotionally.

I woke to a banging on the door, at first, I wasn't sure it was this door was being knocked on. Then the handle rattled and jiggled, it was like explosion going off in the otherwise silence of the room. I froze in mild panic unsure how I should proceed, so I just remained quiet and hoped they went away. The door opened creaking slightly and the candlelight from the hallway spilled into the room. It illuminated Angela's bed not mine. The voice spoke...
"'Ere pretty pretty"
Extra Ordinary Death Threats

Chapter Notes

A/N BEWARE!!!! I am placing a trigger warning for this chapter. If you feel that you cannot read an attempted rape scene then skip this chapter you won’t miss much. I purposely wrote it this way in two parts, so people could jump to the next chapter if they are not comfortable with the content.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

EXTRA ORDINARY DEATH THREATS

Hermione POV

The Brothel

On Drury Lane

"Ere pretty pretty"

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So, this was it? How I was most likely to get raped and murdered in a slum’s brothel? After everything I have been through this is how my story ends?

I could feel the magic beneath my skin thrashing around violently but restricted from being unleashed it was uncomfortable. My mind thinks about the time turner fleetingly but now is not the time. I certainly was going to go down fighting. I didn't survive Bellatrix's' torture only to die at the hands of a disgruntled Micah, because I didn't find his penis waving favourable. He must have a really fragile ego.

I scampered up the cot, so I was seated. I was very aware that I was cornered. He was blocking any hope of an exit I had but left it open. That wasn't as comforting as it may seem, I got the feeling screaming didn't necessarily help in these situations, people just turned a blind eye, or they thought it was a rape fantasy. I shivered.
I would not cry; I would not give him the satisfaction. So, I glared as fiercely as I could, I'm sure Voldemort would have been proud of that look. It was one of his signature expressions after all.

"So feisty", he was at the edge of the bed now and my heart was pounding in my ears. Other than Draco in third year I have never punched anyone else so I knew it would hurt to assault a grown man. The whiskey he had drank was seeping through his pores and the smell was overpowering. The sickeningly sweet tang it had, made my stomach roll.

I waited until he got close enough that a swing of my fist would connect with his face. Part of me thought that this was a bad idea, but I couldn't see any other way around it. Even in the badly lit room I managed to hit my target. He stumbled back probably due to shock rather than the force of my punch, but it still would have hurt. While he was distracted, I raised my foot and kicked out getting him in the abdomen, I went to do it again, but he moved quicker than I thought he would in his drunken state and grabbed my right ankle. I violently kicked out with my left, cracking him in the forearm holding my ankle but he wouldn't let go. I tried again and again, but he just held on tighter. In my desperate state I just started kicking wherever I could get contact. He managed to get my other leg after I got a direct hit on his sternum. Tears started to silently fall as he dragged me down the bed, my skirts pushing up against the friction of the sheet, exposing my naked thighs to his appraisal. The hungry look in his eyes made bile burn the back of my throat. "Well look at that it's better than what I imagined" he slid a heavily calloused hand up my thigh, I squirmed and wiggled trying to shake his hand off but he dug his fingertips into the muscle and I stopped because fuck it hurt. I let out a whimper and he laughed. I will definitely have bruises to show for this. I needed to distract him from touching me further so I did what I could with my hands. My right still hurt badly from punching him earlier, but I figured slapping and scratching could do just as well.

"STOP!" He bellowed. I did so out of instinct, the yell scared me. Micah brought his other hand down that didn't have my thigh in a vice grip across my face. My head snapped to the side, the loud crack of skin on skin echoed in the room. I felt blood pool in my mouth; I felt my bottom lip split from the impact. He did it again. Blood and saliva dribbled down my chin as I began to realise the hopelessness of my predicament. I couldn't fight off this man, I was much smaller and weighed a lot less than he did.

"'Erves you right gurl, just lay 'ere and enjoy it. I 'no I will, the innocent ones always 're", I closed my eyes I didn't want to watch as I heard him release himself from his pants. The heavy fabric rustling a little as it drops to the floor.

I tried clamping my thighs closed as best I could, the muscles quivering in strain. They ached as he yanked them apart forcing them in a direction, I didn't want them too.

"Look at me girly, I wan' you to watch me break you 'part. 'Ave you 'ad a cock in ya before? Or am I the 'irst?", he was vile taunting me like that, I could feel the stomach acid burning. I was trying not the vomit as I met his eyes. I tried to hide the fear not give him the control he wanted. My eyes
flickered down to his groin, at the engorged appendage jutting out angry and swollen red. I could see fluid leaking out the tip, tears burned my eyes as more fell, he was enjoying my fear, my helplessness, my vulnerability. I didn't want him to ruin me in this way. I was a Gryffindor, a strong stubborn woman. I would not let this break me and certainly won't let him win. The hand that had hit me slid up to the junction of my thigh and hip, pulling roughly at my undergarments. I wiggled and twisted my body away with one last ditch effort as I let out a strangled cry, preparing for the violence I knew was coming.

"Do that and I will slit your throat where you stand", a chilling voice broke the heavy anticipatory tension in the air. I turned my head almost too afraid to look, but there was something about the voice that was familiar. A few yells and screams came from the hallway and spilled out into the room. A couple of people holding large candles which illuminated the room so you could actually see more detail. I recognized Angela and the bouncer from earlier but not anyone else. I felt everything close in and I was on the verge of a panic attack.

"Hermione", I zoned in on the voice and found the hard gaze of Voldemort. I sagged in relief. He found me. And he looked positively murderous. He had one of Micah's arms pulled around his back at an awkward angle and was holding a dagger at his throat. Micah's movements where further restricted by the fact that his pants were still around his ankles, complete with his penis still out for everyone to see and it had yet to wilt. I hadn't moved other than to close my legs and sit up slightly. I could imagine the bruise blooming on my face judging by the gasp from Angela and the clenching of Tom's jaw.

"Oh 'Ermione!", but she didn't move because Tom had strategically positioned himself between everyone and him.

"What is goin' on 'ere?", I'm assuming this man was the 'pimp' of this brothel. The owner of all the girls.

"I've come to take back what is mine", Tom spoke with such cold aloofness it was spine chilling if you weren't used to it. If these people were smarter and better educated, you could tell the both of us were not of this place or era.

"Who say she yours, I was 'ere 'irst. You cana 'ave your turn after", Micah the idiot chose that moment to be brave. Tom was already a coiled snake on the verge of striking and that comment pushed him just a little further over the edge. There was a beat of silence, before he moved.

Micah was pushed forward, and Tom brought his heavy boot down on his back, effectively squashing him like a bug into the ground. It was a power play. He was playing the room showing them he was to be feared and not trifled with. He lunged downwards grabbing a fist full of Micah's long filthy scraggly hair and yanking his head back exposing his throat to everyone in the room. A forced submission. Tom shifted his weight so his knee was in the middle of Micah's back, still pulling at the hair. Micah looked like he was in the most uncomfortable Cobra Pose possible. The symbolism was not lost on me and at any other moment in time I would have laughed.

"No one touches her but me", the dagger still pushed firmly against his neck. Tom bared his perfectly white teeth, yet another contrast between him and them. He was dressed in black breeches with his black boots and a white long-sleeved tunic shirt tucked into the pants. He looked
more like a swashbuckling pirate than a powerful wizard. I will forever be in his debt for this.

"Yours mate? Ther's plenty o' girls to go round, no need to fight over 'em", the 'pimp' I assume, trying to placate Tom who thought he was just another disgruntled John who couldn't share.

"What part of she's mine, do you thick headed illiterate ingrates not understand? She isn't a prostitute, so I am taking her home." He roughly released Micah's head, letting it fall to the floor then stomping on it. You could hear the bone crack breaking his nose. He did it all without taking his eyes off the group. Tom raised the dagger pointing it them about to make another point or threat. "Stop me and I murder every single one of you painfully... slowly... until you are screaming for mercy and I will savour your pitiful cries as I string you up by your flayed skin from the lamp posts", he now looked back down at Micah kicking him in the head to get him to roll over, unfortunately he hadn't spent the time to pull his pants up.

"If you ever touch her again or any woman without consent and I hear about it...what I just promised will be fucking sunshine and rainbows compared to what I will do to you", his threat was taken in silent contemplation, I would hate to think about what he would do if anyone dared speak out. It would probably end up in a blood bath. You could very nearly taste the fear wafting off the group, Tom looked dangerous, he sounded dangerous, he was dangerous as he promised death and violence. He was the alpha male in a room full of lesser beings. He turned to look at me and carefully walked over, his face not showing a trace of emotion. His eyes...his eyes soften noticeably as he looked me over. He bent down crouching on the balls of his feet at the edge of the bed. He was making himself smaller, rather than leaning over me. I was touched by his consideration. He helped fix my undergarments (how embarrassing) and lifted me up bridal style. I nuzzled my face into his neck, and he let me, I felt silly for doing it but I needed comfort from someone familiar even if it was Voldemort. In a twisted way I trusted him. He came for me, in my hour of need even after I shouted at him and ran off.

He held me tightly as if he thought they would lunge and try to take me away from him. I had my arms looped around his neck and my eyes closed, I didn't want to look at these people or this place any longer.

Tom carried me the entire time, I was honestly expecting him to dump me on to the ground once we were out of sight. But he didn't. We or rather he walked for some time, I wondered where he was taking me hoping we were not going to be separated again. I grasped his shirt tighter. He still hadn't said a word. I sighed quietly against his neck, it's not like he is doing this without an ulterior motive. He didn't save me because it was the right thing to do, and how did he even find me? I was brought out of my thinking by Tom tapping on my thigh. I lifted my head carefully, so I didn't accidently bump my head against his. He was making himself smaller, rather than leaning over me. I was touched by his consideration. He helped fix my undergarments (how embarrassing) and lifted me up bridal style. I nuzzled my face into his neck, and he let me, I felt silly for doing it but I needed comfort from someone familiar even if it was Voldemort. In a twisted way I trusted him. He came for me, in my hour of need even after I shouted at him and ran off.

"You don't want to know", he must have seen the question telegraphed on my face as I opened my mouth to ask. The look he gave me in return said this matter was closed for discussion.
He let me enter first (such a gentleman), of course it was dark so I couldn't see anything. He waved his hand and candles in the immediate vicinity burst into flame. I was slightly jealous of his wandless and nonverbal ability.

"Bedrooms are upstairs. I'll heat up some water for us so we can clean up", he walked away before I could answer. I sighed, what did I expect? That we were suddenly going to be friends?

I picked up one of the candle holders as I walked past so, I could see while walking up the stairs but also light any that were on the way.

I picked the bedroom directly across room the one Tom/Voldemort had taken up habitation in.

"I presumed you would take this bedroom", his voiced echoed in the empty hallway.

"I...", he narrowed his eyes slightly, so I stopped talking.

"I know Miss Granger, I'm not one of those blithering idiots you call friends", he scrunched his face up in distaste at the word friends. I scowled and pointed my finger into his chest.

He just rolled his eyes "Oh save it Miss Granger for someone who is actually intimidated by that, and didn't anyone ever tell you it's rude to point?", he brushed past me with the large bucket filled with water and poured it into the tub in my room. He stuck his hand in and muttered something that I couldn't make out and soon I could see steam rising from the tub.

The towel he had slung over his shoulder now rested on the bed for me to use. As he walked out, he stopped and placed a hand on my shoulder. "There is bread in the kitchen if you are hungry", he had taken a few steps before my brain caught up, I whirled around and grabbed his arm. He stilled and I could see his jaw tick. I immediately dropped my hand, realising my mistake. I looked down at my shoes twinging my fingers together nervously. He remained turned away facing the door but was listening.

"I'm sorry.. I know you don't like to be touched. I just wanted to say thank you. I don't care about the how or why...just thank you for saving me from that" I looked up and he had shifted his head a little to the right, so I knew he was still listening. He just nodded and left. I shut the door behind him and walked over to the tub. I stuck my hand in to test the temperature of the water, it was so lovely and warm. I caught sight of myself in the mirror on the far side of the room, I looked like a hot mess. Inching closer to my reflection I could get a better look at the large purplish bruise blooming on my cheek. I reached up to touch it and winced at the tender flesh. My lip was split as I remembered when I felt it happen. I could put some Dittany on it if I could only reverse the transfiguration on the gold chain. I unclasped it and get it pooled in the palm of my left hand. I could sense my magic beneath my skin, I just didn't know if I could get past the block. I would have to discuss this with Tom, he may know what is going on. I concentrated on the steps I knew off by heart in art of transfiguration, but to no avail even after three attempts I just could not get it to work.

I huffed in frustration.

I thought perhaps I could have a bath in the meantime but then I noticed all the buttons down the back of the dress. I let out an annoyed scream. I will have to ask Tom, which I was not particularly
looking forward to. He may have saved me, and I trust him to a degree- *but he still scares and intimidates me.*

I opened the door a crack and stuck my head out and looked in both directions. His bedroom door was closed, I timidly crossed the floorboards praying for them not to creak. I raised my hand to knock then brought it back down again, I'm going to have to psych myself up for this. I took a deep breath then let it back out again. Ok, Hermione you have this, you can ask for help….no issues with that at all. I glared at the door and raised my fist to knock.

"Miss Granger", I just about jumped out of my skin, I brought my hand up to my chest and I could feel my heart beating a million miles an hour.

"Jesus Tom, you don't need to sneak up like that!", I let out a breathy laugh, he was lurking in the shadows and well…it was just plain creepy. The way the shadows crossed his face, he looked sinister. It was unsettling, to be in a house alone with a cold-blooded murderer. But I don't think he would save me just to kill me now…ok he probably would do that…but I don't get the sense that that is or was his intention.

He just raised an eyebrow. It's amazing how much he could say with just a look.

"I umm (clears throat) need some assistance, with this" I held out the gold chain, not that he knows what it is "and unbuttoning my dress", his eye twitched at that; I don't know if that was a good twitch or a bad twitch.

"Are you sure you feel comfortable with me doing that?", I knew he meant another man being so close to me after what had happened earlier tonight.

"I trust you at least not to do…that", I made sure I looked him dead in the eye when I said that so there was no room for misinterpretation. He cocked his head to the side, gaze unwavering. It started to get uncomfortable with him just staring. I wasn't sure if this was some kind of test?

He pushed off the wall that he was leaning against and walked over to me. He was at least a head taller than me, so I had to tilt my head slightly to look him in the eye. He held his hand out and I tipped my hand and let the chain fall into the palm of his hand. He looked down at the chain with his brow furrowed.

"This is not a normal chain is it?"

"No, it's my handbag", he quirked and eyebrow at that, "I have some dittany in there. But I'm having trouble with my magic, I can't seem to get past the block. I thought…I was hoping…you could change it back. If you can…." I trailed off, thinking this was a stupid idea.

"I can but what do I get out of it?" and there it was…. the inevitable bad guy selfishness. I rolled my eyes.

"Ah ah ahhh play fair Miss Granger, I did just save you from being raped", yeah thanks for reminding me of that very fact.

"Fine, can we sit down though?" and I walked back into my room and sat on the bed. I waited for him to enter.

He made a waving gesture with his hand as if to say '*continue*.'
"My bag as an undetectable extension charm on it, and I have lots of things in there from when we were on the run from your Death Eaters"

"Impressive magic Miss Granger and Illegal", he had a smirk on his face, and he was enjoying this way too much. I grimaced because yes, I had a few illegal things in there.

"Yes, it took me a few destroyed handbags to get there but I eventually got it right. I have all my books in there, so there is virtually a library contained in the bag, potions and potions ingredients, a cauldron and empty vials, a magical tent, clothes, some personal items, canned food, a torch…I have a lot of stuff in it", both eyebrows were raised now with an impressed look on his face, but a hungry gleam in his eye.

"Interesting" the expression melts away and was replaced by one of extreme concentration. I could tell that this was taking a toll on him, even with the block he was still powerful enough to permeate the barrier. No wonder I could barely get my fingers to spark. After five minutes of intense staring at the chain it warped and changed into my bag. I clapped in excitement. I picked up my bag and stuck my hand in, I fished around, and I tried my hardest just to do a simple *accio*. After 10 minutes of rummaging I finally found one of the Dark Arts books I had stolen from the Hogwarts library. I was sure I would regret this but realistically he knew everything in it anyway.

"Here" and I handed him the book. He looked at me and nodded. It was a peace offering, an olive branch. If we were ever to get back to our time, then we will have to work with each other.

"Thank you Miss Granger", he ran a hand down along the back of my dress and I could feel the buttons unbuttoning themselves. I shivered under his touch.

Later that night after I had washed myself the best I could in that small tub, I found a pair of pyjamas that I had never worn while on the run in my bag. I slipped them on, and I washed my bra and knickers that I had worn that day. I had a couple of spares in my bag, I just hoped we weren't stuck in this time period for too long. I slipped under the covers and it felt foreign; it was hard to fall asleep.

I woke up from a fitful sleep, I had had a nightmare about Micah. I felt silly not being able to deal with my own problems. I was technically an adult, but I didn't feel like one. I tried rolling over, but I just ended up tossing and turning. I flung the bedding back and tip toed out into the hallway, Tom's door was open just a crack and candlelight illuminated the edges.

"Miss Granger, I know you're out there", how does he do that? I gently pushed open the door and looked a little sheepish. I wasn't sure what I wanted exactly…ok why lie to myself of course I know what I *want*, I was a little scared to ask for it. I wrung my hands out and he sighed in annoyance. He was sitting up in bed reading, with gold framed glasses perched on his classical romanescque nose. He flipped back the covers, "Get in, but stay on your side of the bed"
A/N: Some of you may think what she is doing?!!! But at least in my belief is that in situations like that people will generally stick together. I know a lot of you will disagree with me, but Hermione has just had her life upended completely. She is seeking comfort and support in a place maybe she shouldn’t but there aren’t any other options. Tom is being amenable to a point. Not exactly encouraging the behaviour but not dissuading it either. I would like to believe that Tom Riddle is a pragmatic man and by causing more distress to Hermione it will not serve a purpose other than to waste a potential resource.
There Is A Monster In Us All

Chapter Notes

A/N: God damn this chapter was laborious because I rewrote it a few times trying to get it to the point that I was happy with it. I don’t know if I am completely happy with it, but this was as good as I was going to get it. I have the flu at the moment. Being sick sucks! I am mostly doing Hermione’s POV rather than Tom’s, partly because I wanted a purely Hermione perspective of Tom/Lord Voldemort and I am not sure I could pull off the inner workings of a more murdery Tom. Let me know what you think love it or hate it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After waking up in Voldemort's bed I isolated myself. It started to sink in everything that had happened in roughly the last 24 hours. Getting sent back in time, running off, getting stuck in a brothel, the attempted rape and Voldemort saving me.

It all hit me at once. This wasn't a dream or even a nightmare - this was real. This was my life until we figure things out. It's like my brain was taking events in but not really processing what was going on. I guess part of me was in denial- hoping all of this would magically disappear. I wanted this to be an hallucination.

Two weeks.

Two weeks have passed since the Druary Lane incident. Voldemort or Tom I guess has left me to my own devices. For which I'm glad not that I expected us to have sleepovers and braid each other's hair. While I am grateful for him saving me, I need to remember that he still is the Dark Lord regardless of the truce we seem to be having. A wolf in sheep's clothing nothing he does is without careful calculation. He is the only other person that I know to have a voracious appetite for learning that I do. I often wondered through school what the world have been like if he hadn't gone all dark side.

I have grieved and I have cried for the death of my old life. I know it seems a little pre-emptive to go down that road of great pessimism, but I feel I need to be prepared for that very real possibility and not blindsided by it. Or have my hopes completely crushed if Voldemort doesn't have a solution to this predicament. We are both the smartest of our generation so we should be able to do something. I snort with a fresh batch of hot tears rolling down my cheeks, we may be smart but smart enough to work out how to travel forward in time? This isn't a fantasy sci-fi movie.
I roll over intent on snuggling into the warm covers and cocoon myself for one more day. There's a knock at the door, I know it's him outside waiting for me to come out as usual. I'm surprised that he has respected my privacy and not just barged into the room and dragged me out, like some naughty child. I know I'm being a little petulant, but I think I am entitled to after everything I have been through.

"Miss Granger, food and fresh water for you to bathe", and he walks away anticipating that I am not going to respond. He started doing this mother hen rendition after I didn't leave the room for two whole days. I sulkily stare at the door, knowing I need to get up and face this. Harry would be ashamed of how I am behaving, hiding away. Instead he would have been out there already challenging Voldemort to find a solution.

An hour later I am freshly washed and have eaten what Voldemort left at my door. I feel semi human at least. My eyes are still rimmed red and my cheeks a little puffy, but that will go away in a couple of hours. I feel like getting out of the house after being cooped up in here for two weeks, my own personal exile. I descend the stairs careful not to slip on the well-worn wood. I doubt Voldemort would be impressed by me if I died by falling down the stairs. He would probably bring me back to life just to lecture me on the stupidity of today's youth and then kill me again. I get to the bottom and there is no movement downstairs, I wonder if Voldemort has gone out. I hadn't really thought about what he did with his days, probably nefarious plots and scheming? What else did bad guys do with their time other than planning evil deeds?

I headed straight for the front door intent on leaving, when I heard his voice call out to me. "Miss Granger, finally ready to re-enter society as a functioning productive member?", I glared at him while sitting there all regal in the wing-backed chair with his legs crossed, reading glasses on and holding a book. He even makes the mundane activity of reading a book look like a grand affair.

"I wasn't moping", I said weakly knowing he knows that that is a bold-faced lie.

"No, you were just sobbing for days on end, but of course you weren't moping", he put the book down on the lamp table and stood up. I turned to fully face him, was he angling for a fight? Fine if he wants one. I tipped my chin up in a defiant manner.

"Just stop-"

"Where you ready to just give up that easily? That's not the intelligent Gryffindor I have heard so much about. Brightest witch of her age, up hiding in her bedroom. Tsk tsk what would the other
Order members think of that", he sauntered forward, but I couldn't read him. He was so good at masking his emotions I wasn't sure if he was being serious or teasing or a mixture of both.

"I wasn't giving up I just needed time to process everything. A lot had happened that day and I needed time to get my head on straight in order to be able to tackle this problem. Which is why I am going out, I need some fresh air", I turned away to leave.

"Miss Granger, did you not learn your lesson the first time around?", I narrowed my eyes, oh believe me I learnt my lesson the first time out alone.

"You are not my parent" I pointed at him; he was closer now on the edge of my personal space bubble.

"No, but I am the adult here…" something flickered in his eyes and a smirk slowly spread across his plump lips. "But come back to my bed and I can show you how unfatherly I can be", my jaw dropped, and a blush crept up my cheeks. I did not need those mental images. He was putting me off kilter and damn if it wasn't working.

"Just stop, this…not everything is a game", I was annoyed at him playing with me like a cat with a mouse. He just chuckled but it was more mocking than funny. He stepped into my personal space, making me take a step back and another and another.

"No Miss Granger everything is a game, but you haven't recognised that you were in one. Just a pawn being moved in the giant chess game between Dumbledore and I", I scowled at that I wasn't a pawn! It wasn't until my back hit the wall of the entry that I realised he just played me. He subtly manipulated me without me realising it. He boxed me in and leaned into my eye level.

"I'm not a pawn… I'm not", he just raised an eyebrow. *Fuck* fine! I slumped doubt creeping into every thought and interaction between Dumbledore and Harry, Ron and I. Damn it. He crooked a finger under my chin and tilted my head back so I could look him in the eye again.

"Understanding now Miss Granger? Everyone was a pawn, the difference between Dumbledore and I, is that all my followers knew what they were getting into. Dumbledore chose to keep you all in the dark otherwise his machinations wouldn't have worked", he pushed back off and ran a hand through his hair, tugging at it frustratedly.

"Machinations? He's not some…he's not you!" I yelled because he couldn't have been doing this all along, Voldemort has to be tricking me again, playing me. I needed to cling to that line of thought like a lifeline otherwise everything I have known for the last 7 years has been based on lies.

"Really Miss Granger? And I thought you were supposed to be smart? Why do you think Dumbledore and I do not get along? He created, shaped and moulded who I am right now. He manipulated me like he has done to Harry, except he didn't want a mindless pawn that he could martyr off, he wanted an adversary. The problem with his great plan was that I eventually saw right through it and began my own inputs into the game. Level the playing field as it were. He wanted another Grindelwald". To say I was a befuddlement of emotions was an understatement. I was confused yes, but I also knew there was a lick of truth to what he was saying. I was always a little suspicious of how Dumbledore spoke of his early interactions with Voldemort as a young boy in the orphanage. It seemed to strange to write off a young impressionable young boy because he could talk to snakes. Even Harry thought it was unusual, since he could talk to snakes as well.
Before I could get a word out to ask him to explain more, he turns and looks me directly in the eye. He had a strange look on his face, one I haven't seen before. He looked exposed, cut raw.

"We are fashioned creatures, but half made up. I'm split where once the angel transforms into the malignant devil. His deceit and lies turned me from my path to become a fiend; evil henceforth became my good. Love…love such a folly emotion…but yet he doesn't understand the full extent of the emotion himself. Such mockery of others. He is the God and we are the pitiful creations", he practically spat that out. The look of disgust of his face was so fierce. It was a look into the complicated relationship between these…titans of the magical community. I waited patiently figuring he hadn't quite finished what he was getting off his chest. " An idiot who thinks he knows everyone's thoughts and feelings. I can feel love with the likes he cannot comprehend and the opposite side of the coin: rage, with the likes he can scarcely reconcile. If I cannot apparently satisfy one, then I will indulge the other. What angers me the most of his guilefulness, is that he is happy to destroy with good conscience a monster of his own creation. Oh, praise the eternal justice of man! He wanted a monster and oh how I rose to that occasion. Then he hates me for it, the very role he wanted me to fill. I will cause trembling fear in those who cross me, especially of my creator and I do so swear with inextinguishable hatred. I will work at his destruction, nor finish it until I desolate his heart, so that he will curse the very hour he was born upon this wretched earth", he was out of breath after that monologue, chest heaving and hands clenched into tight fists. I was taken aback by the passionate rage he spoke of Dumbledore and his manipulation. I had never really expected that Dumbledore would have put Tom on the path he was now currently walking, playing a role that everyone had expected of him. To feel his own fate was not pre-determined exactly, but that he had no other options. It was strange and showed that his whole war was not black and white as I had naively believed. I would be angry too if I was in his position, not that I am excusing his heinous actions. Thinking about it if I was Harry, maybe he should have challenged Dumbledore a little more than just blindly following everything he said.

"Well that certainly changes a lot of things and provides some perspectives. You compare yourself to Frankenstein's Monster?" I was surprised he used some of Shelley's words to express himself.

"It is a good analogy for the entire situation", I cocked my head to the side assessing him, now that I am aware of the bigger picture, I can look at him as a more complex creature. The one-dimensional evil madman, that Dumbledore 'created', just doesn't seem…. accurate now. I'm utterly mortified that I was hoodwinked for so long. We just never questioned the supposedly good Headmaster or even thought about an ulterior agenda.

I rubbed my forehead; this was giving me a headache. I just wanted even more to get out of here now.

"Come Miss Granger I will escort you for a walk", I opened my eyes in surprise as he was holding out my coat for me to slip my arms into.

"Really?", he rolled his eyes.
"No, I just offered and am holding your coat simply for the sheer pleasure of it", I sighed there went our weird emotional moment.

"You don’t have to be an arse Tom", he just quirked an eyebrow as I slipped my arms into it. I figured fuck it, I wasn't going to call him Voldemort, right here right now he is just Tom Riddle.

We both walked silently taking in the sights and smells of the London streets. Things were beginning to slow down as the sun was setting. I was not apprehensive, I felt comfortable enough that Tom wouldn't let anything happen to me nor push me in front of a horse draw carriage to be trampled to death, because apparently that is a thing. Sometimes I can't grasp to strangeness that is human nature.

"Can we somehow make our way to Hogwarts?" I asked breaking the comfortable silence.

"No Miss Granger. Unfortunately, without our...instruments it would be a pointless endeavour, because of-", I nodded.

"Because of the wards. We'd never find it let alone get past them" I finished what we both were thinking.

"Yes. Diagon Alley is out also. Perhaps if my abilities weren't blocked then I could get in but as restricted as I am it limits things", Yes the blocking of our magic. So many questions.

"Do you have a theory as to why our abilities are the way they are? Is it because of the...circumstances of our arrival?", I kept up the code for our conversation. If it wasn't for Tom starting it, I would have blurted everything out for people to hear, I need to be more careful.

"I can only make assumptions, as no one that we know of has been in this predicament before. It could be part of the circumstance; I just don't believe it's the whole situation. I had never heard that piece of poetry Dumbledore recited before, which leads me to believe that it was of his own creation"

I was more bothered by this than I would let Tom know. Dumbledore's seemingly rise from the dead after a year and then hurling us back in time…well Tom…I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Some of the puzzle pieces fitting together in my mind, make me believe there is more to this than just time travelling us to the past to finish a War, especially since Tom could easily wreak havoc here if he really wanted too.

We watched as young boy around the age of ten maybe…. was packing up his little stand on the corner. When two men approached the youngster, clearly harassing and jostling him; knocking over his basket full of unsold nick-knacks and while he tried to save them stealing his hard-earned coins from his hat. I felt enraged by the injustice and I had plenty of emotions that I couldn't unleash at Dumbledore, so these fools were going to get it.

I let out a growl and grit my teeth. "Tom", I stormed over there ignoring Tom's disapproval. He was just going to have to deal with it.
"Hey, what do you think you are doing?" I had on the angriest glare I could muster. I was ignored in typical male selective hearing. I pushed at the closest man who had dirty blonde hair, "Hey". He stumbled a bit and whirled around, shocked momentarily that I had the audacity to push him.

"Stay out of it girl!", and pushed me back. The young boy tried grabbing his hat back with the coins in it but was backhanded by the other large but skinny man wearing rope like suspenders. I leapt in front of the boy, trying to shield him from further attack.

"We'll be 'aking these an' I 'xpect the same next week", said Suspenders. Blondie just nodded and grunted in agreement.

"No, you won't", I had wondered when Tom would step in, he always seemed to like a rather dramatic entrance. He stood there in the fading light, wearing all black and a black top hat that he obviously had liberated while I was occupied. The hat and long black military trench coat made him look like an early imagining of Jack the Ripper. I helped the boy up who was crying and hugged him while watching the interaction between Tom and the men. He was moving ever so slightly towards the side street. The fact that he was doing that made me believe that this was going to get violent. I was not concerned about Tom. As Lord Voldemort he never seemed like a physical person, preferring using magic than muggle ways of solving things, but Tom Riddle was quick, nimble and sure footed more than capable of physical fighting.

"Yeah 'an wat ya gonna do 'bout it", Tom inched closer to the one holding the hat with the coins. He tossed his hat to me without looking. I caught it before it hit the ground.

"Take back what doesn't belong to you", he kneed Suspenders in the groin to which he grabbed himself and hunched over. Tom ducked anticipating a swing from Blondie, catching him off guard from missing, he swiftly plunged a knife into Blondie's stomach then kicked him off the blade. He must have had the knife either in his pocket or up his sleeve. Seemingly having dealt with Blondie he turned back towards Suspenders who was still clutching his family jewels. Tom grabbed him by the front of his shirt and pushed him back into the wall holding the blade to his neck.

"look I'll g-give tha' coin back 'romise I will!", the guy stuttered out having seen Blondie on the ground behind Tom. I tried to cover the boy's eyes from witnessing this violence, knowing exactly what Tom was going to do.

"Oh, you will", I could tell he had a wicked smile on his face.

"wkgl-", he cut a perfect line across the neck of the man, the artery spurting just a little off the side. I couldn't help but watch, it was so…unassuming but so violent simultaneously. It was done with such assurance that I knew this kind of iniquitous act, this misdeed was not an uncommon exploit in the life of Tom Riddle. He let the man's body slump against the grimy exterior of the building. He turned and looked at me and the boy crouched together hugging, then shifted his gaze to Blondie who was sprawled on the ground holding his knife wound. He bent down and picked up the hat and the few coins that had rolled out after it was dropped.

He hefted the boy back on his feet, who had a tear stained face and eyes full of fear when he looked at Tom.

"Here" and the held out the hat with coins out to the boy. The boy looked relieved as he peaked inside making sure all his coins where in there. Tom pulled out his hand out of his pocket and dropped a few more coins in. The boys eyes lit up like a Christmas tree.

"Thanks Mister, 'is will feed my family for a 'hole month! Thanks M'lady" he gave me another quick hug then ran over to his basket packing everything up and scurried away. I couldn't help but
"Thanks. Why did you do it?" I asked as I handed his hat back, nodding towards Suspenders. A gruesome reminder of what Tom just did, the part of my brain that was morally righteous protested only weakly, the rest of me was just relieved. But I was still worried because anyone could have seen that.

"Why did I kill him? What did you think I was going to do? Pat him on the back with a nasty scolding and set him on his way?" Gee he didn't have to be such a dick about it.

"Well, we could have given them to the police and let them deal with it", I thought that was reasonable.

He snorts

"Miss Granger we are possibly at the turn of the 1800s somewhere in London. The Police don't care what happens in the slums, in fact they are probably glad the ingrates pick themselves off, means less work for them. But still we need to leave now Miss Granger before someone does call the authorities". I huffed because I knew he was right, and I stomped right past him. He didn't miss a beat and stayed in stride with me. He crooked out an elbow and I reluctantly took it. He looked like the cat who got the cream because he knew he was right, and I was non verbally agreeing with him.

"What about Blondie, couldn't he say something?", Not that I wanted Tom to suddenly turn around and finish him off.

"Even if he survives, he will have to own up to his part of the crime. I'm not worried, he'll die of sepsis soon enough"

"You didn't have to do it you know", I said quietly not really expecting him to answer.

"I'm a villain Miss Granger, is it not what you yelled at me when we were..." he flourished his right hand round as if searching for the word in the night air. "Deposited here? And besides filth like that would have kept at it before he eventually got what he wanted". I frowned not that he could see my face.

"So, what you're saying is that you have to follow the villain handbook 'How to be Evil 101?'", frustrated as to why he always turns towards the morally grey area.

He makes a sound somewhere between a laugh and a snort - a most undignified sound from someone normally so composed. I stifle a laugh. I feel a little smug to be able to catch him off
guard with my sarcasm.

"Evil 101? How maladroit Miss Granger, not nearly as sinister sounding", I could hear the smile in his voice.

"Not nefarious enough for a super villain?" A chuckle. Which sounds louder in the dead quiet of the London back streets.

"Super Villain? I sound like a character from a comic book. No if I was going to write a manual for the modern aspiring villain it would more along the lines of *Case studies of Iniquitous Misdeeds for the Contemporary Dark Wizard*".

"Ok, fine that was a good name for a textbook if you were going to write one and thank you for helping that boy back there...I know you didn't have to get involved at all", I look up even though neither of us can see each other's eyes until we pass the next street 'lamp'- more like candle in a box.

"London is a cesspool of vice, violence and villainy and let's face it probably every venereal disease currently known to man. I don't know about you Miss Granger, but I want to go home so we are going to have to work together better to figure it out". He said not giving me a straight answer.

"I know, but thanks all the same. And I think we are past the Miss Granger formality wouldn't you say?", it was silent for a long time before he finally broke it.

"I'm not a good man Hermione far from it, but I don't condone violence against women or children like that"

"But some of your followers certainly don't seem to have a problem with it especially Scabior and Greyback or really for you for that matter you tried to kill Harry", I retorted challenging him. His arm tightened around mine.

"Those pieces of scum beneath my shoe.... well they have earned their death sentence then when we return. Now Miss Granger are you implying that I have complete and utter control over every single follower? because that is quite flattering. As for Harry that is...was? complicated. It's not that I actively went after children. In fact, before Harry I didn't, it was only because of that stupid prophecy. If Dumbledore didn't play it up as much as he did, I would have ignored it." I rolled my eyes not that he could see. Divination is such a rubbish subject.

"Yes...no... I guess...maybe? I don't know Dumbledore perhaps embellished a little and you were made to seem.... omnipotent?" God, could I have boosted his ego anymore.

"God like...interesting" I could imagine him preening in the dark. We were walking a little slow since you could not see in front of you it was quite frustrating, I felt exposed.

"But alas I am just a man. With god like capabilities, I guess. I cannot control my followers’ individual actions any more than you can control your classmates", that was reasonable and logical, I'll admit I hadn't given it much though until now. Being here with him having to somewhat trust him with my life I am seeing the man behind the mask. He is letting me in a little more, after his outburst of emotion earlier I thought he would have completely shut me out.

We walked in silence for a bit longer, till we reached the steps of the townhouse.

"We will have to leave in a day or so", he said quietly. I wasn't sure if this is in relation to the murdered thief or because of something else.
"OK…What have you been doing exactly?", I raised a sceptical brow.

"Information gathering", was all he said as he opened the front door. I was glad one us had left a few candles burning before we went out.

"And what did that entail?"

He gave a 'really you have to ask' look.

"So, what are we now a historical Bonnie and Clyde?", I raised my hands in exasperation.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I choose Frankenstein’s Monster as an analogy for Tom because I feel it fits him the way that I see the Tom Riddle character. I feel as though he is immensely more complex than the one-dimensional character we get in the Books and some of the other fan fiction stories, where he is inserted as just a purely evil villain. I enjoy exploring the complexities of this dynamic. In saying that this story wasn’t supposed to be heavy with emotional angst. It was supposed to just be a fun jaunt!
Robbery In Progress

Chapter Notes

A/N: this is a shorter chapter, but I didn’t want to keep you waiting for an update. I am nearly over the flu and looking forward to doing some more writing. This chapter I included a Tom POV, showing his conflicted feelings however twisted they maybe. I bring out some of Hermione’s immaturity along with her unsure thoughts and feelings. I guess neither of them really know what to do with each other.

Two days later...

Hermione POV

Tom has barely strung a sentence together acknowledging my presence. He's planning something and not letting me in on it. It's frustrating I already feel out of control being in this situation and to now have my actions dictated and decisions taken away.... I’m on the verge of breaking.

I am not a child, yes, I may only be 18 nearly 19 years old, at least 10 years younger than him but I am not an idiot. He doesn't need to treat me like a bumbling gullible moron. I know he doesn't see me as his equal, I don't think he sees anyone as an equal. But that doesn't mean he needs to shut me out. I sigh although how could I not expect him to rebuild his walls even higher after exposing himself emotionally. His spiel about Dumbledore certainly struck a chord and I have come to the stark realisation that perhaps this whole War was pointless and could have easily been prevented by Dumbledore all along. It's just that he chose not to, wanting the rabid opponent that Voldemort presented and played so well. What was equally annoying is that Voldemort was right, no tricks, no lies because why lie when the truth hurts even more. The reality that Dumbledore had something to do with our fall through time cuts me like a knife, dipped in betrayal, a venom more poisonous than anything Voldemort could say. I felt infuriated that he manipulated everyone, including Voldemort. Everyone's lives have been inexplicably altered, diverted to different paths because he wanted it so. Like Voldemort- Tom said we are all pawns on the giant chessboard, believing he has the right to play with our lives without his hands getting dirty. He created us into the perfect little soldiers, running off to war with no real grasp of what that entailed. He really was an allegorical representation of Victor Frankenstein. Moulding, shaping, haphazardly slotting pieces together to make us into what he needs us to be. It's so much to process, it's demoralising and humiliating to know that a person whom you looked up to as a great leader and educator would do this. I feel like the knitted rug of my life has been pulled out from underneath me. A corner thread pulled out and I have yet to stop it from unravelling.

I walk out onto the landing and watch from my doorway the way Tom is folding everything neatly and placing it in the trunk we are 'borrowing' from the people who actually live here. I don't linger too long not wanting him to catch me watching him. So, I head downstairs instead, waiting for further instructions about what it is we are doing.
Tom POV

I have ignored her for two days now, because I am reluctantly admitting to myself that I am growing fond of her. A little protective. Those instincts roared to life at the state of her when I saved her from that putrid den of immorality.

Seeing her sprawled on the bed, bruises already forming on her exposed thighs, bloomers askew and the blood dribbling down her chin enraged me, and I barely know this girl other than what I have discovered while being in Potter's head.

Holding her in my arms felt....nice, having her in my bed felt nice, so nice in fact that I nearly strangled her in her sleep. Her slender neck beneath my fingertips, my thumbs caressing down the front of her neck to her jugular notch. I remember the thrill of gently pressing my thumb into that soft vulnerable spot between her clavicles. All it would have taken to crush her trachea was a bit more pressure. I remember her eyelashes fluttering like butterfly wings and I wondered whether she would open her eyes and see me hovering while contemplating killing her. Would she have screamed? Fought me with the same ferocity as she did in the whorehouse? Or watched with resignation of her fate? I observed her for a few moments longer than pulled away. As much as I fantasized about that moment, I don't know whether or not I would have been able to follow through. I wasn't ready to tempt fate by killing her just yet. She still may prove a valuable asset; it would be a waste to not use an intelligent mind like Miss Granger's. At least that is what I am telling myself, completely believing it is another matter entirely.

I slam the lid of my trunk down and clench my fists tightly until my knuckles turned white. To curb my darker impulses, I went on a little killing spree, I needed to unleash all this pent-up anger and frustration at the situation I find myself in. Miss Granger curled up in a ball and cried for two weeks and I needed to gather information, and gather I did. I just killed them afterwards not wanting a trail to lead back to me. She doesn't need to know that, although I'm sure she has her own theories as to what I was doing. She will need to develop a stomach lined with steel, if she wants to survive while we are here. This isn't our time. People and views are different. Death is an everyday occurrence, usually from disease. Violence is rampant, like the alley way, people will do things out of desperation. Truth be told after the alleyway incident I was expecting a morally righteous lecture about murder. I was surprised she didn't. Glad she didn't, I don't think I would have had the patience to listen to her speak to me like I have no idea how the world works.

I find that I enjoy the spark she has, the way she challenges me. Most people are too frightened to these days and it has become rather dull when they just follow like sheep. She is a shining beacon of innocence, so I can see why people are drawn to her. One half of me wants to preserve that innocence and the other wants to corrupt it. Neither half has budged.

I shrink my trunk down with everything I can muster, having my magic blocked is inconvenient. I
can feel it buzzing underneath my skin, swelling like it is trying the burst the through the seams but the threads aren't breaking. Doing small bursts of magic like shrinking the trunk relieves some of the pressure. I can't do giant feats of magic, just small things. It's annoying.

I make my way down the stairs and out on to the street waiting for the man I hired to come along with the horse and carriage. I don't acknowledge Hermione, but she follows like the good girl she is.

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**Hermione POV**

I roll my eyes as Tom just walks out the door without even acknowledging me, but I know he just expects me to follow him. I hate myself a little bit for just following but I don't know what else to do. I have nowhere else to go. I thought we had made some progress in our strange relationship, it's like one step forward and two steps back with him.

I drag my trunk along behind me because I don't have the magic to shrink it. However, I have placed most of what I need in my beaded bag, the trunk is more for show. We can't really be travelling with nothing it would look suspicious. I stand reluctantly next to Tom, waiting for any sign he may notice I'm there, but I will not wound my pride any further by asking him.

People wandering past look at us as we are just sort of standing there on the sidewalk.

I start feel as though I am on display, something to be looked at as they walked past. I look at Tom and he is glaring at everyone, simply daring anyone to say something. I swear if one more person asks us what we are doing or how our morning has been he will snap and kill them.

"So....." I step sideways a little closer until our arms are almost touching. This was my solution to prevent him from committing mass murder on the streets, was suck up my pride and ask. "What are we doing?", I look into his piercing gaze and hold myself from flinching under it.

"You are going to be my wife", is all he says. His face is stoic, but his eyes are tumultuous orbs. My eyes widen in shock.

"What?!", I screech out, forgetting momentarily that we are out in public. His eyes narrow and I shrink back a little.

"It solves a few basic problems Miss Granger, switch that brain on and use it!", I don't appreciate the tone he is using, talking down to me like a spoilt child. I realise I am acting…well not my age.

"But, you're older! And I don't want to!" I stamp my foot for emphasis. I see him roll his eyes and that irritates me further.

He pinches the bridge of his nose then turns to face me and if steam were possible to come out of a
humans’ ears then that is what I would be seeing.

"Don't push me Miss Granger and start acting like an adult if that is how you wish to be treated", I gape.

"I am an adult", he looks me over from head to foot and I can practically see the wheels turning, he meets my gaze again and his eyebrows lift marginally as if to say really. All I can do is huff in response. After he strategically doesn't speak knowing I will fill the gap, so this interaction isn't awkward, I take a moment to think about what he means.

"Fine…ok I will accept this fake marriage proposal. But why are we doing it?", I wanted to hear his reasoning.

He growls in annoyance. Merlin, he has a way to make you feel absolutely stupid.

"Miss Granger, we have had this conversation partially after I had to rescue you from the claws of depravity. You are a young attractive woman, whose incorruptible aura can be seen from miles around. Being unwed and unattached you are a magnet for the lecherous wolves who would tear you to pieces to have a mere taste of your virtuous essence. Do you Miss Granger wish to be thrown to the wolves? Or would you rather saddle yourself with me and be protected? Keep in mind you cannot go anywhere or do anything without a husband or chaperone in this time period. At least this way we can stay together”. I just stare at him, my eyes flicking over every aspect of his face, trying to find any indication of deceit. Before I had a chance to answer he turns away.

"Ah our coach his here", I can't do anything but stare at this scene unfolding. He gets in the coach and turns to me and says.

"Coming Mrs Granger", my face flushes and I cannot do anything but enter the coach and swallow the lump in my throat.

I sit with my eyes closed breathing deeply, trying to calm myself before the well of emotions I am experiencing explodes and overwhms me. Logically I know pretending to be married is the best option. Without connections and a family, I am relegated to the lowest class. Most likely to be sent off to those horrid workhouses to be worked to death or enslaved in prostitution. Neither are appealing options. It is only pretend so why am I making a big deal out of it? It’s not the fake marriage part I am worried about, it’s the ulterior motive behind this proposal I am concerned with. What does he want with me? I offer him nothing, realistically I am a heavy anchor to his boat. A dead weight.

"How did you get the carriage?", I ask instead not opening my eyes.

"I gave him one of the galleons out of your bag", I sigh there is no pointing in arguing with him.

"Ok, is it legitimate? You're not going to murder his family or something?", I opened my eyes letting him see that it is a genuine concern of mine.

"Yes, Hermione. We need to get to the coast. As for the rest of the way..." he just shrugs as if his villainy is of no concern.

"Tom you can't just do that every time! We have some money...", he frowns.

"Yes, Hermione some money. It won't last long term if we are stuck here permanently. So yes, some intimidation will be necessary if you don't want to pillage and plunder the poor working class
then I suggest you adjust your moral compass accordingly. By my calculations, the coins you have in your bag and the few galleons I had in my pocket adjusted for inflation, is enough to last two years in reasonable comfort. Three years if we were particularly frugal, personally I wouldn't want to push it any further just because of the lack of modern conveniences. That is all without working or any extra income added to the mix. I'm just not sure what we would do here", I was pleasantly surprised that he included me in the future scenarios.

"Does that mean you're Mr Granger?", I smiled trying to turn the conversation back to lighter topics, I really wasn't ready to entertain the premise of being stuck here permanently.

He smirked, "Yes Mrs Granger it does. I thought you would like the nod to modern feminism, besides Riddle is too distinct and I hate it", he scrunches up his face in distaste.

"I wouldn't have picked the Dark Lord as a closet feminist", he laughs lightly.

"Contrary to whatever lies Dumbledore has spread about me, I never had a problem with the fairer sex. I grew up in the second World War Hermione, I saw all the hard work women were doing while all the able-bodied men were conscripted. I applaud their efforts for keeping the country running in their absence", my lips parted slightly in surprise.

"You are not what I expected", I say quietly I say it more to myself, but he hears it anyway.

"Neither are you Miss Granger". We don't say anything else, both of us just watching the scenery outside and relaxing to the lull of the carriage as it sways slightly side to side.

Hours pass in relative comfortable silence, neither of us has spoken since this morning, both with books on our laps, which is fine by me. Tom doesn't exactly strike me as a small talk conversationalist, only speaking when he needs too. It is mostly woodlands that we are passing through and the road becomes bumpier as we enter the thicker parts of the forest. The trees are craggy and their roots large and eating into the path that has been forged by the constant wear of carriage wheels in the same place. Their long hanging branches and leaves scrape against the roof in a rather unpleasant way as we pass beneath them.

The abrupt stopping of the carriage makes me flail, pitching forward into the seat opposite me nearly smacking Tom in the face as I try to stop myself. I was caught off guard by this, however Tom remains composed the only indication that he was affected by this change of circumstances was the grip on the door handle.

"Sorry" I say quietly not getting up from the floor. I can hear voices outside and a lead weight drops in my stomach. My hand unconsciously grips the fabric of Tom's pants, I wait for him to kick me off, but he doesn't. The voices increase in volume to shouting and then a loud crack erupts a moment of silence occurs afterwards. The carriage dips to the side as the man Tom hired to take us to the coast gets down from the front bench.

"Tom what's going on?", In this moment I don't care that my voice breaks in panic.

He looks down his face stony, but I can see the calculation in his eyes. "We are being robbed", he reaches down and gently removes my hand from his pants leg. I nearly reach back out to grab him again but resist.

"Just stay here and don't leave the carriage unless you have no other choice", I nod. I chant to
myself as he goes to exit the carriage that *I will not be a dead weight.*

"Out" a voice yells from somewhere clearly as the door closes from Tom’s departure. I strain to listen to what is going on, but I am not going to be damsel in distress this time.

Then I hear another loud *crack* and realise the sound is a gunshot.
Previously…

*Just stay here and don't leave the carriage unless you have no other choice*, I nod. *I chant to myself as he goes to exit the carriage that I will not be dead weight.*

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Hermione POV

My throat tightens constricting a scream that has bubbled up and threatening to release. I close my eyes a gulp it down, screaming and giving into my terror will not help me think clearly enough to think my way out of this problem. Besides if Tom is still alive out there then it is my turn to return the favour and save his arse. I'm just not sure how I should do that, without magic.

My choice is partially made for me as the door to the carriage is flung open violently, hitting the side with a thud; the hinges protesting vociferously against my eardrums. I had to cringe at the noise, it was like nails on a chalkboard. A burly hand reached in and gripped my upper arm firmly. He dragged me out of the carriage and hauled me to my feet. His hand left my arm and quickly threaded his fingers into my hair. The roots felt like they were being ripped from the sensitive skin straining against my scalp. As he pulled me back against him, I couldn't help noticing the lingering heavy scent of tobacco, it made me want to gag.

I stumbled to keep my footing as he pushed me forward towards the other three men. They were all similarly dressed. Different styles of breeches or jodhpurs at different stages of wear and tear, along with their filthy (what I can imagine was white at some point) linen shirts. They also had great jackets on and black well-worn leather riding boots. These garments were obviously stolen and then worn to death, because clearly these men could not afford such extravagant items. Despite this, they fit the part of bandits in the woods, *hijacking* as it were unsuspecting carriages passing through.
As we got closer to the three other men, Tobacco, as I will now call him kicked the back of my knees, so I fell rather ungracefully to my knees in the dirt track. I could feel the damp seeping in through the fabric layers of my simple cotton blue Empire dress, through my petticoat and the muslin shift dress underneath. This small annoyance cut through my terror like a hot pallet knife. I tilted my head and glared at the ringleader. You couldn't see his much of his face, he had it covered with a black scarf, tied around the back of his head. With his Bowler hat covering the top of his head you could really only see his eyes. They were an angry brown and he was positioned facing me, but with his arm out pointing a handgun at Tom. They were talking but I wasn't paying attention, too busy assessing the other two men. There was one behind Tom holding a rather large machete to his back who also had his face covered, I couldn't make much more out about him, and the other was looking off in a different direction, probably listening for any other incoming carriages. If it was another time and place, I would have laughed at his attire. Did the guy seriously consider himself a pirate? He had on a black Tricorn (which is the stereotypical pirate hat) and a cutlass strapped to his waist. Every so often when he moved the metal would glint and reflect the small rays of sunlight that found their way past the canopy. That’s when I noticed a foot peeking out from behind the tree where he was standing. I squinted to focus. The foot was positioned like the person was lying on their stomach…. I looked around the scene again and realised our coachman was not here…that meant. Oh. That must have been the second gun shot.

I was furious now. The coachman was dead I didn't even want to think about his family. Here we are again, my life at risk again. I was getting sick and tired of this. My Gryffindor stubbornness started to percolate. I raised my head again to tune into what they were saying so I could hopefully formulate a small plan to get away from these buffoons. I finally looked at Tom, he looked fierce and dangerous even without a weapon. Although, I wasn't kidding myself to think that he wasn't carrying something, no way Tom Riddle would ever be caught unawares or unprepared. He was a wall of silence and indifference. However, his gaze upon the ringleader, was worrying. He looked like he was a serpent about to strike and kill him with his bare hands. To everyone else maybe bored…but knowing Tom a little I could see the difference.

Tobacco yanked my hair back painfully. I could feel the heat of his body at my back and his rancid breath on my neck.

"Aren' ya' a feisty one, lil' kitty", he had a twinge of an Irish accent.

"Go check the carriage" Ringleader gestured to Pirate, while kicking a rock at him to get his attention. I ignored Tobacco, thinking that maybe this was our chance down to three while the other was distracted. I also prayed to the deities above that I didn't leave my bag in there. Thank god I had Tom transfigure it back into my simple gold chain around my neck.

The man with the machete looked twitchy for lack of a better word, like he just couldn't wait to draw blood from Tom. I felt Tobacco's finger start to draw along the junction of my neck and shoulder. The dress's neckline was a little more revealing than I am used to, but not distasteful. In our time it would still be considered conservative, but here perhaps a little risqué? The neckline dipped showing just a hint of the swells of my breasts, just the tops. This obviously, gave Tobacco the courage to touch what isn't his. His finger descended down my décolletage, while his other hand snaked around my waist ready to hold me in position as he molested me in front of Tom. I'm
assuming this is what they wanted to crack Tom as a form of amusement. I stared hard at Tom praying he would understand what I was about to do. He nodded infinitesimally.

"Now now now Bar don' ruin the goods befor' we leave" Ringleader said addressing Tobacco.

"Don't touch her", Tom gritted out playing along with what they wanted. I waited until I felt Tobacco's dirty fingernail dip into the valley between my breasts. My left arm was free to reach in between us, and I had enough room to grasp his testicles. I heard Ringleader bark out a loud laugh as Tom told him I am his wife. This distracted everyone enough that I grabbed, squeezed and twisted through the cloth of his pants.

"Bitch", he flung himself back and squeezed his legs together. I kicked him in the face for good measure. It was satisfying. I looked over to Tom, who had just elbowed machete in the eye, grabbed him and pulled him in front just in time as Ringleader got off a shot. Hitting Machete in the arm. I ducked and ran behind the carriage, because I knew the ruckus would cause Pirate to emerge from his session slashing the interior of the carriage to bits. The horse is chomping at the bit to get away, it gives me an idea. They have tied the horse to a tree to stop it from bolting with the carriage while they robbed it. I was surprised they didn't just cut off the horse to begin with. I ran to the tree, I had to be quick otherwise my quick plan won't work. I wrench at the leather straps tied in a knot to the tree. I yank hard to loosen the knot so I can loop it back upon itself so I can free the horse. I watch and listen as Pirate, finishes slashing. He must have figured the three could handle the both of us. The knot slips loose and the horse bucks, pulling the rest of the strap free as it bolts forward. Startling Pirate who was standing at the doorway about to step out, he jerks harshly into the edge of the carriage holding on for dear life, so he doesn't fall out and get run over by said carriage. He's gone now, three down one to go.

Tobacco is still down for the count; I kick him again just in case. I touch my neck just to make sure that the gold chain is still there. It is sigh in relief. Ringleader has tossed his gun to the side; he must have run out of bullets and he doesn't have time to stand there and stuff gunpowder down the chamber. They are circling each other like boxer's in a ring. Tom looks dishevelled and a little grubby, but he is the better looking of the pair. Ringleader looks like he has been dragged through a bush and then rolled around in the dirt. He has leaves and twigs stuck throughout his hair. His bowler hat is off to the side and someone has stepped on it. I look back down at Tobacco seeing if he has any weapons on him, I can use to distract Ringleader. I start shifting through his pockets and only come up with a pocketknife, I feel annoyed because what am I going to do with that? I could throw it…..? Risk hitting Tom or it does nothing, but it will distract Ringleader either way. I watch them for a while, but they are too close. I catch Tom's eye and flash the blade in my hand. He lets Ringleader wrestle him to the ground. It's now or never I run up behind him, not sure what I am doing, but I hold it like I was stabbing the horcrux in the chamber of secrets and plunge down wards. I close my eyes briefly because stabbing a man is not the same as stabbing an inanimate object. It makes me feel sick. I can feel the moment it goes in and there is almost no resistance. There is no sound except the pounding in my ears.

He lets out an unholy yelp clutching at himself, that's when I look to where the blade has embedded itself. My eyes widen as I process it. His right arse cheek. Of all the places I stabbed him in the arse.
Tom shoves him off him and stands up brushing himself off and assessing the damage.

"I didn't think you had it in you, Mrs Granger", I diverted my gaze to look at Tom, who had a hint of humour dancing in his eyes.

"Had what? That I could stab someone?", even though it's kind of had to be done, I was awash with guilt and self-loathing. I wasn't finding this situation funny. I looked at him blankly.

"To give new meaning to karma biting you in the arse, or in this case stabbing you", I knew what he was doing, trying to distract me and it sort of was working. Before I could reply any further, we both turned to the sound that was approaching swiftly. The clomping of hooves. It could be Pirate.

"Run, Hermione", Tom says as he grabs me by the forearm pulling me along. He let's go so I can pick up my skirts and run. These silly dresses aren't made for running through forests. I run as fast as I can, without tripping, which I nearly do several times. The soft ground covered in decaying leaves, that are slick with moisture make it prime to slip and fall when running at full pelt. The smell of the forest is pleasant, the complete opposite to what I was feeling. It brought back memories of the Forest of Dean. Here I was in the forest with Voldemort, running with him instead of away. I can hear behind us the sound of men running after us. Yelling and firing off the odd shot. But we are still out of distance. The forest gets a little darker the deeper we go in and further away from the road. I keep my eyes trained ahead trying to follow Tom's steps. Because of this I stumble and fall hard onto the ground. I want to cry. I can feel the tears prick at my eyes. The breath in deep the smell of earth that is just centimetres away from my face. I dig my fingers tips into the soft soil and attempt to pick myself up.

"Come on Hermione, just a bit further", I know Tom is treating me like a child to keep me motivated and to keep going. But I just can't. I feel strung out. He must have sensed my demeanour change and growled a little in frustration. He looked around frantically as we could hear the men's voices getting closer. He dragged me a little way over to a large tree that had enormous buttress roots, protruding out in all directions.

We squeezed in next to each other in between two roots near the centre, they were deep enough that we would have been somewhat obscured by the other surrounding roots. It had a strong smell of wet earth, but I found it comforting. I rested my head against the side of the root and noted the rough texture of the tree against my skin. We both remained quiet as the men got closer, barking at each other, then deciding to return to the road because it was getting too dark. I was surprised no one heard us because my heart was thumping in my chest and I was breathing a little heavy.

"That reminded me of that scene in Lord of the Rings, were the four hobbits are hiding from that dark rider off the side of the road", I say breaking the silence once the sound of the men's retreating footsteps is further enough away. Tom snorts.

"Yes, I suppose it does"

I look up at him, of what I can see in the fading light, “How do you not let it affect you?”, I say quietly. I don't clarify what I mean, and I don't think I need to. It's a while before he speaks, he must have been thinking about my question or at least whether he was going to answer it.

"We are cut from different cloth Hermione. Different ages, different experiences that have shaped and moulded us. Hurting people affects me as much as stepping on a bug. It is of no consequence
and I make no apologies for that. I live in a kill or be killed world and so making myself the top predator was and is a priority. Here and now of course it does affect me. I am pulled out of my world just as much as you are of yours. Stranded in a different time it is jarring, but I won’t let it beat me. I am adaptable and you will need to be too otherwise you will get torn down and ripped to pieces”. I take in what he has said, and he is right in the sense that I need to adapt better. I'm struggling because I'm still in part denial that this is just a dream. I want to let go so we can move on so to speak.

"I'm worried if I completely let go, I'll lose myself. I'm not Hermione Granger *Brightest Witch of her Age*, here I'm just plain old Hermione Granger"

"I'm not one for sentiment, but Hermione you still are you even without access to magic. We will find a way out of here", I shift a little closer seeking his body heat. As the sun sets that forest becomes cooler and the air crisp. I shiver.

"Hermione give me your chain and I'll transfigure it", I don't question him further as I fumble unclasping it, then hand it over.

Eventually, he gets it and *accios* two blankets, passing one to me and wrapping one around his back. He opens the front and shifts his legs spreading them.

"Hermione sit in between my legs", I stilled. Not that I thought he would do anything, but my mind was rapidly scrambling for another idea.

"We could erect the tent if you have enough magic to do so. Unless you think it's a bad idea. It's just...it may be warmer if we can get the stove going and a little more comfortable than the forest floor...and I can see what else I can dig up in the bag…"

"Miss Granger…Hermione stop your rambling. We can try, I'm not sure how much magic is used erecting a tent. But yes, your assessment is correct, it would be more comfortable than leaning against a tree all-night. I think we should be up early just in case they come back, even if I think it is doubtful", Tom stuck his hand inside the bag and summoned the tent. We moved quickly in the dwindling light laying out where the tent could go and unfolding it. Tom stood for a few minutes with his hand out over the fabric and his brow furrowed in concentration. I prayed this worked and I wished I could help in some way. Now that I didn't have my magic, I missed it immensely. I missed the freedom of it. Suddenly the tent sprang up, appearing as if it had been there for some time. It suddenly occurred to me what state the tent was in, it's not like we had much time to pack it up. I felt irrationally embarrassed.

"Ladies first", tom did a flourish of his hand.

"Ever the gentleman Tom", I entered the tent and it was pitch black, I assumed Tom waved his hand and a small balls of flames appeared in the hurricane glasses lighting up the room. It was a pleasant homely glow.

"it's not much we had to pack up rather quickly"

"Hermione it's fine I wasn't expecting the Ritz. I will gather some twigs and leaves to get the stove going” he turned a left the confines of the tent. I flopped down in a chair and looked around. The bunks were ruffled still like someone had just got out of bed. I felt tired and just wanted a bath and to go to bed. I felt dirty and I hated that feeling. I sighed and went through the bag of what I could reach and pulled out my toiletries, a bottle of water, some digestive biscuits that were miraculously
still in date, some matches, a tin of powdered chocolate and some small UHT long-life milk cartons. It gave me an idea; I went over to the kitchenette to find a clean saucepan and a spoon.

A few minutes later Tom returned with various sized twigs and dried leaves, even he looked worn and tired. There were some coal remains in the stove, at least it will be enough for tonight. Tom couldn't get the stove going, not that I was necessarily expecting him to be an unlimited source of convenience and he was tired. Luckily, I found the matches. He got frustrated and stormed off outside before I could even mention the matches. I guess he was used to always having everything down perfectly, never needing help. It was really the first time he has shown cracks in his armour, showing a hint of his feelings at being stuck here.

When the stove top was hot enough, I placed the saucepan on top heating some of the water I had poured in there from the water bottle. I mixed in a couple of scoops of the powdered chocolate to dissolve it, then added the UHT milk. I stood there a good while just stirring the pot, it was relaxing, and the smell of the chocolate was mouth-watering. I'm not sure how long I stood there just staring off into space, when I heard rustling outside. I froze worried that the bandits had found us, but instead Tom pulled back the flap. I ladled some of the hot chocolate into a mug for him and held it out for him. He looked confused.

I smiled, "I found some matches in my bag. Here I made some hot chocolate…” I watched as his hand slowly took a hold of the hot mug. He hissed a little at the burning sensation but brought his other hand up to circle around the mug.

"Thanks, I can't even remember when I last had some hot chocolate", I turned to ladle some for myself and went to sit down in one of the armchairs facing Tom. I split open the bag of digestive biscuits and placed them on the coffee table between us. We sat in quiet contemplation, I could feel myself begin to relax, like really relax.

I watched Tom take a biscuit from the packet and tracked its movement until it made its way to his mouth. He bit a small bite-size off the edge, and the way his jaw moved to chew the piece was purposeful. The rolling of his bottom jaw slightly to the side, the subtle suction of his cheeks inward and the way his lips curve, they look surprisingly soft and pink. I found I couldn't divert my eyes, the simple act of eating a biscuit he made it so…so…. erotic. A sensual act, a teasing performance, I was sure there was sinful promises etched on those lips.

“Hermione”….huh? what?

I found his eyes, he had a brow raised with a teasing smirk, like he knew exactly what I was thinking. Heat crept up my neck, I was sure my cheeks had a rosy hew. I cleared my throat loudly.

“Yes?”, I shifted around in my chair trying to look anywhere but at him.

"There's a theory I need to discuss with you. I am hesitant to bring it up because of your...state of mind lately", I felt a stab of anger pierce my chest. I was offended by that. Yes, I was struggling a little, but any normal person would be. How dare he!

I opened my mouth to spit back an angry retort, but he cut in before I could get a single word out.

"Are you familiar with the multiverse theory?", my mouth snapped shut and I narrowed my eyes.
“Yes…”, I looked him over again, was this a misdirection? I was confused.
A/N: The latest chapter for all you Lovely people. I’m not quite feeling this chapter; this week has been a little rough. A close family member was diagnosed with a very rare form of cancer. So I hope you forgive me if it’s not up to scratch.

Previously...

"Are you familiar with the multiverse theory?", my mouth snapped shut and I narrowed my eyes. I was confused.

Hermione POV

"The multiverse theory?", I repeated more to myself, a rhetorical question. I frowned deeply, trying to comprehend why he would veer us off into this direction.

He just sat there sipping the hot chocolate slowly, observing me offering nothing more. There was a small twitch to his lips, - he was waiting for me to catch up, glean information out of that innocuous question. Information he seemed only privy too. What would he need to ask me about the multiverse? Does he want an academic discussion? Out of all the theories why that particular one...?

I slowly sat up as it began to click, my blood pressure sky rocketing. He couldn't mean...? No....nononononono.... NO. I stood up abruptly. I would not accept this. NO.

I pointed a shaky finger at Tom, "You can't mean?...you....that...how do we get home from that?...I....no....there has to be something else....?", he just sat there staring at me...drinking. Is this a joke? A game? A test?

"No that is insane, more so than this whole situation already", in my manic state I was gesticulating frantically. Flinging my hands around grasping for the words to express how I felt out of thin air. "We can't be, this is supposed to be Back to the Future with the flux capacitor and DeLorean to boot, not a bloody John Carpenter movie!" I now clutched at my hair, digging my fingers into the strands, hoping for a shred of rational thought would present itself. I didn't think I could handle this, being stuck in the past is one thing but being stuck in the past in a parallel universe is another
entirely.

"Don't be so mulish Hermione we'll ju-"

"Mulish? Mulish? Oh, that's rich coming from you Tom. You're the biggest stubborn -arse I have ever come across and here you are saying I'm stubborn. I am only in this godforsaken situation because of you, because you just had to stick it to Dumbledore and out lay your ridiculous grand plans for world domination. Look at where that got you...here stuck in the forest 200 years in the past, possibly an alternate dimension with no way home. Hope you're fucking happy Tom" I managed to hurl my mostly empty mug at him, of course he ducked out of the way before it hit him. It didn't break just landed with a soft thud on the rug covering the floor.

It was silent. I had a moment to process what I had just said, and thought that it was probably not the right thing to say even though that is how I felt. But I was still too worked up to care. My body felt like it had run a marathon and any headway we had made in this strange relationship had now dissolved back to zero.

I watched as he slowly stood up out of the armchair, he looked angry and usually he never wore his emotions for people to read. I gulped because that was a bad sign, he was showing me how angry he was.

"I could kill you right now Hermione. I have killed many for less. Encircle your slender neck with my hands, my fingers squeezing the muscles, tendons and crushing your wind pipe, restricting oxygen to your lungs. Your body thrashing underneath me, fighting for that breath that will never come. I will watch your inner light diminish, take your last breath from you. Place your body outside and watch every day as you are returned to the earth. Fertilizer for the forest, food for the worms and maggots, until only your bones remain", his voice never betrayed the anger that was so evident on his face, it was eerily calm. It made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. It was unsettling listening to him describe my death, like he was going to pick up the newspaper from the corner shop. I couldn't move from the spot where my feet were planted. I wanted to run but I knew he would find me anyway. I had become too complacent with Tom, in this short amount of time. Forgotten that the predator could easily turn on me.

"You wouldn't hurt me", I whispered I wanted it to come out confident, but it came out anything but.

"Wouldn't I Hermione? I could make an exception I guess... for you" he stalked closer; I could feel his breath now tickling my ear. I reeled at what he meant; I had just meant killing in general...not that. "But you know where I would differ in relation to those pathetic examples of humanity, really make you hate yourself, the shame burning you up inside?", he pulled back a little so he could look me in the eye, his hand gripping my jaw, squeezing so tightly I couldn't speak. "I would make you enjoy it. Every touch and shiver of pleasure that was wrung from this body, you would enjoy it and each time it would kill you a little on the inside. That me, a monster, a villain would cause you to feel those things" he shoved me back hard and I landed on my back slightly winded. I refused to look at him, I didn't want him to see my tears even though he probably already knew.

He left me there on the floor and for a few long seconds I felt his eyes boring into me. It wasn't until he had been gone for what I assumed to be minutes I picked myself up, brushed off the dirt
and curled up on the lower bunk in a musty blanket. I cried, I felt so weak and emotional. Everything was falling apart, and I just couldn't get it together. I would like to believe that he was just scaring me more than anything, but I honestly wasn't sure. He had such a way with words, to cut you down, doubt yourself. He could probably kill you with words and I don’t mean an incantation. His words were like bullets.

I don't know how long I was curled up for, before I felt a firm hand shake me awake.

"Hermione", I stiffened under his touch, but not moving away or saying anything.

"I know you're awake Hermione. I am... sorry for scaring you. I don't apologise for what I said just that it scared you." I rolled my eyes in the dark, typical getting a sorry not sorry from Tom. This is probably the closest thing to an apology anyone has ever gotten.

I sighed and pushed myself up from the position I had been curled into. My joints ached and I felt emotionally drained.

"ok"

"I shouldn't have frightened you, but you just had to go and poke at an open wound and it infuriated me. I needed to remind you Hermione that you trust too much and too easily. I may sometimes be …nice but there still is-"

"The monster lurking underneath"

We sat there in the dark, only the glowing embers of what was left of the stove to add light and heat to the tent.

"Would you have done it?"

"Killing you?... I make no promises, though that percentage seems to drop a little each day. The other thing, no not unless you consented... as a threat.... it works rather well"

I let out the breath I was holding in, relief flooded me. I knew that I would have to do something monumentally stupid in order for him to murder me.

"You mentioned the multiverse theory earlier before my freak out-

"Please don't do that again or I will have to silence you"

"Before my freak out- why do you think we might be in an alternate dimension? It seems fairly accurate to me"

"During those two weeks of your hibernation, when I went information gathering...I went in search of Diagon Alley"

"Is that part of the reason you thought it was a bad idea?"

"Yes...the issue I had aside from killing them afterwards was that they didn't know what I was asking"

"Ok..killing aside... where they playing dumb? or is the alley called something different? They
weren't really wizards?" I knew they were dumb questions, but this situation required it.

"Yes, they were wizards Hermione I watched them for days before hand. I wasn't going to randomly go up and ask. With such limited magic I had to be careful, they still do witch burnings here and in America. But back to the topic, they had no idea what I was talking about, even after some unsavoury methods"

I snorted I really didn't want to imagine what unsavoury methods meant. I slipped off the bed and walked over to the stove, it was bordering on uncomfortably cold and I needed to step away from Tom for a moment to gather myself. It was like he had a split personality sometimes...I wonder if he ever considered a mental health disorder or if he really was just a sociopath. I noticed Tom must have gathered some more sticks as there was a small bundle next to the right foot of the stove. I fumbled around for the matches and miraculously got everything going. I just stood there heating up my hands, when I felt Tom appear next to me.

"They really didn't know about Diagon Alley? Are you sure they weren't just lying?" I really wanted to cling to the hope that Tom was wrong.

"Unfortunately, no. I am a natural legilimens Hermione, I am very good at discerning lies and believe me these people were telling the truth. It's very strange, I don't remember anything in the history books I read a Hogwarts recounting the moving of or name changing of Diagon Alley especially when it should have already been established. I can't figure it out other than an alternate dimension or we've somehow changed things being flung so far back in the past?" I kept thinking about alternate dimensions, the notion wasn't any better than what we've already established...but...Dumbledore.

"Tom. What...what if you are correct about the alternate dimension part, just not how we imagine?"

"Go on, colour me intrigued Mrs Granger"

"Dumbledore is behind this yes? You said he threw something at you and chanted an unknown spell, right?"

He turned wide eyed and I could see him putting the puzzle pieces together.

"You're implying Dumbledore did this?"

"Well yes. He always said that imprisoning you was pointless as no wizarding prison could hold you. So, what if during that year he was supposed to be 'dead' he was creating this prison for lack of a better word. The magic alone is extraordinary, how he did it exactly I would be more than interested in figuring it out. I wonder if he even knows entirely what he did"

"It was a time turner he threw at me; it just never came with us. We may in fact be anchored to something. This is more than what Dumbledore could do, hell anybody short of a deity. Small things yes, but an entire world? That is unlikely"

"Ok...well what do we do?"

He ran his hand through his dark curly hair, "Well one thing I did manage to discover from interviewing those people was that the great wizarding library in Greece it still exists in this…place. Let's just go with an open mind and see what we can gather from the library. I don't think I can just...be here and not do anything. Especially when we don't really know what here is", I watched as the shadows of the flickering flames danced over his face, he looked disturbingly
beautiful. A small traitorous part admired him and his ability to just be who he wants, fighting against expectations even if they were partly orchestrated to bring about his downfall. I wonder if he really believes what he told me about being a poor example of Frankenstein's monster. I am not a fool to believe that he would ever be open to seeking redemption, I think he likes being the villain in his own story. It must be freeing to just be who you want to be, and he has everything at his fingertips to change well *everything*. If I could show him that he doesn't have to keep playing Dumbledore's chess game, that he can just walk off the board. No more lives would need to be sacrificed to end this battle.

"*Man is condemned to be free. Condemned because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does*"

"*Man is who he wills himself to be*" he quoted back at me making me smile.

"Exactly"

"Are you trying to change me Hermione by quoting Sartre at me?", he raised an eyebrow and looked rather amused. I was surprised he read muggle books.

"No, I don't think anyone could change the great Tom Riddle or dissuade him from anything. But I just wanted to remind you that, things don't have to be this way. So many lives are affected by the decisions you and Dumbledore have made"

"Hermione, there is so much history between Dumbledore and I, and I don't think I could stop now if I wanted too. I just want to crush the insipid old man and finally have my victory", he had an unhinged glee shining in his eyes; both of them were obsessed at destroying each other and unlikely to stop until one of them was dead.

"I'm angry too Tom at Dumbledore, absolutely seething inside and he will get it once we see him again. We *will* see him again; I am not dying here in no man's land. Yes, researching I can do, something to focus on. No more breakdowns. I... just can't help but wonder why didn't you choose a different path? Why essentially give Dumbledore what he wants?"

"*Because he in part created who I am Hermione!*" He slammed his fist down on the edge of the stove making the pan atop clatter. "He wanted an adversary, the ultimate adversary well he damn well got one." Tom's volume increased and ended the statement with a resultant roar, making me jump a little in my skin.

I was struck dumb for a moment too scared to think while I observed the pendulum of his mood swing to anger.
"Don't engage him, you're giving him want he wants which is a fight, too...to...neutralise you, then he looks good again in the eyes of the wizarding world. The saviour, the slaying of the monster. Like you said, 'he is happy to destroy with good conscience a monster of his own creation'. Why can't you walk off the chessboard and accomplish something? You're the only other wizard aside form Dumbledore that has or had great potential. That is why he chose you; he feared your strength. He would deny it of course that he was ever threatened by a schoolboy, but the more I think about this the more I think I'm right".

"You don't get it Hermione; I can't just walk away. I have spent half my life dedicated to the path that I am on." He slaps his palm on his chest, then reaches out and grasps my shoulders shaking me. "I am at the precipice of succeeding, he set this in motion" his fingertips dug into my shoulders, but he wasn't looking at me, he seemed to be lost in his own head reliving a memory or fantasy. He was hurting me, the feel of his short fingernails breaking the skin, made me do something that I would never have normally done. I tilted my head up and I strained to lean forward in his firm hold. I brushed my lips gently against his. I looked at his eyes and I could see his long eyelashes flutter; I sense him deflate when I pressed my lips again more firmly. His grip lessened once he came back to his senses. Our gazes locked and he jerked back releasing me like my skin burned him. The expression on his face was shock and very unsure of what he was looking at. I was a creature he had never come across.

"Tom, you were gripping me rather tightly. I thought a non-violent approach may snap you out of it", I raised my hands in a non-threatening manner.

He scanned my body looking for injury, not finding any he returned his gaze to mine.

"It's nothing, I can fix the bruises later"

"Let's not talk about that ever", he brings his hand up subconsciously to touch his mouth but then catches himself. I feel a little offended by that I don't know why exactly, it's not like it was a real kiss.

"Sorry", I say biting my lip.

"It's....yeah"

"Ok, let's just pretend everything that has happened in the last twenty-four hours hasn't occurred. Chalk it up to temporary insanity", I twined my fingers together to stop from nervously fidgeting.

"Alright"

"Alright"

“What are our plans then moving forward?” Just wanting to put that awkwardness behind us. He seemed grateful for the change in topic.

“It’s still relatively early in the morning, so we can either go back to sleep for a little while or pack up and start out early. We don’t want to get caught by the highwayman again if we can help it. I also don’t know how far we are away from the coast, maybe a day or two? If we stick to the cover of the forest for as long as we can-”

“Then we should theoretically avoid their detection”, he nodded. “How early is it?”
“Just after 3”

“We should probably get a head start, unless you’re tired?”

"No, I’m not...let's get going so can we find your flux capacitor and DeLorean." I bark out a laugh.

"I can't believe you were actually listening to my hysterical ramblings”

"I maybe an arsehole Hermione, but I am always listening"
**Sympathy For the Devil**

*Previously...*

Well then...*let's go find your flux capacitor and DeLorean.***

*I bark out a laugh "I can't believe you were actually listening to my hysterical ramblings".*

*I maybe an arsehole Hermione, but I am always listening"*

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**Third POV Albus Dumbledore**

**Back at the Battle of Hogwarts**

"*Let you think on it? What is there to think about?*" Harry screamed at him, his young irate voice echoing in the clearing of the forest.

In all of Albus's imaginings of this very moment, this result didn't even rank in the top 100. In fact, to an outside observer, it would be seen as narcissistic of Albus to never have contemplated a negative reaction. But to answer Harry's irritating question so he can put a stop to this ridiculousness. Yes, he does need to ruminate on it. Voldemort was never supposed to exit this prison. The ramifications of unleashing an angry Dark Lord could be dire to the wizarding world once again. Personally, he didn't really see what the issue was. It was unfortunate that she got sucked in with Tom and he didn't want to stop and think about what that girl would be going through, but if her sacrifice saved the lives of the many then so be it. The only disappointment he saw was the loss of her intelligence and to be stuck with these dimwits.

Before he had a chance to answer, the ministerial Aurors started popping in, making the 'minions' rapidly start apparating away. His guess was that without their leader they aren't so confident. Bellatrix tried engaging with a few, but eventually she too saw the futility of it and apparated away in a swirl of black smoked fury.

Without a word Albus moved to leave the clearing in the forest wanting to have a look at Hogwarts. He hoped the others would naturally follow him.

The view of the beloved Hogwarts castle from down at the forests edge, was horrifying. The outer exterior of the castle was essentially rubble. The walls had large blast holes that you could drive a car through, some had smoking puffs of dark grey plumes reaching high into the sky funnelling out of them, parts of the castle were still on fire which lit up the night sky like a monstrous night light, and all of this was punctuated by children screaming. This was a complete sodding mess, but it could be rebuilt. Wiping the slate clean as it were.
Albus turned back to see most of the Order of the Phoenix behind him all looking a mixture of bewilderment, incensed and bitter. He knew they would rally against him and say why he couldn't stop this, why he couldn't take Voldemort out earlier, why he, why he, why he. Ungrateful bunch of twits. If he did everything then they would never learn, plus this was never about them. No, this was between him and Tom. Everybody else was a means to an end. He raised his hands and clapped them together, apparating him and them away from the war-torn castle grounds and to his personal residence.

Upon righting themselves from the forced apparition, Kingsley Shacklebolt spoke up, "What the in the world is going on Albus, how are you alive?", the dark-skinned man looked perplexed and a little exasperated.

Albus held his hand up to prevent anymore Phoenix members from speaking up over the top of each other. In fact, he thought that he should really just stupefy them, along with a silencing charm, so they can just be still and listen.

"If you all would be quiet, I will explain", a small amount of impatience bleeding through his words.

"Ugh can you stop stalling and tell us where Hermione is! And with the Dark Lord too! You have condemned her", Ronald Weasley yelled, going red in the face. Such an annoying boy with hideous orange hair. But a good fanatical follower for the light. A sheep, as the muggle teenagers would colloquially say. Albus knew he had affections for the young witch, however she held fascinations elsewhere.

Albus waved away their assertions, like swatting a fly. "Don't go sprouting accusations like facts Mr Weasley until you know the situation. I will tell you all you need to know in good time, but first you all need to calm down."

Harry Potter narrowed his eyes calculating, people often underestimated Mr Potter, thinking he wasn't smart. Well he wasn't book smart per say, but he was rather intuitive when it counted. He questioned Albus again much to his chagrin, he didn't like his authority being brought into disrepute in front of all the Order members.

"All we need to know? You mean only the parts you will tell us, not the bits that you will intentionally leave out", Albus glared making the members step back. They seemed to forget the great wizard, who was always so nice...had a magical ability that far surpassed theirs and could easily kill most of them if he really wanted too. What they didn't know was that Albus knew just as much dark magic as Voldemort did. Well if they were smart, they put two and two together, but he found that most of the light tended to live in denial.

"I will tell you what I want to tell you Mr Potter, but the abridged version if you must know, is that obviously I didn't die from the Gaunt ring, so I used that time to outline my plan to bring down Tom. Which I succeeded in but wasn't expecting Miss Granger to be clutching at his robes! Are you sure that you want me to try to reverse what I have done? A wrathful Lord Voldemort returning from this prison, to raise chaos once more, are you definitive in your decision?", he
looked around at all the faces some looked unsure, doubtful, as much as the older members wanted to bring back Hermione they understood the consequences much more than the younger impulsive members did.

Harry looked around noting the hesitation, "What? We can't just leave her with him. I know releasing him is not ideal, but I can't in good conscious leave her there after all she has done with finding the horcruxes. So please undo this", Albus could have said a flat out no and be done with it, but in doing so he wouldn't maintain his squeaky-clean reputation and he would be a target for vengeful members. He reluctantly looked down at the time turner around his neck, thinking how in Godric's name he was going to pull this off.

"Fine, but you all need the live with the consequences of this no matter what they maybe".

"When you say prison like what do you mean exactly?", he resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the youngest male member of the Weasley clan. Isn't it obvious as the noun implies?

"I created a complex spell, which took many months to get right. Its purpose was to trap Tom in the time turner", stopping once he saw how they were already struggling to understand what he had done, and this wasn't even the complex part! "Think of the time turner when you set your dials and then say the spell. You all should know that even if you have never used a device. Think of it as a door to the present, a door to the past and they are connected by a hallway. What I aimed to do was block that door to the past from opening, trapping Tom in the hallway. In order to do that I had to create a 'bubble' around him so he wouldn't hopefully get sucked sideways out of the time stream", Albus felt quite proud of what he had done, while it sounded simple explaining it like this and perhaps a little insane he was overall happy with it. Now the only question really was if it had worked. He had experimented with an orange and it had seemed to work but a person? He was cautiously optimistic. However, the glaringly obvious problem in this whole equation was Miss Granger hitching a ride on the back of Tom. Still he had faith in his abilities. And if not...well he would cross that bridge as they say when it came to it.

"Ok...what is the bubble exactly? Like a holding cell in the hallway? An anchoring point?", Ahh a good question a little more in depth, he expected that from Remus, the man wasn't an idiot after all.

"Well the bubble, that is if we are keeping with the analogy of a prison is the cell. The hallway is the prison and the bubble is the cell. It was made to anchor Tom there, to stop him from floating away, but also so I could pull him back to this time if I ever had the need too. Now if everything went correctly then it will be a simple tug on the imaginary string, and they will appear. If something went wrong and they got caught up in a timestream then it will be a little more difficult. Since time will be moving at a different pace than here. So, keep that in mind"

"Wait...different time. I don't understand!" Cried Ron, not being able to visualise what Albus was saying.

"Ronald Weasley" a shrill voice piped up from Mrs Weasley, while the twins Fred and George, just jostled Ron around trying to calm him down. Arthur Weasley just shook his head thinking what a mess everything was and rather upset at the thought of Hermione being alone with that monster.

Kingsley didn't say a word just stared at Albus, with a fierce look of concentration trying to fit the puzzle pieces together of what is the now a mysterious wizard, perhaps they never really knew him at all?
"SHUT. UP!", Harry yelled attempting to regain the reigns of the conversation, steering it back to calmer waters. Everyone went silent at the outburst. "This is getting us nowhere, Dumbledore just do what you need to do to get Hermione back, please", he sighed at the annoying pleading, but with resignation he removed the chain from around his neck.

He closed his eyes and his hands around the turner and chanted a spell, however the results were disappointing. He tried again and again but to no avail. He wanted to scream and yell and throw things, but that would look unprofessional. So, he took a deep breath trying to calm the violent emotions swirling inside him.

"Well...things have not gone to plan"

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**Hermione POV**

**3 days later**

**Somewhere in a forest in the South East part of England.**

"Hey Tom...can I ask you a question?", I had been itching to ask this question for a while now, but too scared to become the target of his anger. His behaviour over the last few days has, given me the courage to outright ask it. I flopped down beside him on the grass.

"You just did", he lazily shifted his gaze over to me. We were outside the tent it was a nice day. We had stumbled upon a stream (**thank god**) because I really wanted to wash some clothes especially my knickers. A girl could only last so long and I was at my limit of clean underwear. I was not going knicker less either!

"Fine. Can I have another one?", he just blinked at me and my brain processed what I had said. I smacked my forehead.

"Ugh, I walked into that one." I chewed my lip for a moment contemplating whether I should ask, but it is just **there**. "Since the likelihood of you murdering me right now is at a low (**he smirked**), your appearance isn't...you know", I flapped my hand around indicating to all of him. I figured he would know what I meant. He scowled then looked away. I waited patiently to see if he would answer the question. We aren't exactly friends, so I wouldn't be surprised if he chose not to answer the question. I was aware enough to know that his serpentine facade that came to be after his resurrection at the Triwizard Tournament, was a personal and touchy subject. But I think considering the circumstances I had a right to know.

The silence stretched on and I wasn't going to sit there stupidly waiting for him to open up. I stood back up to resume my washing over at the edge of the stream.

"It's complicated. I'm still trying to figure it out...", I stared for a moment and decided the risk was worth it. I'd go for the million-dollar question. "Does your more...human look mean that you have your soul back?", I looked down at him, he was sitting on the grass, leaning back on one elbow, with his legs stretched out and picking at the blades of grass. The slight breeze was ruffling
his curly hair and despite the cold look on his face I thought he never looked so…at peace. I chuckled a little at the thought.. peace…such a foreign concept. I can't remember in the last few years when I did feel truly at peace and at rest. Relaxed. Where you weren't constantly on edge that someone was going to kill you or more specifically Harry. It was surreal to think that the common enemy was here relaxed in front of me, going through what I can imagine an existential crisis. Did I dare feel sympathy for the devil?

He remained turned away but answered, "Yes. It feels…. strange after so many years with…less of one", I sat back down and edged closer, as close as I could get without being in his personal space.

"What's it like?", I was rather eager to lap up any information he would give me. After chasing down and destroying his horcruxes I was very much interested, in what the books sorely lacked.

His eyes flicked over my face, looking for something then clearly finding it he answered, "Empty, to put it simply. You can instinctively tell there is something inherently missing. It's hard to describe it, but that primitive part of the brain just knows. I wanted immortality and I got it, but at a price. At the time I was willing to pay it - any price for it. Now...now I'm not too sure. Get that look of your face sweetheart, I'll never be fluffy kittens and unicorns", he shuddered at the child like imagery. I held my hands up in defence, "I wasn't thinking anything specific...just hopeful", and hopeful I was. Tom would always be dark and lurking in the shadowy parts of society. He wouldn't be Tom if he didn't, it was a pity really, he would be a rather good teacher if he could curb the murdery part of his personality.

"Do you think that it has something do with Dumbledore's spell, the weird-yet-to-be-determined-time-travel or the fact that most of your horcruxes are destroyed?" I cringed at that; I had a terrible realisation that I had in fact been actively trying to kill him. He must have noticed my face drop.

"Hermione look at me.", I raised my head afraid again, that I had overstepped or something worse. "Am I angry about the horcruxes? Yes, but in the grand scheme of things that was more Dumbledore than you. I'm guessing you're coming to the realisation that you were trying to kill me and having to reconcile that fact, now that we...know each other", I must wear my emotions on my face for him to read me so well.

"I... yes? I just never really had given it much thought until then. Thinking about the horcruxes as separate objects was easier than connecting them to a person", I felt sick, the weight of the guilt was crushing even if he had been trying to kill Harry.

"It's fine Hermione, not like I don't have people actively trying to kill me on a daily basis", he looked uncomfortable talking about this.

"That's such a horrible way to live, at least Harry had parts of the year with no threats", Did I have sympathy for the devil? - yes in that small moment I did. An isolated young man that couldn't trust anybody; it would have been so lonely- how could anyone live like that? I hesitantly reached out the short distance between us and gave his hand closest to me a gentle squeeze, hoping to convey what I couldn't get out. His eyes held an emotion that I couldn't decipher. I will think on it later. I stood not wanting to make this moment between us anymore awkward than it already was.

"I guess I better get back to cleaning my knickers while the weather is still fine".
Later that evening I returned to the tent, after spending the rest of the afternoon washing and scrubbing our clothes the best I could. I didn't know when we'd have the chance to wash again. If we ever returned to our time, I will never again complain about doing laundry with a washing machine. My back and arms ached. I don't know how women in this time do it constantly.

I entered the tent with our clothes neatly folded and noticed the smell first- it was mouth-watering. Tom was hunched over the stove top stirring something.

"What's this?", I asked at the threshold of the tent. Curiosity taking over as Tom had never cooked while we have been in the forest so far.

"Well my dear, I'd say we are two days away from Dover and we could use a good hearty meal. The crossing from Dover to Calais won't be an easy one and I can't guarantee when we will eat something like this next".

"What is it?" Piqued.

"Rabbit", I blinked looking back at the stove.

"You caught a rabbit and skinned it?", he nodded and went back to stirring his pot.

"For Godric's sake is there anything you can't do?"

"I am a man of many talents, Hermione", he flashed me a charming smile. Jesus he could charm a house plant.

"Ok...Mr man of many talents, tell me something no one else knows", I challenged him as I put the clothes down on the edge of the couch. He was thinking and tapping his chin.

"I make a simply murderous death by chocolate cake", I snorted.

"Really? Is it because you put poison in it?", he threw his head back and laughed.

Gathering himself again from his rare bout of laughter he replied, "Yes a couple of times, but it really is good without the poison. I have served it at a few Death Eater gatherings, and everyone raved about it afterwards. Of course, they never knew it was I who made it in the kitchens with the house elves", I gaped like a bloody fish.

"You made it with the house elves? Have I stepped into the Twilight Zone?"

He rolled his eyes and looked to the heavens for support. "There really is so much distortion of the truth from Dumbledore…and some of the Death Eaters, which I let perpetuate because it certainly helps my villainous reputation"

"Like what?", he resumes stirring for a good minute before answering again.

"Like the house elves, they don't bother me either way. I only killed the one's that hated everyone
other than pure bloods before you enter into that tirade. Mudbloods, I'm here with you Hermione right now. If I really hated them, I would have killed you within the first five minutes of ending up here. I'm a half-blood like Harry, it would be hypocritical to despise them. Don't you think?”. I felt my world tip sideways for a moment, trying to reconcile the two parts of Tom Riddle.

"Now I see what you meant before…everything seems to be topsy turvey"

"Mmmm the good old grey bearded arsehole knows how to play on the weaknesses of others, and no offence but you guys on the 'light' side are suckers. I can see why none of you except me saw through what he was doing, he is very good at playing good", I was becoming overwhelmed again, I hated that the truth was slammed into my face once more. I was surprisingly not angry at Tom. "Hermione, I have filled the tub with some water from the stream, why don't you go take a bath and soak those aching muscles"

"If it wasn't totally inappropriate, I would kiss you right now", a bath sounded heavenly.

"I wouldn't say no Mrs Granger", a rather toothy smile.

"I'm sure you wouldn't you cheeky bastard" I smiled and turned on my heel heading off in the direction of the 'bathroom'. My smile slowly faded as I got closer, I realised holy shit I like the dark lord. As a person? Acquaintance? As a friend?

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**Tom POV**

Bloody hell, I rather adore this young woman. I still don't know whether to kill her or keep her, but I like her.
Previous…

Bloody hell, I rather adore this young woman. I still don't know whether to kill her or keep her, but I like her.

Hermione POV

Inching towards Dover

We both had been rather quiet after that conversation two days ago, which looking back was borderline flirting. I think we both are a little confused, well I know I am confused. I still don't completely trust him; he can be unpredictable and that worries me. It’s difficult because for the most part I have to rely on him, my life is at the moment completely in his blood-stained hands. I guess the biggest problem aside from his wonky moral compass is my loyalty and friendship to Harry. How can I build a potential friendship with someone who murdered his parents? It feels like the biggest betrayal, that no friendship could survive.

I trudged in silence behind Tom as he seemed to know where the hell we were going. If it was up to me, we would have been lost a while ago. I was no girl guide. The only thing that gave me hope that we were going in the right direction was the change in the air. A saltiness that could only be associated with the ocean.

Up ahead I could see where the edge of the forest stopped and opened up onto a flat grassed area, leading right to the edge of the cliffs. I smiled and ran ahead, ignoring Tom’s calls for me to stop. I couldn't help it, I needed to get out of the forest and feel like we are making progress. It was at least 200 metres I thought to the edge as I sprinted as fast I could in this dress. My beaded bag, thumping at my side rather roughly to the rhythm of my feet pounding the earth. I stopped to a slow walk as the edge of the cliff was approaching, the last thing I needed in my excitement was to slip over the edge and fall to my death. Tom would not be able to save me then. The wind was whipping about, my hair kept blowing in my face but I didn't care, the smell of the fresh briny air...
was….it smelled like freedom. I could see off in the distance the enormous sail ships both coming and going, to and from France and elsewhere. It was an amazing sight.

"Hermione", Tom was a little breathless after having to run after me. I know I was a slight magnet for trouble after all.

"Tom, just look", I grabbed him by the front of his shirt and roughly turned him so he could look. I pointed out at all the sailboats, their large sails billowing in the ocean breezy, while dipping and cresting on the rough channel swell. It was a sight to see. Looking at this image in textbooks was one thing but viewing in person was another.

"It's amazing isn't it?", I wonder what he thought of my childish reverence. I couldn't help the small squeal of excitement that escaped me.

"It is a rather enchanting sight", he replied but he wasn't looking at the boats. I didn't think too much on it, I was too caught up in the thrill of the moment.

A few hours later, I was hot and sweaty from the walk and descent down to the Dover port. What I wouldn't give for another dip in the tub like I had two days ago. I'll be eternally grateful to Tom for filling the bathtub for me.

What struck me first about the port was the outrageous smell of urine and fish. It kind of dampened the backdrop of the brilliant gleaming limestone chalk white cliffs. There were people everywhere. I was astounded by the sheer number of people at the port. They were all bustling about, moving crates of food stuffs, bottles clinking, large trolleys with the Royal Mail logo stamped on the side rolling by and men shouting. I stepped closer to Tom so I wouldn't get bumped and lost in the crowd of people. They just kept walking not caring if they ran into you or not. Towards the furthest end of the docks, there were stalls set up for people to buy tickets on to some of the ships for transport across the Strait, some where you could buy small servings of some type of food (I assumed this was for the dockworkers and for the crew of the boats) and I noticed even discreetly there were sex workers lingering in the back. Really, they were everywhere! I wasn't paying attention to where I was walking because I was lost in this particular train of thought, that I had bumped into a man who smelled like salt and bad body odour. He had a few sores on his face that immediately repulsed me. I tried not to show it because that would be rude, if he had a genuine medical condition. They looked similar to the ones on the lady's face from the brothel who was fellating the gentleman in the hallway. His pants had seen better days and his shirt was stained various shades of yellow from sweat. His hair was long and shaggy, haphazardly tied at the back with a black ribbon fraying at the ends and he had rough looking facial hair that was well on its way to being a beard.

"Aye lassie watch where ya' goin'", I leaned back as he leaned in the smell my hair and noting the Scottish lilt in his speech.

"Ah sir can you please let me go now? I need to find my husband", he chortled at the thought that I would be married, but ultimately ignored my polite protest.

"What's a sweet girlie like you doin' down 'ere at the docks?", I tried to step back so I could look around, wanting to get Tom in my field of vision.

"I told you I am looking for my husband, we are going to France. Now get your filthy hand off me"
annoyance at his persistent intent to ignore anything I said was grating on me. I swatted his hand away to stop him from touching me, my revulsion now present and accounted for.

"Ya need to learn ya place young lass and I dannae see your husband anywhere. Why don't you come with me an' we can find him for ye?", I didn't want to go anywhere with him because I knew that it was a trap for silly naïve young girls who he thought I fitted into that category.

"I don't think so but thank you for offering. I'll just wait here for him so he can see me", I nodded trying to remain polite for the audience we were gathering. Just as he went to grab my upper arm another arm snaked around my waist and pulled me too him, so I was out of reach of the Scotsman. I stilled not knowing who it was immediately but relaxed at the man's voice.

"The only thing she will get going with you is Syphilis", I shuddered, so that was what the sores were about on his face. A sexually transmitted disease and no treatment in this time.

"How dare ye?", either the man was angry that his disease was now known to everyone or he didn't know he had it.

"How dare I? You were the one trying and failing at seducing my wife, ignoring her protestations at saying 'no'. When a lady says no, she means no, it's called respect, if you need a reminder of what that word means I suggest getting a dictionary", the assertive tone coated in arrogance seemed to make the man back down. He lifted his hands in a placating manner and stepping back in defeat, "No hard feelings there sir, ye got ya self a nice wee lass there to warm ya bed, be a shame if something were to happen to ya", Tom seemed unfazed by the threat, almost bored, like this was the most uninvective threat he had ever heard. Although, it probably was since he would have come up with more violently fantastical ones in his blood thirsty reign as the Dark Lord himself. Tom Riddle was just as crafty as a 'regular' man as he was a powerful wizard in his prime.

"Let's go sweetheart, we have places to be, no need to lower ourselves to likes of illiterate diseased fishermen", Tom was careful not to say my name, pushing me along behind him not wanting to turn his back on the disgruntled Scotsman. After a minute the man decided this wasn't worth the effort and retreated. Tom slipped his fingers around my wrist and pulled me along, we approached a large rowing boat that was waving a Belgian flag. I was confused I thought we were going to France, not Belgium and in a much larger ship.

I turned to Tom to say something, but he already placed a finger over my lips, "Just wait here".

I watched as Tom approached a man and began talking to him, then gesturing over to me. He stepped closer to the man in a threatening manner, which made the man step back with a look on his face that said he really didn't want to deal with this but caved to Tom's demand. Tom patted him on the shoulder in a patronizing way, then proffered one of our galleon's. I lamented the loss of another one of our coins, but in the grand scheme of things it really didn't matter.

Tom returned to my side and we found somewhere to sit and wait.

"They won't be able to leave until the next high tide. The port is too shallow for the larger packet ships. The rowing boat is taking supplies out while they wait", and he pointed to a large packet ship out in the distance. It had three masts and well that's about the extent of my ship knowledge. I was a little apprehensive of this trip, I was worried about seasickness and my fear of drowning. I wasn't a fan of the ocean, to be honest it scared me a little.

"Why are we going on a Belgian ship?"
"Hermione tsk tsk not remembering our history lessons, are you? The Napoleonic wars are going on right now. Being on a Belgian ship greatly reduces the chances of French privateers plundering the boat. I don't fancy being on a ship that gets attacked by pirates". I had completely forgotten about Napoleon and the French Revolution.

"Great…just great"

"I bribed the man to give us a cabin. I didn't want to be lumped in with the unwashed masses in the steerage. It offers us a bit of privacy and safety for you"

"Thanks", from reading some history books and historical novels I do know of some of the things that go on, more so on long voyages than a short trip across the channel. I'd rather not be robbed in my sleep, the fear of my bag falling into the wrong hands causes me to clutch it tighter.

It was at least another hour of waiting before the tide was high enough for the packet boat to make its way into the dock. I felt like I had a whole swarm of butterflies flying furiously in my stomach. My palms were getting damp and my throat tightening.

I tried to keep my breathing even, so I didn't start to hyperventilate, this situation was stressing me out.

"Hermione are you alright?", I tried smiling to let him think that I was ok, everything was just fine. "Hermione".

"I'm just getting nervous, ok? This makes me uneasy"

"You don't like sailing? Do you get seasick?"

"It's not the boat, it's the ocean I don't like. It... the uncontrollable and unpredictable nature of it scares me", I wasn't embarrassed by my phobia, but admitting a weakness to Tom was also unsettling.

He just looked at me assessing but didn't say anything else. We watched the crew drag and drop the wooden ramp off the side of the boat and it clanked loudly against the sea weathered dock; the weight of it caused vibrations to ripple up your legs.

"Alright, men up this side to tha left and women to tha right", my eyes widened when I realised that we were going to be separated for most of the trip. I laced my fingers through his and squeezed, making him aware of the extent of my anxiety. He looked down at our intertwined fingers quizically, and I briefly thought that he had not held hands with anyone before? But I was abruptly cut off from that line of thought when I was called out to "get moving mam". One last look at Tom and I disentangled myself from him and followed behind the rest of the women.

We were shown to our quarters, they were small rooms with no doors, just a curtain that slide across the front giving some privacy. The room had a bunk bed, a pail of water, a small basin and some hand towels. The bunks where padded with straw mattresses, a pillow and simple cotton blanket. The woman I was sharing with must not have spoken English as she just looked at me and climbed up on the top bunk without saying a word. Perhaps she was used to travelling like this, but I certainly wasn't.
Hours later I was a mess, I had already succumbed to the seasickness. It was impossible not to unless you had an iron stomach. Like the woman on the top bunk had, as the boat dipped, rolled and crested the waves with increasing ferocity she remained heavily snoring. In between my heaving, I could hear the rain pelting the upper deck. This trip has taken longer than I had anticipated and the storm now thrashing the boat around I can't imagine it is helping us make much progress. There is a symphony of moans I can hear out beyond the curtain, clearly, I am not the only one suffering in silence as my stomach cramps with a fresh wave of bile filling my mouth. I am hugging another pail which rolled out from underneath my lower bunk once we left the harbour and encountered a rougher swell. Sweat is beading my brow, my hair a tangled mess as I try to keep it out of range of my mouth and bucket and all I can smell, and taste is vomit. I want to move I really do but my legs and arms just don't want too.

I am lulled a little by the rocking of the ship, the nausea is overpowering, keeping me firmly awake. I don't know what the passage of time is like as this feels somewhat never ending. I never want to get on a boat again. At some point the curtain is abruptly flung back and I think if it is a man come to molest me, well he will have to do it covered in my stomach contents.

I feel the person sit beside me on the floor and reach for my chin twisting my head to the side and I grimace. It makes my stomach turn. Tom looks concerned at my appearance. He pats one of the towels against my face, wiping up all the sweat. He then searches through my bag for something and shifts me, so I am in front of him and he braids my hair to keep it out of my face. I don't register much of it but the feel of his fingers against my scalp is soothing. My nerves are so fried that even my hair seems to ache.

As a fresh batch of dry retching overcomes me and I claw at the bucket as my stomach tries desperately to expel the contents that are non-existent. Tom holds me around the stomach and runs a hand up and down my back, massaging and kneading the muscles gently trying to offer me some relief. I will be sore tomorrow. I start to cry, my hot tears spilling over and burning my sensitive cheeks. I feel utterly miserable. I don't remember much after that, other than him mumbling something about sleep into my ear.

Two Days Later….

I roll over and snuggle down into the pillow. I try to blink and struggle to open my eyes, the pull of unconsciousness is tugging at the edges but semi realise that I am not on the ship anymore. The sheets smell oddly familiar, at that alone is enough to keep me determined to stay awake.

I manage the pry my eyes open and look around. I'm in the tent? I blink furiously and shake my head, needing the shackles of sleep clamped around my brain to drop off so I can think. Another
minute and I sit up rubbing at my eyes. The stove is on and crackling away, that familiar sound is comforting. Tom is nowhere to be seen. I look down at my clothes, my cover dress and petticoat are gone, and I am just in my muslin shift dress. Tom must have removed the outer layers; I think I vaguely remember throwing up on myself as I tried to catch the rolling bucket. My tongue feels heavy and like sandpaper, my throat is burned from the stomach acid. I smell horrid and my skin is sticky from the layers of dried sweat.

I hold on to the edge of the bed frame to hoist myself up on shaky legs. I slowly edge my way over the bathroom area and notice the tub is filled with water and it is still somewhat warm. I don't care I just want to be clean and brush my teeth. Pulling out all my toiletries I set to work at scrubbing every inch of my body, washing my hair twice and then brushing my teeth. Upon feeling like a member of the human race again, I dressed in modern clothing, sweatpants, a jumper and Ugg boots. I needed a slice of normal. I brushed my wet hair and pulled a maroon coloured beanie over my head. Grabbing another blanket out one that didn't smell as much I placed it around my shoulders and decided to peek outside for Tom. He had dragged a bench seat out and was staring up at the sky.

I sat down on the edge of the bench seat, unsure if I was welcome to intrude on his personal time.

"Welcome back to the land of the living", he didn't turn to look at me, he remained looking up.

"What happened?", I slid a little closer, sensing it was ok to as he seemed to be in a good mood.

"You were exhausted and a little dehydrated, so I in a way knocked you out"

"Knocked me out?", I wasn't sure exactly what he meant.

"You were quite seasick, but the nausea was keeping you awake, so I…sort of stupefied you, just enough to render you unconscious, without your body going stiff as a board"

"Oh, ok well thank you", I tucked some of my hair behind my ear and chewed a little on my bottom lip. It was sort of sweet in a way knocking me unconscious. I don't know how much he actually cared for my health and wellbeing, but before I could think too much about it, I planted a gentle kiss on his cheek.

I played with the sleeves of my jumper not wanting to look at him, it didn't mean anything just a kiss on the cheek to say thank you. Because really, he could have easily just left me there, it wasn't his responsibility to look after me. Oh, hell I was nervous now and I just made everything awkward.

"It's fine Hermione"

"What are you doing out here?", it was quite cool out of the tent, winter was fast approaching. Definitely later in the year than when we got sucked in.

"Just looking…thinking", a generic non-answer. I sighed and looked up as well. Despite the crispness, the night was clear. You had a perfect sky to look at if only we had a telescope. No clouds and certainly a lot less light pollution than in our time. Looking up at the night sky never ceases to amaze me.
"I kind of like the idea that when we die, our bodies will disintegrate, and all the atoms of our ashes will eventually return - out there. To the wonderful and mysterious Universe, for we are nothing but stardust. It's beautiful really, don't you think?", I couldn’t stop the small smile on my lips as I thought of that, the universe is so much vaster and more beautiful than what most people give it credit for.

“That’s a remarkable way of thinking about it, poetic. Stardust, I like it”, he shifted on the bench and I felt his arm lean against mine. I relaxed; we were going to be ok. Murderous impulses aside. Maybe I could one day call him a friend.
Previously…

“That’s a remarkable way of thinking about it, poetic. Stardust, I like it”, he shifted on the bench and I felt his arm lean against mine. I relaxed; we were going to be ok. Murderous impulses aside. Maybe I could one day call him a friend.

BACK IN THE PRESENT

Harry (and Ron) third person POV

The two young men sat quietly off to the side both with fervent anticipation of what was to come. They were concerned about their best friend's welfare. What was happening to her right now? Was she being tormented by Voldemort? Was she dead? It stricken them both that if she was indeed dead, then she would have died alone and afraid.

"Do you think she is ok?", the red headed boy bumped shoulders with his green eyed bespectacled best friend, looking for comforting reassurance that Hermione will be fine. Even if he ultimately knows that it will be steeped in hollow denial.

"I don't know Ron. I don't know", there was nothing else that Harry could say to reassure his friend. He knew what Voldemort was like, so he only hoped that she wasn't tortured. That it was a quick death and that was cold comfort. But there was still something nagging, a thread of a thought snagging on his awareness. In the forest he can't, couldn't understand. What was up with Voldemort's behaviour? His fleeting fascination with Hermione and then protecting her from Dumbledore when he suddenly appeared. It was rather confusing. Although a rebellious thought bubbled to the surface, thinking that Voldemort might have been suspiciously correct about Dumbledore. He noted the bitterness which surrounded the thought. The old Headmaster has been acting strange since his reappearance, he doesn't seem the same as before he died. How did he survive the Gaunt ring, when we all saw his withered black necrotic hand? What the hell has he been doing for the last year? Yes, he gave us some long-winded story about constructing this prison, which sounded…well he wasn't completely on board with it. It sounded like something Voldemort would do. Not the warriors of good and justice. Harry wouldn't say this out loud, but it bothered him greatly. Was it even possible to remove them from that 'prison'?
"We'll get her back yeah? Hermione is as smart as that snake-faced ass hat, she's resilient and resourceful. I'm...I'm sure she'll be fine", now it was Ron's turn to attempt to lift Harry's spirits, even as he sounded resigned and despondent. Harry appreciated the effort.

Harry remained focused on the movements of Dumbledore as he, flicked pages, stacked books and rearranged his desk. It was a lot of doing something without actually accomplishing anything. He flicked his eyes over the rest of the room. The adults were huddled together, discussing something and the twins and Ginny were whispering. No doubt up to know good, but he couldn't summon the feeling to care about what they were planning in this moment. No, he would continue to watch Dumbledore with a scrutiny that Hermione would have been proud of. He would get to the bottom of this, he just didn't know if he would like what the bottom was. He didn't want Hermione to be the human sacrifice to take down the Dark Lord. Why couldn't Dumbledore take him out like Grindelwald? Why did it have to be him? Because of some stupid prophecy? He didn't really believe in prophecies but followed what this 'great' wizard said to the letter because he thought it was the only way. Now however, things have definitely changed. If he manages to bring them both back from wherever he has sent them, and by chance Hermione is still alive, he would be more than interested to see what Voldemort has to say about everything. Something is not adding up, but he doesn't know what it is yet. His instincts are screaming that something is wrong. But for now, he'll watch and wait.

Tom POV

France, somewhere near Paris

After a week or so of wandering around the local area

She is dangerous. Like a slow acting poison. She is seeping in, being absorbed into my skin. She doesn't realise it yet, but she will be mine in due time.

I have astutely decided that I will keep her around for now. She would be a good ally if we ever get back. If only just to rub it in Dumbledore's face that I turned the mudblood princess to my side.

The joy it would bring me, I would relish it so. Maybe it would finally crack that facade he has so fastidiously kept up all these years. Finally, they would see the master manipulator, behind those blue fucking twinkly eyes that I'd love to rip out of his eye sockets. I smile darkly at that. I would use a muggle method that I have heard about but never had the chance to implement. A spoon. Dig his eyes out with a spoon. Getting the angle right as you force the metal between the eye and the socket, careful to apply the right pressure because you don't want to slip and go too far in and hit the brain. No, just enough to get behind the eye, then lift and twist. Scoop out the eyeball with the optic nerve still attached to the brain. I would preserve them in a jar in my study so I can look at them every day and know I finally beat the bastard. Mmm most of my followers would appreciate
the brutality of it, some of the more uptight members (That's right Lucius I'm thinking of you), would cringe at having resolved to more primitive muggle methods. Because really, they don't want their prissy hands getting dirty.

"What are you smiling about?", Hermione touches my arm gently getting my attention. She was sweet talking a farmer to give us a ride as far as he is going in the direction of Paris, on the back of his farmers cart. Her sweet innocent nature could charm most people if she put in the effort. Otherwise she could be quite abrasive and that annoys most of the general populous. I find I rather like her when she is like that. But I still have lines she cannot cross.

"Oh, nothing you need to worry about Mrs Granger", I flash my best smile as the farmer was coming over, slipping my arm around Hermione's waist. Playing the part of love-sick husband, I would rather at this point slice one of my own fingers off.

"Oiseaux d'amour prêts à partir?", the older farmer, was missing some teeth and his face was weather beaten after years of ploughing the fields. He nodded and bowed a little, scrunching his hat in both his hands. I wondered what Hermione had told him, for us to be allowed to ride in the back of his cart amongst the vegetables. I hated having to ride like a commoner, but it was better than having to walk all the way to Paris. Love birds really?

"Ouis bien sûr", Hermione replied politely, squeezing my waist as a warning I presume to stop me from doing something that would ruin this for us.

"Montrer le chemin", I waved my hand in front, indicating for him to take us to his cart. I assisted Hermione up onto the cart, just like a good and proper gentleman would take care of his wife. We both shifted some of the crates around to make room for both of us to sit down. It was going to be a long bumpy ride, I let Hermione rest her head on my shoulder. It was all part of the role playing after all.

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**Hermione POV**

The farmer was relatively easy to convince to let us hitch a ride in his vegetable cart. I did promise that we would help set up his stall at the markets in exchange. I haven't told Tom this yet, I'm sure he will be thrilled. I could remember enough French from holidays with my parents to get around.

"So how did you do it Mrs Granger?", Tom poked me in the side to get my attention, which nearly ended up with him getting an elbow in return.
"The wistful tale of misunderstood forbidden love and we are eloping to Paris to start a new life and open our dream apothecary", he snorted at the forbidden love. In virtually every version or scenario I could think of in this moment, our tale of love would fall into the forbidden category. We are separated by an expanse that I cannot even begin to fathom of how we would cross.

"What? it won him over and here we are, besides we are going to need a cover story because people will ask us. We kind of standout".

"Yes, I suppose you are right. We'll try our best to fly under the radar. Now relax Mrs Granger, it's still a few hours to Paris even without the walking", I took that que that he wanted to peace and quiet not to be bombarded with questions like I usually barrage him with. He was just quite fascinating to speak with on the subject of magical theory. Or any subject really, he was so widely read, it was refreshing being able to speak with him about things that I can rarely speak about to anyone, because they just weren't interested or they couldn't grasp the subject matter. I nestled in next to him and let my head drop to his shoulder, I was rather appalled with myself that I enjoyed his smell. It was something that I can began to associate with safety. Which was hilarious if it wasn't so depressing. It was unhealthy is what it was.

**Paris**

It didn't take as long as I thought it would for us to enter the outskirts of Paris, perhaps three hours? Tom was not thrilled as I had expected him to be at the prospect of hauling crates of vegetables and helping to set up the man's market stall. But aside from physical labour, it was a free ride. I considered that a win.

I let Tom take the lead as we walked around the streets of Paris, trying to get our bearings to the best of our abilities from our time in the future. It wasn't that much difference to London, a busy city that still smelled horribly and was rather dirty.

It was getting late in the afternoon and I started to wonder where we were going to stay the night. But before I get the question out, I had noticed that we were heading to a more well 'dubious' area. I briefly considered if he was looking for the entrance into the French wizarding community. I could see a heated argument between a man and a woman, at first you would think it was a marital spat, but I could only pick up certain words and it was no domestic. No, this sounded like an employer and an employee. Normally I would have just walked by because she seemed to be handling herself, but he was getting a bit aggressive.

“Madame, nous n'avons plus besoin de vous. Je me suis réapproprié votre rôle, que je vous ai déjà dit plusieurs fois, alors laissez ou je vous ferai”, to me that sounded like a threat- *Leave or I'll make you.*
"C'est n'importe quoi. Vous avez donné mon rôle à un homme! Discrimination pour être une femme", the woman was punctuating her displeasure with various hand gestures. I would be livid as well if this happened to me. Losing her job because of her gender.

"Vous êtes une femme votre travail est à la maison", the woman, huffed in indignation and raised her hand to slap the man across the face. I would too if someone told me my only place was in the home. The man reacted quickly and grabbed her wrist in mid-air and twisted, if he twisted any harder, he could break her wrist. I could not let this go.

"Tom", I gripped his arm tightly as adrenaline spiked through me. He tightened his elbow so I couldn't release my arm.

"Hermione, you don't need to intervene every time you see an injustice", I whacked him with my free hand.

"So, you acknowledge that it is an injustice, what that man is doing? Well I am not the kind of person that just stands idly by "Tom", I watched as he looked back over to the man, his face tightened and then relaxed. I would have missed it if I wasn't openly assessing at close quarters.

"Fine, but don't get all high and mighty if I break his fingers for laying a hand on you", I was surprised he acquiesced so easily. I don't think he cared either way whether I got hurt, he just wanted an excuse to assault someone. I pulled my arm out and ran to intervene.

"Excuse me! Excusez-moi", I stepped in between the man and the woman, pulling on his arm to bring it down so the woman's arm wouldn't be twisted. "Ahh let her go!", I struggled against the strength of the man, but I wasn't going to give up. I then lifted my weight off the ground, so he had to support it. It made him let go of the woman and he kicked out at me. Hitting me in the thigh, I instantly let go to grab my leg. I levelled a glare at him then turned to the woman, who was on the ground rubbing her wrist.

"Contrôle ta femme!"

Tom laughed, it wasn't light or genuine. It had a sharp edge and if the man had any sense he would have run off. But, alas he did not.

"Control her?", he sauntered over to the man, standing right in his personal space. He didn't even bother switching to French. "Why would I want to control her?", without telegraphing his intention he suddenly had a hold of the man's left hand, twisting and you could hear the audible creak and snap of the bone. I grimaced and felt sick. "I like her rather feisty", he said cupping his own hand over the man's mouth to stop him from screaming. He kneed the man in the stomach to force him to the ground, the man tried to get up using his uninjured arm. Whimpering in pain, behind Tom's hand. "Ah Ah ah…No I don't think so. You can stay on the ground where you belong", I saw him pick up the other hand and said "This is for touching my wife", I turned quickly back to the other
woman, I knew what he was going to do.

"Excusez moi, parlez-vous anglais?", I asked, the sound of the man's muffled cries again permeated the air.

"Oui…ah yes. Thank you for stopping that man. Am grateful to you and your husband", her accent was thick, but I could understand her well enough to get what she was saying. Close up I can see already she has lived a harder life than most. She had deep lines in her skin already but, I got the impression she was younger than she looked. She was unremarkable really, just another face in the crowd that would be lost in the history books. I felt a little sad by that.

"Sorry for his behaviour. He can go overboard", I had hoped she wasn't offended by Tom's brutality.

"Non, he is good man not stopping you from being you", the irony of that was not lost on me if only she knew how he had been actively trying to rid mudblood scum from the face of the earth a few months prior.

I turned to look back at Tom, he was crouched down next to the man saying something, he was grinning evilly. I can only assume it was a death threat, I see him quickly pocket something. Not that I am surprised, he is an opportunist after all.

“Is your wrist alright? Do you need to see a doctor?”, I helped her up of the ground, and onto steady feet.

“Non, I am fine. It will be sore for few days but ok. Are you visiting Paris for holiday?”

“We just arrived today actually”, I smiled at her while rubbing my sore thigh, I’m sure when I look at it tonight it will be purple.

“Oh my, bienvenue à Paris! Such a lovely city despite the mongrels”, she spat in the direction of the man trying to nurse both his injuries.

"Yes, welcome to Paris"

Chapter End Notes

Madame, je n'ai plus besoin de vous. Je vous l'ai dit plusieurs fois. Maintenant laisse ou je vais te faire.- Madam, I do not need you anymore. I have told you this several times. Now leave or I will make you.
C'est n'importe quoi. Vous avez donné mon rôle à un homme! Discrimination pour être une femme.- That's bullshit. You gave my role to a man! Discrimination for being a woman.

Vous êtes une femme votre travail est à la maison- You are a woman your job is at home

Contrôle ta femme!- control your woman

Oiseaux d'amour prêts à partir?- love birds ready to go?
A Simple Unmistakable Fact

Chapter Notes

A/N: Oh man this chapter drove me mad! It was like banging my head against a brick wall. I loved writing it, but I felt there was something lacking. Next week some more adventure!
Let me know what you think.

Previously....

"We just arrived today actually," I smiled at her while rubbing my sore thigh, I'm sure when I look at it tonight, it will be purple.

"Oh my, Bienvenue à Paris! Such a lovely city despite the mongrels", she spat in the direction of the man trying to nurse both his injuries.

"Yes, welcome to Paris."

Hermione POV

After our little scuffle on the streets of Paris, we retreated to a hotel- or what you could call a hotel in the 1800s. At least it was relatively clean, and we had access to a regular water supply. I, for one, was happy about that. I would not say I liked the small dent it was making in the coins, but I think we deserved a good rest and a proper bath. We haven't had one since we left London.

Tom has been missing in action for the last two days, and I am worried- not about him. I am concerned about the Parisian population that is at his mercy. I'm sure he is out there swindling some poor sod, then stuffing his body into a back-alley crate and left to rot until someone notices the ungodly stench.

I sigh as I take in the grey skies outside. It had been raining and miserable as if the weather is a reflection of my state of mind at the moment. I want to go home, be with my friends and pseudo-family again. I hate having to rely on Tom, because I never know when he may turn on me for real, not just as a threat. He isn't a friend at least not in any traditional sense. This is more of a 'friendship' out of necessity. The strange thing is, why does he continue to stay when he could easily leave me here? Is he lonely? What I am conflicted about is that I am growing fond of him. I
like it when I make him crack a rare genuine smile or the way he lights up when I ask a difficult question about magic. I have also found it difficult to sleep over the last two days, and I never realised that I subconsciously depended on him for sleep. He has kept most of my nightmares at bay- especially the ones about Bellatrix. He is such an enigma, and I find myself wanting more. To know more.

A sharp bang behind me jerks me out of my introspection, and I pick up the nearest heavy thing ready to use as a weapon. Whirling around with the ‘odd’ figurine poised in the air to strike, I see that it is only Tom.

I slowly lower the figurine, relieved. "Where have you been?", to my ears, I sound like a nagging mother.

"Nowhere. What in Salazar's name are you holding?", he looked perplexed why I was holding such a thing.

I looked down at the figurine, it was a reflex to grab for a weapon when startled, but I'm not sure if he means why I was holding it in the first place, or why I was holding that specific thing.

"Ah...a figurine...of a...elephant...crossed with a hippo?... I guess...?", I didn't know what it was.

"Mmm... yes the love child of an elephant and hippo", I narrowed my eyes, he was looking slightly mischievous when he looks like that he has been up to no good. However, when isn't he up to his neck in dastardly misdeeds?

I gave him another once over, but my eyes double-backed to a spot on his shirt. Is that blood?

"Tom, what did you do?", he stands there looking rather pleased with himself. With a flourish, he reveals a wand and starts twirling it around rather amazingly with those magically dexterous fingers.

"Just nicked his wand…", I gave him a look to say who? "The guy from yesterday, I broke his fingers remember."

I was a little surprised, but not that much, and this wasn't even that high on the list of his offences. Compared to murder, what was a bit of wand stealing?

"Oh, is that it?" I couldn't even muster the energy to pretend to be indignant of this misdeed.

"Is that it? Is that all the fake righteous anger you can manage? Becoming immune to my criminality are you Mrs. Granger?", he stepped closer the smugness oozing off him.

"Yes, Mr. Granger, petty theft isn't worth it. Besides we could use the wand and the guy was a complete chauvinistic pig", I offered primly, crossing my arms. I looked at him. I really looked at
him. My thoughts drifted back to moments ago.

He had stubble growth, and he looked a little older, more real. Not perfect. Human. A flawed man. A sum of imperfections wrapped up in this unrealistic version created by Dumbledore. He had always given Tom a...sense of divinity. Untouchable. The name Lord Voldemort made people wet their pants in fear. However, looking at him now, he was counterfactual. Everything Dumbledore had said was faulty, tainted by personal bias and whatever his agenda is. Tom was just a man; it astounded me that we all lost sight of that simple unmistakable fact.

"True Mrs. Granger. The guy does not know how to appreciate a good thing when he has it in front of him."

"Really?" I got the feeling we weren't talking about the man/wizard from the street anymore. My heartbeat picked up.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Is that why I'm still here? Why you haven't just killed me or left me here to rot?" I placed the weird hippophant figurine back on the table.

He stepped close into my comfort zone, making me uncomfortable. He knew he was making me nervous. He leaned in, our lips almost touching, a whisker barely between us. I could feel the warmth of his breath on my skin. If anyone saw us now, they would comment on the two lovers sharing an intimate moment.

I was distracted by the fact that he was so close, the intense look in his eyes drilling into mine. His honey-coated lips that expelled poisonous words, that lured many to their deaths because he commanded it, were mere millimetres away. I could remember how they felt when I pressed my own against his. Soft yet a little chapped. Would they feel that way again?

"There's something about you..."I feel the point of the wand digging into the soft fleshy spot under my chin. I swallowed hard. I wouldn't show fear; he feeds off it. His other hand cups my jaw and he drags the pad of his thumb across my bottom lip. My lips part slightly. I never thought they would be sensitive like this. The tension building in the room is becoming stifling. His eyes are watching his thumb, with eagle-like precision.

"...that is addictive, 'You have witchcraft in your lips.' You are a dangerous woman", he closes that infinitesimal gap capturing my bottom lip between his teeth. It isn't exactly a kiss; he tugs gently nipping. The wand clatters to the floor, and the now freed hand encapsulates my wrist.
He bites down enough for his top teeth to break the skin. I could feel the sting, my eyes watering. Tom sucks gently where they breached. He pulls back.

"What's this?", he bares his teeth in anger revealing the bloodstaining on the bright white enamel. He punctuates the question by pressing his thumb into the scar Bellatrix was so happy to give me.

My eyes widen, and I suck in a quick breath, startled, and off-kilter. I'm unsure about what is going on, and I manage to get a low whine out past my constricting throat. Getting a hold of myself when he adjusts my arm so he can get a better look at it; I am both horrified and furious.

I watch as he stares down at the derogatory slur carved into my arm. He is tracing the letters with his index finger. I briefly wonder if he can feel any residue of dark magic remaining.

"Who did this?", he drags his eyes away from the cursed wound.

"You know who," snaps out of me before I can stop it. I try to jerk my arm out of his hold, but he grips it tighter.

"Who Hermione?", he was using his low, threatening voice. It made me shiver because the air around him always dropped in temperature, and you could feel the magic in the air.

"One of your idiotic sycophantic followers, that literally kissed the ground you walked on! Bellatrix!" I was highly emotional from missing home, being alone for two days, and lack of sleep from nightmares that I didn't entirely think when I brought my right hand up and across his face. My palm stung from the contact. His face was turned away with a significant red mark now blooming on his cheek. The resultant crack from the skin to skin contact broke whatever strange moment we were caught up in and back to our senses — the only sounds where the floorboards creaking from the room above and my heavy breathing.

I froze torn between wanting to run away and fixing what happened. My decision was made for me as my feet refused to move from the spot; they were in. He brought his hand up to touch his cheek. I stared wide-eyed waiting for retaliation.

"I'm sorry… I slapped you, but you overstepped Tom. You can't just do that. You scare me sometimes when your mood changes rapidly...I can't keep up. It's unsettling...unpredictable". I bit my lip and instantly regretted it as I had momentarily forgotten that he had just split it.

"I'm not good at this," there was something in his eyes that I couldn't decipher, then the shutters came down. His cheeks have a faint hew to them which wasn't attributed to the slap. Was he embarrassed?
"Good at what?", he just stared at me frowning, the cogs where turning, but he ultimately made the decision not to explain further.

"Don't worry Hermione," he licked the remaining drops of my blood from his lips. I felt a little warm watching him enjoy it. It was twisted and possessive; nothing good could come from that.

I watched as he picked up the wand from the floor and rolled it in between both hands.

The amusement from earlier returned.

"Now my dear...list for me the ingredients for the medicinal Hawkesgrass potion, their strengths, and weaknesses, how they interact in the potion, and what could be altered to make it more efficient. Plus, for extra points, tie it into defence against the dark arts and how it can be adapted for use in the field", I groaned.

"Now now there's no need to stop your education because we are stuck in this..." he waved his hand around indicating everything, "1st circle of Hell, although I'd say I would be more in the 6th Ring", he tapped his chin thoughtfully. I just shook my head; he was more of a book nerd than I was. I rather liked it.

"Mm, yes I'd say you are much lower in Dante's inferno than I," rather than push anything further I acquiesced to his instruction. It was easier to avoid any confrontation and think about my stagnating education.

Snorts, "Of course Hermione, I have a much darker past. Here are a pen and paper...do not look at me like that...I hate quills you always run out of ink in the middle of a blasted sentence, it takes three times as long to write something. Start writing. You have an hour". My Pavlovian response to exam conditions kicks in, and I automatically start writing furiously.

Later that afternoon

"Your Linaeus Valdos?", the disbelief that drenched the question made him pause and lookup.

"Yes, Hermione," he resumed what he was doing.

"The author of The Principles of Transfiguration: complexities of inanimate to biological transformations and how to perfect the method?"

"Yes, Hermione. Are you hard of hearing?" I picked up the pen and threw it at him.
"Mature," he said rushed as he ducked the writing instrument, the clattering of it breaking the otherwise silence.

"I don't know what to feel exactly. Elated one of my favourite authors is here in front of me or like I've been duped". I frowned slowly just watching as he nonchalantly turned the pages of the paper, I had written on Hawkesgrass, and the other finger pushing his glasses further up his nose.

It's bloody ridiculous.

No

It's infuriating.

He is challenging everything; a lot of preconceived notions have been metaphorically blown out of the water. I know I have thought about these countless times but just witnessing it, again and again, makes it drum home. That I am not hallucinating, he still has his issues, and I don't know how to reconcile that- I probably never will. Why did he try to scare me then initiate a non-kiss? Everything else? It could be worked on, change his trajectory of destruction and focus that ferocious energy into something a little more productive. But what? The eternal question.

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Tom POV

What in Salazar's name was I thinking? I'm not a hormonal teenage boy. Attempting to kiss her? It was a stupid impulse; she was looking stunned and beautiful, holding that ridiculous figurine. Clearly, someone needed to know what the damn elephant or hippo looked like before attempting to sculpt it. However, I digress.

I can't get the taste of her out of my mind. Her soft lips are a narcotic. Her saliva and blood mixed with mine, for that short amount of time...was like no other. But that fucking scar it was a distraction that I hadn't counted on. She most likely feels more insecure about it now that I have seen it. It was inevitable. I can get rid of it for her, but without my full magical ability, it will be an impossible task.

Bella...Bella...Bella, my most loyal follower...what to do with you?
The Ring of Iron

Previously…..

Bella…Bella…Bella, my most loyal follower…what to do with you?

The weather remained abysmal a relentless downpour for the last five days. It reflected our moods perfectly- solemn and withdrawn. I looked out of our hotel window; the rain-streaked glass slightly fogged from the warmth emanating from the small fireplace in the centre of the far wall and my breath.

The streets down below had turned into miniature rivers, puddles at least a foot deep made it hard for the carriages to navigate. That’s what happens when the proper sealing of roads had yet to take off or be financially motivated. The sound of the rain against the glass was both relaxing but at times an inexorable warped beating of time ticking away. The longer we seemed to get stuck in this period, the hope of getting home slowly diminished. Tom had cloistered himself to the point that I found it most vexing. He dissolved into the depths of literature and rarely came up for the proverbial gulp of air.

It was frustrating, but I partially understood. After embarrassing himself with that almost kiss, of course, he would shrink back into himself to preserve his ego. Tom seemed like the kind of guy that would have a glass ego- pretty to look at but easily shattered. Our quasi friendly relationship is now awkward. There is something different about it this time, but I can’t figure out what it is.

The clock chimes and I turn away from the window; Tom is still sitting in the chair by the fire. He has become a permanent fixture in that piece of furniture. The only occasions he surfaces is to eat or shove an essay question in my face. Honestly, it is starting to irritate me to no end. I hate being ignored.

“Tom, there are neon pink elephants outside shooting glitter from their trunks”, I thought at least I would get a twitch, or a head turn, but no reaction at all- other than him turning the next page in his book. I storm off to have a bath and an early night. Since the present company is insistent at ignoring my presence except when it suits him.

I roll over, and immediately, being assaulted by the sunlight streaming through a gap in the drapes, I involuntarily blink and cringe away groaning from the sinister light. Sleep is still making my thought and sensory awareness lethargic. I tuck my hands under my head and pillow and snuggle back down not ready to get out of bed just yet. It is nice and warm, which is partly attributed to Tom, who is a human furnace. He was also kind enough to place a warming charm on the blankets, the hotel room is poorly insulated, and the colder weather is making it frigid. Sleeping with Tom isn’t as awkward as one would expect to be this close to a serial killer. He always comes to bed after I am asleep and is usually up before I am awake. I don’t feel nervous any more about him killing me; he could have easily done it the other day when he shoved the wand under my chin. But that doesn’t mean I get a free pass at provoking him. He is still too quick to anger, and the rapid mood swings are exhausting, I wonder what it would be like in his head.
I stare unabashedly at his face; he looks so relaxed in sleep vaguely childlike despite his age. The weight of his demons is temporarily lifted. What would his life have been like if Dumbledore embraced the young prodigy instead of abandoning him? I know Tom has explained what happened, but it is still so hard to believe. But impossibly real. A stray curl has fallen across his forehead; my fingers itch to put it back in its place; the only thing stopping me is his reaction. I narrow my eyes. I will get him to talk to me today, not this wall of silence. The reminder of this past week makes my blood start to boil, how dare he ignore me. It was a week ago. And it wasn’t even a kiss, which it could have been if he didn’t blow up about the scar. I don’t understand him! Without too much thought to what I was about to do- I didn’t want to think about the consequences of this if it went sideways. I abruptly sit up, grab my pillow and swing down upon his head. “Thomas Marvolo Riddle!” I yell as I lift the pillow, ready for a secondary swing if necessary.

In a nanosecond, he is half rolling, sitting and getting tangled in the bedsheets, so much so in his startled state that he ends up falling off the bed with a loud thud. I wait for him to untangle himself, with muffled noises that resemble no human language. He peaks over the edge of the bed, wand trained, and I’m sure there are a dozen spells on his tongue. “Hermione?”, once he realises, there isn’t any danger. “What is going on?” “I was getting you back for not speaking to me.” “And that required hitting me with a pillow at this hour?”, he sat on the edge of the bed, pushing down the offending bedclothes off his legs.

“Yes! I’m sick of your behaviour this past week over what a non-kiss? Stop acting like a bloody pre-pubescent boy. So can we go back to acting semi-normal please?” “I’m not acting like a teenage boy!” I threw the pillow at him, which just before hitting him again exploded into a cloud of feathers. "Really, Tom? I would say you just proved my case for me", I smiled like the Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland. I jumped off the bed rather pleased with myself and patted him on the shoulder as I walked passed to the bathroom. He scowled and muttered something under his breath.

I had decided after my mildly eventful morning annoying Tom that I would venture out by myself. He wasn't interested too absorbed in the current book that he was reading and I was practically climbing the walls to get out of the hotel room. I had promised myself that I wouldn’t venture too far from the hotel, not wanting to get lost.

After many hours of wandering around, I decided to head back to the warmth of the room. My fingers felt like they were already halfway to frostbite and suffice it to say I wasn't all that impressed with Paris in this period. The streets were atrocious as London was, there were no sidewalks- for lack of a better term; it was a shithole. The architecture was still magnificent, but that could not take away from the chaos of traffic- handcarts and carriages everywhere, more than then seemed physically possible to fit in the space given. I try my hand at navigating the narrow side streets, to get away from the masses of people, they were a little easier but meandered making...
no logical sense that I could discern. The stones that had been laid down in some cases were still slick with residue from the rains and particularly slippery if you didn't watch your step. Much to my dismay chamber pots were still haphazardly throw out of the windows, the sanitation of the city was a festering cesspit of excreta. The rains had cleansed some areas of the waste only for it to pool in bad drainage catchments. It left me very cautious as to where I was stepping.

There was a moment where I thought I heard a whimper that was more child sounding than an adult. I shook my head and moved on, focusing where I was stepping to head back towards the main road. That's when I heard it again and a deep sounding chuckle. My curiosity was piqued. I really should have ignored it and kept moving as the sun was beginning to set and my Brunswick (without the petticoat just the jacket and hood), wasn't enough to keep the cold seeping in once the sun went down.

I followed the sounds of the people I was looking for and filtered out the odd shout in French, the splash of a chamber pot being emptied and other general domestic sounds. Coming up to where they were, I pressed myself against the exterior of the building. It was a child. I did another survey of my surroundings, and this side street was lacking in activity. There was another whimper and cry, and my heart ached. I took a chance and looked around the corner; there was a man whose face was covered by the shadows creeping into the alley from lack of light. He was towering over a girl who looked young just based on approximate size and style of clothing. I took a deep breath and considered my options. I didn't have Tom here to back me up or come to my rescue if something happened. If I died here in this back alley, there was no going home, and the likelihood of Tom finding my body or caring that I had disappeared was slim to none. But I couldn't in all good conscience walk away from this. I wouldn't be Hermione Granger, Gryffindor, advocate of light and justice if I walked away now. I scanned the ground for a weapon and noticed an abandoned pan, like the ones they filled with hot coals to warm the bed. It was missing a lid, so it looked like a large frypan. I crept over and picked it up I wasn't going to touch the stacked chamber pots. It was heavy being cast iron; I could barely raise it above my head.

I took in another breath and braced myself. I turned the corner, attempting to be as quiet as I could, now grateful for the background noise to cover some of my approach.

The man had a hand up the girl's skirt, and she was whimpering in pain. The other hand wrapped around her throat; it was more of a threat than him choking her. As I got closer, I made out more details, she was crying by the sounds of her thick mucous sobs, and she was favouring her right leg. I hate men like this that took advantage of young girls or women who couldn't fight back. It reminded me of Micah in the brothel.

I swung.

I didn't quite get the correct angle or height; the pan felt heavier trying to swing it at a faster pace. The unknown man went down at least; he groaned attempting to get back up again, I panicked and swung again, just hoping to get him- this time I got him square in the back of the head. You could hear the ring of the iron against the back of his skull. I dropped the pan, breathing heavily, I had
broken out into a sweat from the effort. The man lay unmoving; I bent down to get a better look in the now almost non-existent light. There was a head wound on the back of his head that was bleeding profusely. He smelled distinctly of body odour, alcohol and tobacco. I poked him in the shoulder- nothing. I stood back up and kicked him- nothing. Worried crawled up my spine. I bent back down again and reached tentatively for his wrist; I felt for his pulse.

Nothing.

*Oh geez.* I scrambled back my eyes wide as saucers- it was an accident I kept telling myself. I didn't mean to kill him. Not even in the war did I kill someone at least directly. The whimpering of the girl snapped my attention back to what was a more pressing matter. I can have a breakdown later. She tried half hopping away but not getting very far. *Damn it* I think her ankle is broken.

I raised my hands showing her I meant no harm to her, that I only wanted to help. She let me approach her and I squatted down helping to fix her skirts.

"*voudriez-vous que je vous aide?*, I asked her if she would like me to help. She stared at me for a long time, weighing the options if I was genuine or not. She was risking a lot, trusting a stranger after what happened.

"*Ouis*", I gestured to her I was going to pick her up, I was hoping I could carry her back to the hotel to fix her ankle and then decide what to do with her. I was risking a little as well by carrying her out in the open I didn't want to be accused of kidnapping and murder. That last thought made my stomach lurch. Because I had murdered him, not intentionally but I still did it.

After what I could estimate to be a good half an hour later, we found ourselves outside the hotel. The sun had set, and I thought myself lucky that I hadn't been stopped. The girl had either miraculously fallen asleep or passed out due to the pain. I thanked the man who held the door open for me to pass and prayed he didn't notice that I had left childless.

I tried to knock on the room door but instead had to try tapping it with my foot. Satisfied with my attempts, I stepped back and waited, adjusting the girl's weight in my arms- the muscles were burning, and I didn't know how much longer I could hold her. The door slowly opened, and Tom stuck his head out. He tilted his head to the side, trying to process what he was seeing. He opened the door wider and ushered me inside, I laid the girl down on the small two-seater chair, trying to be careful of her ankle.

"Tom ask questions later. I need you to heal her left ankle. I think it is broken or badly sprained", he whipped out the stolen wand and knelt next to the girl. Without touching the ankle, he inspected it then pointed the wand and said "*Sarcio talus*" a jet of pink light shot out the end and engulfed the ankle. It pulsed three times and slowly faded away.

"Well?", he stood up back and faced me crossing his arms like a scolding parent. I always fold like
a house of cards whenever I get the reprimanding stare. I was like the child getting caught for sticking my hand in the cookie jar.

"I found her in an alley, and I couldn't just leave her there", he looked back at the girl then back at me and sighed pinching the bridge of his nose. I stepped up to him and shoved his shoulder gently.

"Hermione?"

"Mmm?"

"Neon pink elephants shooting glitter?" I whacked him instead of answering.

"What did I tell you?"

"That you're an arsehole", I smile widely.

"Yes, and the other thing?"

"That you're always listening", I poked him in the chest, hoping he wouldn't ask the question I had an inkling he was building up too.

"Correct. What else happened Hermione?", my stomach dropped, the blood draining away from my face. I gulped hoping I could forget the whole thing. I steeled myself I would not cry over that pervert. It was more about having his death on my conscience. I knew Tom had no morals so he wouldn't understand what was tearing me up inside, but at least he could share the burden.

_I would not cry_. Despite my inner protestations, my chin still wobbled, and my eyes stung with unshed tears. He looked worried, and I don't remember him looking worried-_concerned_ but not worried. He cupped my face in his hands as the first tear fell. I drew in a shaky breath, that was more like a strangled sob and whispered,

"I killed him". 
Ok, I am taking a 2-week break- I am still writing! It's school holidays over here in OZ!

Previously.....

I would not cry. Despite my inner protestations, my chin still wobbled, and my eyes stung with unshed tears. He looked worried, and I don't remember him looking worried- concerned but not worried. He cupped my face in his hands as the first tear fell. I drew in a shaky breath, that was more like a strangled sob and whispered,

"I killed him".

I would have thought the look of surprise on his face would have been funny if I wasn't in such an emotional upheaval.

"I killed him, Tom", I wrapped my hands in the material of his shirt and buried my face it in. It was like the dam just crumbled, and I had gotten myself so worked up that I couldn't stop myself from crying. The guilt, the horror of doing something like that- marking my soul was nearly unfathomable. Everything we had been told about murder and how it damaged you were scrolling through my brain rapidly.

"Hermione...dear", he pushed me back gently so he could view my face. I was reluctant to release his shirt from my white-knuckled grip.

I wiped my cheeks; they were stinging from the saltiness of my tears and sniffled. I'm sure I looked a hot mess, and then I caught sight of Toms shirt. There was a large wet patch right in the centre of it. He wasn't wearing period clothing- he was in his pyjama's.

"Sorry", I mumbled out, avoiding eye contact. I was silly at suddenly being embarrassed for having yet another breakdown.

"Hermione look at me", my eyes made a slow journey from the wet patch to meet his eyes. "It will dry", he made a show of waving his hand the patch disappeared. I scowled momentarily annoyed that while he could use some magic, I still couldn't access mine.
"What is bothering you? Really bothering you about it?", he moved to sit on the edge of the bed, and I sat down next to him.

"I killed him, Tom, what's not to be bothered by that? I'm not you, all cold and heartless. I can't just end people for the sake of it- like it's a sport", I knew I was taking a small amount of my frustration out on Tom- which wasn't fair, but he kills people without much thought.

"I'm not saying that you shouldn't be bothered by it, Hermione. That wasn't what I was asking. Think", I scrunched my face up- which was not a good look on anyone. I didn't want to think about it. I wanted to wallow in self-pity.

I sniffled again and looked down at my hands, twisting them in my lap. Killing him did bother me, It's not something that I thought would ever happen. During the war, I knew there was a small chance- and I was ok with that. Kill or be killed as Tom had said weeks ago. Part of me didn't care that I killed that man for hurting the girl, and lord knows how many other children were at his mercy. Would it change my soul? My magic? I was more scared for myself than anything, and that's what horrified me. What would everyone back home think? The light side always stressed the 'no killing' rule, that we didn't want to lower ourselves to the levels of our darker brethren.

"That murder...it is the ultimate act of evil. I took a human life whether it was intentional or not. How does that affect me? My soul? My magic?" I looked to him with pleading eyes, hoping he would show a sliver of decency to my existential struggle.

"Murder in some cases is evil, but in generalising that 'murder is the ultimate evil' with broad strokes. Do we then condemn ourselves for eating every time we kill a chicken or a cow? Does a predator commit an act of evil when it stalks and kills an innocent antelope to survive? Do you tell a woman who has been abused by her husband regularly who then kills him in self-defence that she is evil? I think it is all psychological upon reflection our self-imposed moral code. It is not black and white as Dumbledore or anyone on the 'light side' seems intent on preaching. Do I think you are tainted? No. Do I think your soul is torn? No. Do I think you are evil? No. You were just in an awkward position, and it was an accident no one can blame you for that. They should stamp at the bottom in that tiny font - conditions apply. It is not a one size fits all rule."

He shifts on the bed to be perpendicular to me and reaches out with one hand turning my face to look at him.

"No one my dear Mrs Granger, Hermione, no one is as bright, and as pure, the stars should be jealous of you. To lump you in with my stygian blackness...is beyond excessive. If we followed their logic, all our souls would be swiss cheese from the number of insects we killed during potions lessons. Are all other animals on Earth worth less than us because we are human and they are not? I don't believe it tears the soul or rips the edges depending on who is spouting such nonsense. I've made many Horcruxes, I know what it feels like to have your soul damaged, and the pain is unimaginable. Like I said it's psychological- it's easier to kill animals than our kind because we look like each other, we are fundamentally the same. I just choose not to make the distinction
between them and us. Does that make me evil? Perhaps, but I like to think of it as pragmatic. We're all animals in the end." To say he had flummoxed me is an understatement. He keeps upping the bar and changing the status quo.

"Don't get me started on light and dark magic, Dumbledore is a massive hypocrite to maintain the line drawn in the sand. Magic is magic; there is no light and dark. If we travelled another 400 years in the past, would they know what the hell we were talking about? No, because it is intent upon the person. I'm sure St Mungo's surgical department would be more than interested in some of the spells I have in my collection, it would certainly bring up their success rate and make their surgeries more effective. But, because they are dubbed 'Dark Arts' they won't touch them. Getting off track...People will always manipulate the system, Hermione, open your eyes. Your wallowing in guilt and for what? Do you intend on going out tomorrow and accidentally killing another person? No. Your magic will be the same today as it was three days ago. The only stain is on your conscience and whether you let it eat you alive. Now go get yourself ready for bed, I'll watch over the girl", he stood up and leaned over and kissed me on top of the head. I wasn't sure how I felt about everything he said. I watched as he went over and sat in his favourite chair and summoned his reading glasses. He conjured a blanket which magically draped itself over her, and he resumed reading.

I know what he said was correct, it was just a whole other way of thinking, and that was difficult. Was it because the 'madman' was talking sense? A little. He keeps upending everything in my life, challenging me and part of me likes that. Life certainly hasn't been boring in his presence. He's not what I expected at all- echoing my thoughts from the carriage.

How could I go back to normal life after this? Sure I hope to finish my education, I'm sure McGonagall will make sure the school is rebuilt ready for the start of the next school year. That is depending on what happens when we return. Will he still want to kill Harry? Will he still want to be friends? Or is this just a means to an end?

We had breakfast in the room the next morning while we discussed what we were going to do with the little girl. I still felt sick at the prospect of the man out there lying dead in the side street, what if someone saw me? Would they report it? I could feel the beginnings of a panic attack start to take hold.

"Hermione, breathe", I could feel Tom's dark presence behind me. He sounded annoyed, and I am sure my morals severely grated against his lack thereof. I met his gaze in the mirror that I was standing in front of, attempting to fix this blasted dress. "Here let me", I dropped my hands petulantly, now I was annoyed and frustrated at feeling like a helpless damsel.

"Where did you say you found her?" I looked at his reflection and the determined look of concentration at figuring out how the dress laced together. A small laugh escaped me at the situation of Lord Voldemort facing a losing battle to a woman's dress. He growled and met my gaze again. "I don't know how you women manage these infernal contraptions".

"Well, I'm not managing. It's just a dress that they have overcomplicated. Anyway, it was on a side street. I'm sure I'll be able to find it again", he hummed, adjusting the material and cocking his
head to the side satisfied with his effort.

"You have overlooked one key detail, Mrs Granger", he said, running a finger along the exposed skin along the back of my neck and shoulders. I shivered. What was it with him touching me lately?

"And what was that?" curious I didn't think I had missed anything.

"She's a gypsy", my eyes darted to the girl, and I looked at her attire, while she was stuffing her face as only a child could. Cheeks filled to the brim of bread, her lips smeared with butter and caked with crumbs. She blinked owlishly at us while chewing. She was dressed a little differently than I had seen other children, but this period sometimes threw me with the clothing of the poorer classes, they all started to blend and look the same after a while.

"I guess. So what does that mean we do?" I looked at Tom because I was out of my element. Did we just wander around until she recognised someone?

"We'll head to the markets first and if that doesn't work out, try the outskirts of town. The gypsies will be squatting on a vacant piece of land", this will take longer than I thought, it could be days before we find her parents, they must be so worried.

"OK, I'll get her cleaned up and then we can head out I sense It's going to be a long day", Tom nodded and held out a conjured a wet cloth that I could use to wipe the girls face with as I shuffled past him.

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TOM POV

She's so bloody vexatious; it's like I am going a little more insane the longer I am around her. I am not going to deny the sting of arousal I felt when she said that she had killed the man. What I wouldn't have given at that moment to watch, those sweet innocent hands taking a life. Accidental or not. I bet she was glorious in her righteousness. Such a shame she can't stomach it. But she is too pure for her good; I need to loosen her morals a little. I am just itching to ravage her skin, leave my mark on her.

She is a tempting oblivious seductress, so unaware of her allure. Her mind is a siren song whose call is seducing me. So intelligent, her essays were particularly enlightening, showcasing how she thinks. Her only issue is that she lacks outside of the box thinking. She will achieve great things, but only within a certain set of guidelines, she isn't quite prepared for the real world just yet. But when I am finished with her, the ministry will fall at her feet.

She isn't ready, but the seeds have been planted after my little monologue on murder. I find it galling for Dumbledore and all of those morons that call themselves warriors of the light perpetuating the myth that it damages the soul and that you can only use 'light' magic. Have they dumbed down the last decade's worth of Hogwarts students to the point they don't even question anything? Just accept everything on blind faith? No wonder the Aurors are abysmal, except the older generation before this campaign on wiping every 'dark' text came to be. As usual, they prefer
sticking their heads in the sand. That's how I was able to run wild for as long as I did, they didn't and still don't know how to counteract my Death Eaters successfully and the ones that get captured, well they deserved to be culled from the heard. How is a simple expelliarmus or jelly legs jinx going to fight 'dark' magic? Of course, I don't think that there should be unchecked open access to the dark texts, like idiots that can't pass their OWLS shouldn't be allowed anywhere near them, only those that meet the required academic criteria. I was thinking more along the lines of an advanced level Defence Against the Dark Arts subject or curse breaking. See I'm not as unreasonable as they make me out to be. Knowledge is power, power and those who have the panache and ambition to seek it. And that has been the secret to my success, surpassing Grindelwald. Accomplishing things that most wizards can only dream of. And even in the face of failure, I still keep going, a relentless force of nature.

Hermione POV

It's been hours of walking, walking and walking. Tom stole a small metal wagon, it looked like a child's toy not that Tom would have cared, but it did make it easier for pulling Noma around. We did eventually get her name out of her. In our time, teachers and parents alike would have been concerned for her lack of communication skills, especially for a girl entering the age to begin schooling.

"Hermione dear, don't stress yourself over this. It's a period and cultural issue", I fumed not wanting to believe his words, even though I knew women weren't afforded the same options as men. It was the time where you had to marry a suitable match for you to be deemed successful. His success by default was yours. It was annoying because I knew I couldn't change it.

"At least it isn't as bad in our time", I thought with a sliver of satisfaction. Tom chuckled a little.

"When I went to school, my dear, young witches such as yourself while afforded an education you still had to take a core subject of home economics - as if you couldn't open a book of your own accord to learn a simple cleaning spell — such a waste of time. However, a lot of the pure blooded and even half-blooded witches only ever looked at marriage as a viable 'career' option after Hogwarts. Finding the most suitable male specimen of blood purity and wealth of connections was of the utmost importance, or you had an arranged marriage".

"I would have railed against that hard. It's an insult to female intelligence. How can marriage be a career option? Not that I have anything against homemakers, that's their choice, but there's a difference between choosing it as opposed to it being forced upon you — society telling you-you're not good enough for anything else. And arranged marriages seriously? We aren't cattle. I'm sure the female population would have been fawning over a young Tom Riddle", I had seen the only photo in existence of what Tom looked like he was younger in the Student Heads album, and he would have made girls fan themselves in his presence.
"I had many suitors Hermione both female and male alike. But they were more interested in a short rebellious dalliance before they married as soon as they left Hogwarts. Besides I had neither the name nor the connections, what could a poor orphan boy offer them in return?", I felt a flare of white-hot anger, rush through me.

"You would have had plenty to offer an intelligent young witch of the time, more so than some of your pure blooded housemates. A bunch of mindless sheep following everything their parents say, getting the money they never worked for, a job in the ministry they didn't earn and for what? To perpetuate the cycle with their children. No wonder they look depressed or are genetically affected from the inbreeding", he laughed but it the edges was tinged with bitterness.

"Well thank you, Hermione, the sentiment warms the cockles of my heart, that my ribcage is mysteriously missing. But unfortunately, no one was willing to defy their parents, and I refused to be someone's charity case. I was determined to make it on my own and prove myself to them", I felt a pang. I could feel the loneliness in his words and underlying abandonment but covers it with a thin veneer of sarcasm. I gulped, not sure if I should say anything in return, he is feeling vulnerable at the moment even though he would never admit it

I was saved from responding; secretly, I was relieved because I didn't know how to respond to that. A gypsy caravan could be seen up ahead, and that had our attention. There seemed to be by my count at least ten wagons that I could see parked in a semicircular fashion.

As we got closer to the settlement, us being two strangers approaching the settlement naturally garnered attention from the males, who appeared to be setting up two fire pits. The men- perhaps the leaders of the squatting gypsies- began yelling in our direction. If I were alone in this situation, I most likely would have turned away being remarkably outnumbered, but with Tom beside me, I was more confident, more self-assured. They were speaking mostly in French. However, I did notice a mixture of German and English words amongst the prolific onslaught of verbiage being launched our way.

"Let me do the talking my dear", I frowned a little peeved that I had to defer to Tom in particular situations, but dealing with this angry mob they were more than likely to listen to Tom than me- a younger woman.

I stopped when Tom halted a few metres away from the front of the 'pack'. This seemed to make them more angry that they had to come to us, which was ridiculous because we were walking towards us already.

"Go turn round this is our land", the leader of the pack was an older man perhaps in his sixties, with well-worn brown pants, matching brown fabric suspenders, a dirt-caked beige long-sleeved shirt and a wide-brimmed hat that matched the same fabric of the pants. His black boots were heavily scuffed, and you could make out the threading of the material they were made out of
pulling apart, it would not be long before they were completely worn through. He was making a
doodling gesture, and some of the men behind him even held pitchforks.

I barely restrained a snort in amusement. I brought my hand up to my mouth to physically stop
myself from smiling. Was this what my life was like now? A strangely played out adventure
novel? I felt Tom lean in so he could whisper in my ear.

"Contain yourself, Mrs Granger, it's impolite", I turned my head to look him in the eye, of course,
hedn't moved an inch, so we were nose to nose. His was serious but the mirth flickering in his
eyes- showed he rather enjoyed this turn of events. Of course, he would- he lived his life in shades
of theatrics- the pompous arse. I just rolled my eyes and turned back to the mob of gypsies, where
now the women folk were hanging back, taking in what was happening with curious gazes.

"No, I don't think I will just yet. I thought you would like this back", I bristled at Tom referencing
Noma as a piece of property, but I kept my mouth shut. He wheeled the stolen trolley around and
revealed the girl sitting in it with her feet just hanging over the edge. She was still huddled in the
conjured blanket from last night and was chewing on some more bread. Her left shoe was off, and I
had wrapped it up in a strip of fabric from one of Harry's t-shirts I found in my beaded bag.

"Where did you get her?", the way he asked the question was like we had purchased her off the
street. A few seconds later, a woman ran forward but kept wary eyes on Tom as she approached to
snatch up Noma. I tried smiling to reassure her we meant no harm.

"My lovely wife here", Tom slipped his arm around my waist pulling me to his side to emphasise
his point, "saved your daughter from further molestation so I would think you should be grateful
that we returned her relatively patched up". The woman spoke rapidly to Noma in a language I
didn't know, but her body language spoke volumes to what she was asking. Noma was shaking her
head furiously at one part then crying the next.

"What they say is true, Noma says so" The woman turns to the man speaking English, I'm
assuming so we could understand what was going on, her accent a strange combination of French
and something. "She also says that it was Mani who hurt her."

"Blasphemy! he wouldn't do that to Noma", the man looked to us with angry eyes, accusing as if
we had filled her head with lies.

"Are you saying she lies?", the woman offended that her daughter would be treated as such.

"He is not here to defend himself- we wait", the man wanting to end the discussion, but Tom not
missing a chance to be smug and rub it in chimed up with, "well he won't be making an appearance
anytime soon."

"Why?"
"Well he's dead", the collective gasp from the crowd was one of disbelief. "I killed him", my head snapped to Tom. I swear I heard my neck crack. I wasn't sure why he was taking the heat off me, but I was glad either way. He looked at Noma, and her eyes drifted to mine then back to Tom again, nodding, going along with the lie.

I tried to be nonchalant about it. However, I caught the gaze of one of the women in the crowd who was staring brazenly at me.

The leader took a step forward, attempting to intimidate Tom, he opened his mouth to say something but another man off to his left butted in. "That was not for you to decide; you are outsiders. You do not follow gypsy law", Tom just shrugged, not caring that he breached their laws. He did, however, tighten his grip around my waist, when the man stepped forward.

"I did what I did in the heat of the moment, can't change that now", I was worried we were about to get lynched by these people with pitchforks because Tom failed to be at least a little contrite about 'killing' the man.

"Tom", I said, squeezing his hand on my waist in warning, they were getting more agitated, especially the ones edging for a confrontation.

"Fine. We'll leave now. We came to return Noma to her family. Make sure she doesn't walk on that ankle for at least a week until the swelling goes down. Don't want my wife's hard work to go to waste", I don't think he could have sounded anymore patronising - scratch that he probably could. He dropped the trolley handle and spun me around and started dragging me along. It was all so abrupt.

"Tom, can you slow down!", he didn't answer, and I looked back because I felt that perhaps some rogue gypsy would throw something at us. I nearly tripped on a rock because I couldn't quite get my footing with the pace Tom was setting.

He slowed down after what felt like a few minutes. The sun was setting, and I didn't want to be out at night, that's when most people get robbed.

"Sorry Hermione, we needed to make a fast getaway, so we didn't get lynched- yes I caught that train of thought. It was a seventy-thirty chance, some gypsies are spiritual, and others follow Christianity quite strictly, or you get a bit of a mix. We got a mixed bag back there, and they could sense my darkness, so they were naturally scared and wary."

"Ok, so what does that mean? It could have been because you supposedly killed one of them."

"Nothing, unless we encounter them again. The last thing we need is being accused of witchcraft; there are enough eyes on those outcasts as it is. Did you notice one of the older women in the back? She kept making devil or evil spirit warding signs", I barked out a laugh because it was just
so damn funny.

“It was like they knew your true nature”, I bumped shoulders with him, he had still to unlink our hands, and I wasn’t sure how I felt about that.

"Now now Hermione, no need to be rude."

"Oh, Tom, you know I was jesting. Some people do think you are the devil in disguise."

"They seem to forget the devil is also an angel, fallen but an angel."

"Misunderstood"

"Mmm?"

"I think he was misunderstood. Not that I'm a believer, but I always thought that he was misunderstood. He was doing what he thought was right; however, misguided it was- because he loved God so much. And he gave Adam and Eve the choice to exercise their free will, and they chose to eat the apple while knowing that they weren't supposed to. They were all mixed up in God's ridiculous game- what was the point of offering free will only to punish them for using it? It makes no sense." I tilted my head to look up at the now darkened sky, listening to the crunch of the gravel underneath our feet. It was a beat of silence before Tom answered.

"You're an interesting woman, Mrs Granger, becoming a rebel- like me", I could feel his intense stare even in the dark, I could even imagine what it would look like- a scientist looking through a microscope trying to understand the new species he has discovered.

"I was already a rebel Tom; it was just pointed in a different direction. Now I'm just making my own choices, out from under the man who was supposed to be guiding us towards the light. When he has been hoodwinking all of us, using our naivety and blind faith to push his agenda."

"Finally accepting the truth?", he paused and furnished his wand from his pocket wordlessly casting a *lumos*. 
“Yes and not just because of what you said. I couldn’t immediately accept it at face value because I didn’t trust you. Upon reflection, I can finally see the bigger picture, not just the tunnel Dumbledore figuratively sent us down. And...I’m getting to know you the man separate from the entity known as Voldemort.”, I chewed my bottom lip, nervous the way he was looking at me.

“And do you, Hermione? Trust me?” well, that was a loaded question.

“Yes”, it sounded more breathless than it should have, and against my better judgement, I did trust him. He stepped into my personal space and tipped my head back. I thought he was finally going to kiss me conflicting as that was- but no, he kissed me softly on the cheek letting his lips linger.

I closed my eyes and let him pull me into his chest; he rested his chin on top of my head. I don’t think either of us knows what it is we are doing. By a strange twist of fate and Dumbledore’s machinations, we are both each other’s anchors in this time and place.
Wagon Wheels Part 1

Previously….

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Harry third-person POV

Back in the present

Harry watched as the older man still shuffled around his desk trying to find whatever it was he was trying to find while muttering incoherent things under his breath. It made him wonder if Dumbledore knew what he was doing, or was he stalling until it was too late? This whole thing seemed more like an experiment than an iron-clad idea, and that made him a little angry. I mean trapping someone in a time turner? He still couldn’t quite get his head around it. It was something that should be in a Dr Who episode.

Harry always prided himself at trying to uphold the ideals his parents would want to him have. He wondered what they would do in this situation. Would they just let it slide- one sacrifice for the many? Or bring both of them back to the present and deal with the consequences? He wasn’t going to deny that releasing Voldemort was a tad worrying and doubts started to creep in, what would Hermione do? Honestly, she would probably fight for his return if the situation were reversed. He never thought his life would turn out like this or secretly he never thought he would survive this long. A teenage boy of mediocre magical ability to take down the most powerful dark wizard of this century, the idea was absurd.

He knew deep down this whole thing was to martyr him off, and he only realised it when it was too late, the dominoes had already begun falling. This whole twisted mess had started decades before he was born, and Dumbledore and Voldemort were too obsessed with ripping each other to shreds. It shouldn’t be his problem. While the ex-headmaster was an extraordinary wizard, he couldn’t dodge getting his hands dirty forever. Up until now because of he had a short time for reflection, he realised Dumbledore rarely interfered except at the Department of Mysteries because he
ultimately had no choice, and how could he pass up a grand showing of his abilities?

He removed his glasses and pushed his fingertips into his eyes to relieve some of the pressure. He had a headache— not from Voldemort, and he was exhausted. Would things ever get better? It seemed like things would only get worse before they got better. Part of him just wanted to cry, sob in despair and desperation. But he was supposed to be the saviour of the wizarding world and him breaking down would not be good for anyone.

He sensed someone crouch down in front of him and placed a comforting hand on his knee.

"Are you alright, Harry?", he heard the soft-spoken voice of his former professor, Remus Lupin.

Harry lifted his head and put his glasses back on. Otherwise, he was ophthalmologically challenged without them.

"I'm fine Remus, just tired. Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course Harry," Remus stood up and shooed Ron over to make space for him to sit.

"What do you think my parents would do in this situation? Did I make the right decision?" Harry felt distressed at the prospect of disappointing his parents, even their faint memories.

"I think Harry, that your parents may have slightly differing opinions on the matter, but ultimately because they love you, they would support your decision. I can understand that you want to save Hermione; we all do. She has been an integral part of getting us as far as we have gotten and we all miss her very much. But, in saying that, you will have to think about how this may play out. What if You-Know-Who comes back and she doesn't? What if they both come back, but she isn't the same Hermione? He could easily torture her both physically and mentally."

"You mean like Neville's parents?", Harry turned towards the voice that spoke the words in a tortured sounding whisper.

"Yes, Ron, I mean like Neville's parents. You need to be prepared for that; could you face that prospect?" Harry understood where Remus was coming from, being prepared for the absolute worst- could he do this?

"I have too. I owe it to Hermione; she deserves to be with her surrogate family no matter the circumstances. If she is like Neville's parents, then we will take care of her.", He spoke earnestly unconsciously, making his decision.

"Then I guess you have made your decision. Some of the others may not agree with it because of the danger it places on us all, but I'll make sure they understand", Harry watched as the werewolf gave him a sympathetic look and returned to the other adults. He felt a stab of guilt. But he pushed it aside because he would not feel regret for wanting his best friend back and out of the clutches of evil.
"Like I said earlier mate, 'Mione is resilient if anyone can handle the Dark Lord it's her", Harry smiled weakly at Ron, just as Dumbledore made a gleeful sound having found the parchment he was looking for. Finally, perhaps we'll be seeing Hermione soon.

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**Hermione POV**

**Back in Paris**

"Are you sure it's safe to venture out? I don't want to be ambushed by either the police or disgruntled gypsies", I kept looking around worried someone was all of a sudden going to jump out at me.

"It will be fine my dear, I doubt they would want to bring unnecessary attention to themselves, and the police wouldn't care about a dead gypsy", I was simultaneously relieved and horrified, the complete disregard for human life in this period because of who they are will never be easy to swallow. Although thinking deeper on it, not much about society has changed in the last 200 years. It made me want to scream in frustration.

I sighed and stomped after him in the crowded marketplace, were throngs of people all dodging and weaving around each other, haggling for the right price. In part it's crowdedness reminded me of Diagon Alley, and at that thought, I felt a tug of homesickness in my gut. But like all places in Paris and London it seemed, the smell of the people and horses was overwhelming; I tried my hardest not to gag.

Tom had the desire to explore the marketplace after our brief walk through a couple of days ago with Noma, trying to find her family. Since then, we had spent the last couple of days going through my beaded bag and cataloguing all the ingredients in it. As usual, Tom decided to quiz me periodically on the various ingredients and their uses. We fell into a different kind of easiness after our emotional cuddle in the dark. Our dynamic has shifted, and I can't place my finger on what exactly. I don't know how I feel about it or Tom.

I am broken out of my reverie by a hand, roughly shaking my shoulder.

"Huh?" I look into those blue eyes that have become so familiar.

"Focus, Mrs Granger", I looked to see where we are standing, and it's inline for a bakery just on the edge of the markets.

"So this is where you sometimes sneak off to and come back smelling of butter and sugar?"
"Of course", he flashes me a devious smile. "I'm choosing to share this weakness with you. I am rather fond of pastries."

I couldn't help but smile, and it wasn't really a weakness but something he enjoyed and probably never shared with anyone.

"Mmm if we ever return, I will have to bake for you sometime.", his eyes brightened with emotion then dimmed again, with a look of mild surprise.

"You can bake?"

"I can don't get me to cook an actual meal- not like Mrs Weasley, but I can bake."

"I might take you up on that offer, if your chocolate croissants are delicious then you'll never get me to leave."

"Ahh, so it comes out. Your favourite is the chocolate croissant; I'll keep that in mind."

"It's just too bad they aren't invented yet."

"You know the history of croissants?"

"Of course, I had to investigate my favourite guilty pleasure", I laughed and looked away then something caught my attention on my periphery. I turned my head just enough to get a clear field of vision. It was the woman from the crowd of gypsies who had been staring blatantly at me. She was down a narrow side street peeking her head out as if any moment she would get caught. We made eye contact, and she started waving me over. I looked back at Tom, who was also staring at the woman.

"Hermione, if you decide to go over there, stay where I can see you."

"You're going to let me go?" I thought he would give me a lecture on entering yet another precarious situation.

"You're a big girl. Just be careful", I felt like something was left unsaid, but I nodded and spun on my heel.

I kept eyes on the woman as I navigated my way over to where she was standing. The closer I got, the more I could see how anxious she was. Her eyes darted around looking for I presume someone to notice that she was there, her fingers biting into the brick- the tips of her fingers were white.

"You speak anglaise?" I was hoping she would have some knowledge of the English language. While I could keep up to some degree, I don't think I could manage an entire conversation in French. Her dark chocolate brown eyes pierced mine; she had long eyelashes and long black hair that was immensely curly- similar to what mine was like as a child. I couldn't help but continue to look her over; she had a few gold coins linked together with a chain around her neck, many rings and bracelets adorned her wrists and fingers.
"Ouis. You helped Noma the other day. I wanted to say thank you, not many people would help a gypsy girl", her accent was thick, and I couldn't understand some words but enough that I knew fundamentally what she was saying.

"No, of course, I would. I couldn't just stand by and do nothing!" I felt strange accepting thanks for what should be a normal human reaction. However, I sensed that there was more to this visit than just to say thank you. She blinked a few times to seemingly deliberate something.

"You medicine woman?", I squinted at her while replaying in my mind what it was she had said. "I don't quite understand what you mean?"
She waved her hand around, trying to find the right word to convey to me what she purports.

"Doctor"

"Ahh no I'm not a doctor, but I do know some first aid", she frowned, and it occurred to me she probably doesn't know what first aid is.

"Yes, or no", I wasn't sure if she meant that as a question or a statement. I stared at her a while; this must be what she was trying to ask. Is Noma hurt again?

"Does someone need help?" I decided the all-inclusive approach was probably best because if she needed help, I wasn't going to scare her off by being too direct.

"Ouis, my brother. We have tried everything but do not know what is happening."

"Sure. I can come with you now, but first I need to find Tom", I go to turn, but she stops me placing a firm hand on my forearm.

"Your husband is not a very nice man. I do not trust him."

"Yes, he is complicated", such an understatement. "He doesn't trust or like anyone, but if I do not know what is troubling your brother, then he will. We come together, we are a team", I felt annoyed that I was in this position, but what I said was true. Tom was more knowledgeable than I, and he could use his magic to assist either in the diagnosis or treatment. I pushed aside the uneasiness that bubbled up from the way the word 'team' slid off my tongue. Ron would have an absolute conniption if he heard me say that Voldemort and I were a team.

"Fine, but know that him being there will not be well received."

"Well they will have to deal with it", I wrenched my arm out of her grasped. I could feel guilt claw at the edges of my mind; Tom was going to be the undeserving object of their hatred all because he took the heat off me. I could see Tom still in line, but he saw me coming with a look on his face telegraphing that he knew he was not going to be getting his pastry this morning.

"Let me guess you found some other poor soul to help?", I rolled my eyes at his dismissive attitude and just grabbed his hand in mine and dragged him over to where the woman was still loitering in
the shadows. Our shift in dynamic made us much more comfortable being in each other's personal proximity and not so hesitant to touch one another.

"Tom this is…?", I looked sheepishly at Tom because I failed even to get the woman's name whom I was trying to help.

"Malia", the woman threw a glare at Tom, who in return just looked to the sky for some restraint.

"Malia, well lead on assuming it is urgent", she nodded and indicated for us to follow her.

"I am missing my morning pastry for this? It better be good", I squeezed his hand in retribution.

"She said it was her brother, and they can't figure out what is wrong, and she thought since we helped Noma that we might help again", he sighed with a frustrated growl.

"Fine, but don't expect me to be nice."
"I just need you with me", I realised as I said it, that the statement could be taken a few different ways, even if it were true. My pulse spiked perfusing blood into my cheeks. He must have seen how closely I resembled a root vegetable as he ducked his head down to whisper in my ear.

"Well Mrs Granger, if I have that beet on you then I’ll be with you more often", I snorted at his terrible pun, but he did get a smile out of me.
We followed Malia out to the outskirts of town and found ourselves on the same road that we
ended up on a few days earlier- albeit a quicker way. She didn't turn to make sure that we were
following, not that I think she would have needed to, Tom was making enough noises to indicate
his displeasure that you couldn't deny that he was there. Typical.

"Tom can you not make this any more unpleasant please?", I said this only because I was worried
about the other gypsies’ reactions to us being here, even though we were here to help. I knew from
the initial meeting from Tom that the gypsies were not welcoming of outsiders and us being there
was highly controversial.

"Hermione, I make no promises, but I will help you", I smiled relieved and grateful because he
didn't have to help me; I just had a habit of pulling him into situations.

As we passed the fenced off entryway onto the parcel of land that they were squatting on, I started
to become apprehensive.

"Hermione, don't worry I will protect you if they are to enact revenge for killing the child
predator", I compressed his fingers a little showing that I was listening, but caught up in my self-
reflection, by the fact that I hadn't even thought of that as a viable option for her approaching me.
How naïve and gullible I truly was. My good nature used against me.

"Tom…", I gulped looking up at him.

"You're too good, my dear, too trusting. The savages of humanity would gleefully rip you apart if
they had the opportunity, without a second thought to the brilliant light they were snuffing out. Be
more careful; you're lucky that I am here. Now let's go so you can mother this poor sod."

We came around the back of the wagons, and you could hear someone grunting in agony. There
were a group of onlookers circling were the man was lying on the ground. Unfortunately, I couldn't
get a good look at him until they moved out of the way. Malia pushed her way in between the men
and woman to make way for Tom and me.

"I brought help", she yelled in French. Once the people realised that it was Tom and me, naturally
there was a lot of arguing. However, it distracted them enough that I could squeeze my way in and
kneel next to Malia's brother. He looked like the male version of her; I gathered they must have
been twins or born very close together. He was sweating profusely, pale, gasping for breaths and
his left arm was swollen and red. I felt panicked looking at the state of him. I wasn't entirely sure where to start.

"Tom" I looked up expecting him to answer and I saw that he wasn't there. "Tom...damn it", I reached for my beaded bag hoping I could find some pain-relieving potion. If I could help ease some of his pain, his groaning and yells of agony are distressing and distracting. I found it- Tom had made a failsafe if a muggle picked up my bag then it would just look like a normal bag, hiding the extension charm.

The ground was freezing; it wouldn't be long before the first snow fell. I could feel the stinging icy tendrils penetrate the fabric of my dress.

"Hi, I'm Hermione. I need you to hold still for a few seconds if you can for me." I hoped my voice was calm and collected and not the high-pitched sound of panic I thought I heard. He wasn't holding still or trying to- I wasn't even sure he had heard me.

"I'm going to hold your head still for a few seconds so I can give you some pain relief", where the hell was Tom? He could help me right now. I shuffled around cursing my ruined dress- to sit around near his head. I wanted to see if I could place his head between my knees to hold him still. The position was rather scandalous for this day in age, and no one seemed inclined to help me. My eyes darted quickly to the arm that was red and swollen looking; oedema had gotten worse in the last few minutes. I needed to work quickly. I ignored all the yelling in broken French/English/German/various other languages thrown in there.

I wrenched his head back much to his weak protestations, my fingers slipping from the copious amount of sweat beading on his face. I used my other hand to bunch the material of the dress enough that I wasn't flashing anyone so I could squeeze the crown of his head between my knees. He squirmed and bucked on the ground, but I forced his head down and tipped his chin towards me, opening up his airway. His face was pale; eyes screwed shut. I hoped this position for the moment would cause him to take a deep breath. I waited a few more seconds, but he wasn't opening his mouth.

"Open your mouth", all I received in return was another grunt in pain through clenched teeth. I opened the cap to the vial of pain-relieving potion; I wasn't going to give him all of it because that would be too suspicious. Just enough to make it bearable. I sucked in a deep breath and forced my left hand's fingers into his mouth; this was a risk.

"Bite my fingers, and you'll be swiftly relieved of your ability to procreate", his eyes snapped open, and he momentarily stopped writhing for me to allow three drops of the potion into his mouth. His eyes didn't leave mine, and it was starting to become uncomfortable.

"How do you feel?" moving so we were in a less compromising position. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath; the potion must be easing his discomfort.

"You're an angel", I frowned and blinked stupidly. Maybe I gave him the wrong potion; it wasn't supposed to induce a hallucinatory reaction. I moved around to his side so I could get a better look at the injured arm. I gently lifted it, noting the hissing coming from his mouth- hmm the nerves must be highly sensitised.
"Do you feel nauseous? Stomach cramping? Any chest pains?" I looked up, and he was staring, wide-eyed at me while panting heavily.

"What is your name, my angel?", before I could answer there was a commotion off the side and I could hear comments- dark aura, devil, evil- I sighed, Tom must be making his grand entrance.

I looked over to where everyone was parting, and Tom was walking calmly despite all the insults being hurled his way, and I felt sick with guilt again. I turned back Malia's brother, who completely ignored Tom.

"Are you feeling, ok?" I reached out and touched his shoulder.

"Feeling like I would like to be between your legs again", he smiled which turned to a grimace as a wave of pain must have radiated through him. I dropped my hand, feeling appalled and angry. I just helped him or tried too, and he makes that disgusting comment. Are women only ever seen as sexual objects?

"He'll be fine my dear…", Tom held out his hand to help me off the semi-frozen ground, and that's when I noticed the snake wrapped around his left arm. Surprising myself was my lack of reaction to the snake. Tom looked at the man coldly; it worried me briefly that in the future this man will have to be careful; otherwise, he will end up six feet under where no one will ever find his remains.

"…if he can make explicit comments then he is not knocking at death's door. There was no envenomation, so he will only experience discomfort for around three weeks. Don't touch the wound let it heal naturally, although my advice would be too put it in a sling until the swelling goes down.", he patted the snake, and to everyone else, it would look a little disturbing, but to me, it seemed natural being the heir of Slytherin after all.

"It was a snake bite?"

"Yes, the common European Adder. He must have disturbed her nest, doing whatever it was he was doing- so she lashed out."

"So, he will be alright?" Malia asked, rushing over to her brother, checking his arm. It was quite swollen and looked incredibly painful.

"Yes, he won't be doing much over the next few weeks", Tom answered somewhat disinterested in what was going on with Malia's brother, and more in the snake that was now unravelling itself from around his forearm and slithering up towards his neck. People where now ogling Tom and the snake whispering conspiratorially to each other, this would be something that they will talk about for a while- the two strangers and a snake. Malia's brother, whom I still didn't know the name of was again staring at me again; I felt self-conscious. I know I must have looked a wreck and I was cold now because from the knees down my dress was wet, and what made it worse was that my
socks were also damp.

There was a flurry of activity after that as Malia started to bark orders, a makeshift stretcher came out and a strip of cloth to act as a sling.

I wrapped my arms around myself and tried to resist shivering, while it was only mid-morning; there was still a crisp breeze.

"Tom…", I said, stepping closer to him, mindful of the snake draping itself across his shoulders.

"Yes, my dear?"

"Can we go now? I'm cold", he turned to look at me, eyebrows raised.

"Of course, let's get you warmed up your lips are turning blue", he pulled me close and kissed my forehead, his lips moving against my skin, a few moments later I could feel a warmth trickle down my back. He had placed a simple warming charm on me.

"Thank you", I smiled up at him. He brushed a finger against my cheek; it was such a small affectionate gesture that I dared not think about too much.

"Can't have you dying of hypothermia now can we Mrs Granger? Let's get you back and draw you a nice warm bath", he steered me back towards the dirt track, keeping his hand on my lower back. We paused out near the gate, and he placed the snake back on the ground for it to find its way to its hiding spot. I looked around the area; it was nice and peaceful- picturesque. In our time, I would love to come back here and see what it looks like now.

"Wait", I heard a voice yell out behind us. It was Malia, with her hands clutching her skirts, lifting them slightly giving her more ease of movement while running. Tom stiffened next to me most likely expecting something untoward. I just wanted to get back to the hotel room and get into that warm bath Tom had promised.

"Yes", Tom stepped a little in front, shielding me. While I appreciated the sentiment, I am a big girl and can handle myself. I place a hand on his shoulder, letting him know it was okay.

"Malia?", it occurred to me that she didn't know my name. "Hermione", I pointed to myself.

"Her-minny, thank you again for helping Mathais. We owe you another debt. You need transport, yes?"

"How do you know that?"

"We asked some of the coachmen not to give you transport", I gaped at the audacity of her to manipulate our situation like that. I could practically feel Tom vibrating with indignation next to
"Why would you do that?", finally finding my voice, since Tom wasn't going to explode like I thought he would.

"A few of us were curious about you two. Most of us don't mind that you killed Mani, but care that you did it as an outsider", she turned and looked at me, and I felt myself go pale. She knew.

"What do you intend to do with this information?", as always Tom generally treated everything like a threat and picking up on Malia’s subtle jab.

"Nothing. He was a disgusting man- better off the others thinking that you killed him than them finding out it was her. I want to offer you deal", I felt like we wouldn't have much choice in this, take the deal or be stranded here in France until Tom snaps, which wouldn't be good for anyone.

"Hang on- you owe us for helping twice. Now you want to make a deal- how is this fair on us?", I felt like I was being taken advantage of.

"Make it what you will, but we offer you transport to Italy. In return, you keep an apothecary stand to help my family make money."

"You want us to work for you in exchange for getting to Italy?", it couldn't be that bad, could it? We had been having trouble securing transport- no thanks to her.

"Fine, we accept. But don't think for one second if anything happens that I don't like or you continuing blackmailing us- that I won't murder you all in your sleep", her face morphed into shock and she looked to me thinking I would say something to the contrary, but I was already pissed so no I wouldn’t. Anyway, this was the tamest threat I have heard Tom make, so I wasn't too concerned.

"Come back in two days, and we will have a wagon ready for you", she turned and left us standing there, and I, for one, was confused, hurt and angry.

"Come on Mrs Granger we have some planning to do."
Two Days Later

"Tom, what- where are we going?"

"Just taking a detour through the city one last time. If we make it home eventually, I’d like to remember the historical places we’ve been despite the fact they are horrible. Anyone who dares to tell me otherwise can go live somewhere without indoor plumbing and tell me how great that is.”, I smiled as he dragged me along, because yes, while the past was were from an academic perspective, it is not something that I will endeavour to live in again.

I longed to pull out the polaroid camera that I discovered in the deeper recesses of my beaded bag. It was one of the possessions of my parents that I decided to keep after I wiped their memories. I purloined the camera and a photo album. While it hurts to think about them that way, I know that they are better off- safer. Despite Tom being here with me, essentially sidelined from the war, his Death Eaters are still out there scouring the country for muggleborns and their parents. I just hope that they are further enough away that they will be out of sight out of mind.

"Tom, can I ask you a question?" I had never been able to ask him about my parents. I didn't want to disrupt the static balance we had achieved thus far. But I realise that- as much as I am not ready to admit certain feelings that are arising- if we are to move forward in any fashion issues of a particular nature need to be addressed.

"Your parents, I assume?", he dropped back to a stroll beside me his hands in his pockets, his head hanging forward.

"I didn't dare to ask until now", he smiled, but it was unpleasant like a sour taste was left in his mouth.

"No, I know you had to wait until I was fond enough of you so I wouldn't kill you for bringing it up", it hurt to even admit to myself that that was the reason why.

"Yes, and because I am angry- so so angry at you for that", and I was pissed but more so hurt. " It makes everything difficult the more I get to know you- that I-

"Guilt. You feel guilty for even liking me a little bit-betraying your friends' etcetera etcetera...." I hated doing this, but I needed to know everything. I couldn't in good conscience continue our...acquaintance without airing some of his more heinous misdeeds. Both of us have been ignoring most of the issues swirling above our heads like a bleak black cloud.
"Did you order them to be killed?", my throat constricted, my tongue heavy, the words thick like tar. They tumbled from my lips barely above a whisper, almost completely getting lost to the arctic breeze which seemed unrelenting in its ability to suffuse down to our bones.

"No. My followers may have taken what I initially said and ran with it, putting their creative spin on it. Yes, I did want all the muggleborns rounded up and their relatives. But not for any nefarious purpose. I wanted the half-bloods next as well, then the pure-blooded ingrates. "I was discombobulated by his vague explanation. I reached out and grabbed his arm roughly, stopping him from walking.

"We were all told that you were trying to exterminate us- a genocide", I wasn't entirely sure I believed him.

He barked out a harsh laugh- it was not in any way a humorous sound. Horrid, disgusting bile inducing anticipation laced with trepidation scraped at my insides. I placed a hand on my stomach like that alone would prevent me from dispelling the contents of the organ on the sidewalk.

"Ha- no if only I were a wizard version of Hitler. God Dumbledore has warped my perception, what am I? Grindelwald 2.0?", we were getting strange looks from people passing by, their scrutinising disapproval was not doing anything to detract me from my current state of misery.

I observed Tom and the combination of the expressions that flittered across his face were unfathomable exasperation, extreme bitterness and mania that frightened me. I was torn between standing there with him- watching him pace back and forwards and bolting. Wanting the knowledge, he had and hearing it were two different things- I was afraid, and it felt oppressive.

I ran.

I just needed some space to breathe for a moment and think about what it is I wanted. I kept running until I reached the outer edges of the city and then slowed down to walking until I found a quiet spot just off the road. I leant against a wooden fence. I closed my eyes and just let my sense take over- crisp, clean air filled my nostrils, my ears picking up the cows in the distance, the feel of the rough texture beneath my fingertips as they glided over the timber and the feel of the winter sun on my face.

I was confused again- pulled out from my comfortable bubble and then reality had the habit of slapping me in the face.

"Hermione?" I refused to open my eyes; I wanted a few more seconds of peace. I shook my head.
"I don't know if I'm ready to hear you say it" my voice quavered exposing the rawness of emotion I was feeling.

I hadn't realised until now the extent of the feelings I was suppressing- it was uncomplicated if I didn't give it any thought.

"Look at me", his voice was low but had a commanding quality that I couldn't deny. My eyes fluttered open to meet his. I was expecting a cold flat look, but instead, his eyes were shimmering with a stripped back emotion- raw honesty.

Hot salty liquid pooled in the corners of my eyes, threatening to burst forth spilling down my face. Their cleansing power would not extend to extinguish the past- wash away this searing pain. They were wobbling on the precipice.

"Have I ever lied to you?", his question startled me. I wasn't expecting it. Hands clenched by his sides; he was restraining himself from coming any closer than the six feet between us, which seemed more like continents apart.

I stammered out an incoherent answer because no he hadn't at least not that I could tell. He generally didn't answer if I asked something he didn't want to. Sometimes he offered up more of himself than I ever dreamed of knowing and that is what made this, so God damn difficult. It wasn't just about my parents or Harry's; it was everything. The past and the present merging in a violent collision.

"I haven't there's been no reason to lie Hermione", I loathe the way he said my name with a sharp tone- like jagged edges ripping into my skin, the playfulness abandoned. "You said you trusted me" accusatory.

They fell. Tracking a predetermined path down my face, a road map of my turmoil.

I did — this Tom Riddle. I do. Lord Voldemort not so much.

"I do" the words we're brittle; I am grappling to contain the up well of emotional pain aching in my chest.

"It wasn't my agenda; I wanted to conduct genealogical studies." I let that sink in for a moment. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The sound that discharged from my throat was a subdued wail, followed by a constricted intake of air.
I blinked furiously grasping for a train of thought that made sense. I must have looked utterly ridiculous.

"Are you serious?" I frowned wiping away the tears that stung my cheeks and made them itch.

"As a myocardial infarction", he deadpanned, was he being facetious?

"Don't be a dick", was all I could manage, then added, "Don't trivialise this, Tom, I'm serious!" The remark appeared to ignite something in him.

"And so am I!", the sudden rupture in his otherwise composed demeanour was discordant from the tranquil countryside. His eyes narrowed to glittering slits, and he stepped closer. Despite having his magic heavily restricted, I could feel a distortion of the air around us. I hadn't quite expected this reaction- a dismissal or irritation but not offended.

"Get that confused look off your face, Hermione. Is this how it will always be? Doubted at every turn? Even after everything we have been through thus far?" my brain stalled; how did this conversation completely veer off course? I struggled to collect my thoughts in an orderly manner, how to get the right words across for him to understand my predicament.

"Tom...I... everything is fucked really" he looked surprised by my swearing, and he moved closer again a mere foot between us now. "We need to clear some things up. I'm a muggleborn, and that controversy is important to me as well as my parents. Things are getting complicated between us... I think, and... and... I want to be your friend. I just don’t know how to… " Disappointment glinted in his eyes for a second then disappeared. He turned momentarily, releasing a rumble of discomfiture.

"What I said was true, Hermione, I had so many plans, and I admit things went awry. But I never explicitly said to kill your parents, just that I wanted to procure them. As far as I'm aware they weren't captured."

My eyes closed, and I sagged against the fence as relief coursed through me. It felt like some of the weight on my shoulders had been removed. I placed a hand over my heart and relished the fact that my parents were safe and in Australia.

"You have no idea how much I needed to hear that" I could feel tears well in my eyes again, this time in solace. I sniffed and tried to compose myself, reaching for a sense of decorum. This event showed me that I couldn't keep ignoring and suppressing my feelings any longer. I hadn't realised how much emotional pain I had been carrying around unacknowledged until the floodgates opened.
He reached out as if to pluck one of my hands off the fence but stopped unsure if I would want him to touch me. My brain was attentively observing his movements that I didn't react. Him thinking it was unwanted dropped his hand back to his side. Standing this close, I noticed the flash of hurt that was quickly filed away.

Silence settled over us, and we both watched each other with a newfound wariness. Seeing the disappointment in his expression when I mentioned being friends and a troubled countenance because I didn't immediately proffer my hand, had me thinking...did I hurt him? Could I Hermione Granger, muggleborn witch, surely wound a man of his experience?

Usually, being this close to someone avidly staring at me would make me uncomfortable. Instead, it gave cognisance that hummed through me like a live electrical wire. It pulsed; every part of me hyperaware. Desire warred with guilt for this man in front of me- he was so unobtainable it cut like a knife. For some abstruse reason, he opted to disclose parts of himself to me; revealing a complex, layered individual, who had more flaws than I think he would care to promulgate.

If only there were a way to keep him at arm's length? While I uncovered his hidden depths right down to his very soul. I wanted to know more as much as I wanted to deny it- I can't help myself. My thirst for knowledge propelling me forward. I hesitantly reached out all the while questions plagued me- would he want me to? Did the small touches mean anything? Would he be repulsed by my clumsy advances? Was this some ridiculous schoolgirl crush? Did he see me as a woman? Would he give me control? Because wanting to do something requires him doing something in return, and I am not ready for him to have that much control. Not now.

I fingered the fabric of his coat- I felt out of control, a little reckless after my emotional outburst. I summoned the courage to look up in his eyes, and he was appraising me with dubious curiosity. He must have sensed my reluctance because he didn't reach out again and try to touch me, just as well because I would have held off his advances- refused them. I didn't trust him enough with my heart.

I parted the front of his coat and stepped closer, completing the gap. The heat and magic radiating off him cause me to shiver- it was like his body was bathed in a soft flame that reached out to caress mine. My adrenaline spiked, and so did my Gryffindor courage as I ran my hands up his chest. Tom's breathing quickened, and I could feel his heart pounding in anticipation. My own heart was pounding wildly the two of them dancing in an offbeat rhythm.

I forced my hands into his curly hair, which was just as soft as it looked and tilted his head forward. His eyes filled with a desire that encouraged me. He wanted me just as much as I wanted him.

I pulled him closer, so his mouth was hovering over mine, our lips millimetres apart. I waited- a test to see if he would take control or completely relinquish it to me. He waited as we shared the same breath. I pushed up with my toes and kissed him, his lips warm and mouth hot, just like the rest of him. He opened immediately and let my tongue slide inside. My fingers untangled themselves from his hair and made fists in his shirt, holding him firm, so he didn't move. I dragged
both of us backwards until my back hit the fence, and his body flushes with mine. His hands still
never touched me. Instead, they gripped the fence- I could feel the taut muscles of his arms against
my torso.

stirrings of arousal I haven't felt since Draco pooled in my lower abdomen. Lust surged in my
veins, making my skin feel like it was too tight for my body. I felt his erection against my stomach,
and I knew I had to end the kiss as much as I wanted to keep going.

Struggling for breath, I broke the kiss. I wanted to see how I affected him- this man spun from
perpetual darkness. He was panting and flushed just as much as I was. We stared, unable to look
away. He was startlingly handsome in this lust drunk state. I noted that in the depths his eyes, he
also had flecks of green.

I could never take this back now; we could never go back from here. The kiss was everything that I
had imagined, but I still wasn't ready. The responsibility I held and the unresolved issues I had yet
to reconcile still hung over us. I turned my head to take a sip of cool air.

"I shouldn't have done that", the words while whispered tolled with a deafening ring. I felt him still,
and it dawned on me how the statement sounded. I turned my head back to face him, my fingers
still entangled in his shirt. "that's...that's not what...how I meant them to mean." I took a deep breath
and started again.

"I enjoyed it, Godric more than enjoyed it. But, I'm not ready for this yet. I still...I can't-". A finger
touched my lips.

A resignation fell over his face, and a glint of determination flickered in his eyes.

"Shh, I understand. I'll wait until you are ready. I'm not going anywhere, and I always get what I
want", a predator like intensity filled his being, and I could feel myself begin to flush at the
promise he made.

His gaze rested on my lips before returning to my eyes. I subconsciously licked my lips; I could
still taste of him on my tongue.

"We should make haste. I'm sure Malia is wondering where we have got too. Are you sure you can
handle their antediluvian ideals?" I didn't bother to contradict what he said because I wasn't sure
how to untangle myself from him. I was conflicted, and it seemed until I could figure something
out I always would be...I mean, how could I ever be ok with murder?

"I'll be fine, Tom- I'm sure I can make something work", the heaviness of that double meaning
hung in the air.
A/N: I hope this makes sense in my sleep-deprived addled mind. My 2y/o has had croup so I am very tired.
Anyway, the goal was to explore more into their relationship and create some intimacy between them, by having Tom be vulnerable.

Tom POV (One month later- Approx 74 days lost in time)

I felt like this was a long slow slide into insanity. This bewitching woman and her constant self martyring are becoming insufferable. Every time I go to touch her, she pulls away, and I am not a tactile person by nature. The memory of that kiss is on constant replay in my mind along with her smell and the feel of her tongue sliding against mine. I have never understood the purpose or enjoyment of kissing until now- I always viewed it as a slightly disgusting activity. But she makes me just want to drag her back to the damn wagon and.....nope no I need to get control of myself. I let out a puff of air and roll my shoulders as I set out the potions ingredients for the day at least this gives me something to do.

I look up and watch Hermione wandering around with that Mathais fellow. I have a few plans for him if he even thinks about hurting her- he'll be in six parts quicker than he can say Au revoir. She catches me watching her and gives a shy wave. She makes me feel things like a god damn Hufflepuff, when I look at her, I get this weird sensation in my chest cavity, but I don't know what that is supposed to mean. I've never really had other feelings before- definitely plenty of anger, resentment and schadenfreude. I know I should push her away, nothing good would come of this. She pulses with a blinding light akin to the sun, and you can't help but stare until it burns your eyes out. I like her smile, to see her happy. I frown at that thought. Happiness....it is not something that I am familiar with. It was...is a foreign concept- I had never given it much thought concerning my own life much less someone else's.

I settle the large pestle and mortar on the table next to the window in the wagon. Outside is blanketed in snow, so I haven't the faintest idea why Hermione is out with that twit. If only she knew some of the thoughts that floated around in that prick's head, she wouldn't be so quick to be within his vicinity. He has been utterly infatuated with her since we agreed to this slave labour. I can't help but glare at the glass and wonder when everything went sideways.
The more I thought about Dumbledore, Potter, my failed plans over the last 60 years, being stuck here let's be honest no seemingly way home, the shitty orphanage, my first hellish year at Hogwarts and Hermione- which stung more than I cared to admit. A thought floated, 'I am alone and miserable. Only someone as ugly as I am could love me'. The Frankenstein quote most unbidden had to surface now. How could she...she would never...never... - I couldn't prevent the burning rage that roiled and hissed inside me like hot molten lava. It bubbled up - uncontrollably, the violent wrath consumed me engulfing my being. I struggled to take a breath in; my hands trembled as one grasped the table edge harshly and the other clawing at my throat. I broke out into a cold sweat, my mind swimming in a panic. My heart was pounding like I was running a marathon, blackness edging into my vision. I could feel my self losing balance, gasping for a breath that wasn't coming, my fingers slick with moisture slipped from the table, and I could feel myself falling.

Hermione POV

Guilt.

The guilt was shredding me up inside. I still carry a little from accidentally killing Noma's uncle, but seeing her happy makes that easier to swallow. However, the intense feeling that I've betrayed or desecrated the memories of the people; Tom's killed or ordered to be executed is taking a toll on my conscience. I'm sure; he's aware of the gamut of emotional turmoil I'm running right now. I can't help but also feel horrible about the fact that I am hurting him as well. He maybe the Dark Lord but he is much more complicated than the light side ever gave him credit for.

I have done my best to give us both some space so I can sort out my feelings. I have concluded that I will never be able to put aside what he has done- I think it would drive me to the brink of insanity trying to. But I am willing to give him a chance to prove himself. The biggest question or thought I have is, is any of this real? Are the emotions he has shown me authentic or is this another plot until we can successfully make it home? I don't know what to think, and I don't have anybody to talk to about this.

Mathais and I had struck up a friendship because aside from the less than appealing comments from when we first met, he reminds me of Harry and Ron. It's not the same, but it fills a void in my chest. I know Mathais has ideas that we could be more than friends, but I can mostly dodge those advances. I know Tom and I aren't married, but it still feels wrong to break those imaginary vows. We are about to enter his wagon, and he has been helping me make a leather wand holster for Tom. I noticed two weeks ago that it was Christmas and I remember from my research into Tom at Hogwarts that his birthday was on the 31st. I wasn't sure why I felt compelled to give him something- ok that's a lie I need to stop kidding myself here.
The feeling that someone is watching me makes me look around, completely ignoring what Mathais is saying. I automatically look towards our wagon, it is simple in design- I'd hazard a guess to say that it isn't finished yet. The basics are complete so that we can live pleasantly within, but the outside is incomplete. It has some decorative panelling, window shutters and a ladder. It isn't painted colourfully like some of the others or has incredibly ornate wood carvings attached. But, the wood is sealed from the elements. It's cosy and home for now. I notice Tom looking through the side window where our little table is pushed up against the wall tucked up underneath it. He is scowling at Mathais. I give a tentative wave and a small smile. I sigh, turning back I doubt Tom will ever get on with anyone here. I have at least been trying to make an effort, but Tom seems content to only interact with me and very little of everybody else.

Mathais grips my elbow ushering us towards the front of his wagon.

"Your husband hates me."

"Tom hates everyone."

"But he hates me."

"Try not to overthink it, and don't do anything stupid to goad his ire", I shift my gaze off the bright white snow and take in his deep frown.

"Like what?" I shot him a sly smile.

"Like keeping your hands to yourself or you'll find yourself short", he laughed nervously and quickly removed his hand from my elbow. I turned back to look at Tom one last time, just needing to see his face again the urge too strong to resist.

His movements where frantic, I squinted and stepped forward, trying to get a better look. I took another, then another, then another. My eyes widened when I could see him gripping his throat. Panic snowballed in the pit my stomach, and everything else fell away except for that small window and Tom's face. I rose up on the tip of my toes, ready to run full pelt towards the entryway to the wagon. The adrenaline was spiking viciously, coupled with my heart beating faster and harder. I felt slightly dizzy — my neural synapses firing at a rapid rate like bullets from a machine gun. I took off hearing Mathias call my name, but I ignore him again.

I nearly trip on the hem of my thick woollen and cotton skirts, momentarily forgetting in the heat of the moment to lift them. Trying to run fast was virtually impossible on the frozen ground, aside from nearly tripping, slipping was a problem. If I slipped and concussed myself, I would likely not forgive myself if something terrible happened to Tom that was preventable. The short distance, thirty to forty metres, seemed like it was one hundred times that in my hysterically fraught mind.

Three-quarters of the way through the distance I hear a loud thud and glass shattering. If it were possible, I think my heart started beating even faster, trying desperately to thump its way out of my chest. A few seconds later, which in my mind seemed an eternity, I made it to the base of the four
stepped ladder to the door. I clambered up slipping only once on the thin layer of ice that coated the second rung, cursing most unladylike as my kneecap caught the edge. My hands were cold and trembling as I hauled myself up the steps touching the frostbitten wood. Time was of the essence as I heard no other sounds aside from my breath venting heavily from my mouth. Practically throwing myself into the wagon, I freeze momentarily taking in the scene, my eyes darting around frenetically. Tom is sprawled in what little available space we have in the middle of the wagon. The small table on one side, a four-drawer chest and stove on the other- with Tom firmly in the centre. In his fall he must have somehow bumped the table causing some of the vials to roll off onto the floor.

Tom's head was turned away, and there was a small trickle of blood that had navigated its way on to the wooden flooring. My instinct was to rush over there immediately, but I needed to get myself under control so I could think clearly. I would not be helping Tom by being overrun with my hysteria.

I took a few cautious steps towards him mindful of the broken glass, glinting like little jewels next to him. A minute or so later, Mathais rose such a clatter coming up the stairs; I sighed heavily, not wanting to deal with him right now while kneeling close to Tom. I shifted Tom's head slowly in my hands, careful not to bump the wound on the back of his head. He was breathing, then started coughing.

"Hermione- what's going....on?"

"Tom had an accident Mathias I saw through the window."

"Oh, do you need any help?"

"No...I should be ok to manage him by myself", I could hear the firm dismissal in my voice, and I felt a twinge of guilt, but I didn't want an outsider meddling in our affairs. Besides, I doubt someone as proud as Tom would wish a stranger seeing him at his weakest.

"Tom?" I asked clearly but not too loudly; I had a feeling he will probably have a concussion. His eyelashes fluttered, and I tried again. This time he managed to open his eyelids but looked a little dazed and confused.

"Hermione", he whispered.

"Tom, I think you had an accident. I'm going to help you sit up and then I will get some pain relief potion and some Dittany for the cut on the back of your head. Do you understand?"

"Yes", eventually he focused his gaze on my face. I assisted him sitting up very slowly until he got his bearings, he resumed coughing, which turned into dry heaving. Then he jerked out of my grasp and proceeded to vomit off to the side, thanking the forces above he had enough sense to do it away from me. When he seemed to finish, I stood up and wished I could use my magic. I had to step over Tom, the vomit and glass to reach our bed at the back of the wagon. It was positioned perpendicular to the interior and only as wide as the wagon. If Tom were any taller, he certainly wouldn't be able to stretch out. My beaded bag was sitting atop the made bed, and I rummaged
around not being able to find anything, then remembering that Tom was sorting everything out. Stepping back over Tom, I opened the top drawer in the chest and then quickly discovering the three vials I now needed.

"Sorry...I'm a bit frazzled seeing you like this", I knelt back down, handing him the pain-relieving potion first. He closed his eyes and gulped down the bitter-tasting potion, but I could see him sag as the potion took effect.

"Would you like the nausea potion?", it couldn't hurt to take it, he stared at it for a while then reached out for it. Once that was taken, and we sat in silence for Godric knows how long, he finally spoke.

"Can you pass me my wand please?" I wasn't sure if that was the best idea, but I got up the glass crunching underneath my shoe as I lent over to pick up the wand from the table. I reluctantly handed it over, and he swished it around not saying anything as the vomit disappeared and the shards of glass reassembled themselves on the table as if they were never broken. Sometimes I seriously loved magic.

"Do you need help getting to the bed?"

"No, Hermione I am not a child", he snapped I honestly expected this reaction from him- lashing out when he was vulnerable.

"I was asking! Go sit down on the bed and then I'll fix the back of your head."

He muttered something but did as he was told. I waited until he was on the bed before I came over, not wanting him to think that I was trying to mother him. I took out some tissues from my bag and dabbed some of the Dittany on them then gently pressed it the wound. I waited a couple of seconds then lifted the tissue and inspected where the cut was. It had completely healed.

"It's healed, you need to wash your hair to get the blood out. How do you feel? Still nauseous? Dizzy? Tired? Confused?"

"I am fine Hermione; you can stop fussing over me like a toddler", I rolled my eyes not wanting to engage in the behaviour he hopes to elicit from me.

"Can you tell me what happened?", he crossed his arms and looked away jaw clenched, the muscle ticking. I'm surprised this man still has molars after all the grinding he does.

"Please...I was worried about you. Seeing you on the floor like that..." I went for straight-up honesty. We haven't spoken much in the last month- mostly that's on me and while I needed to think it was wrong to push him away and resist the feelings I have. I am foolish. It's hard to have space from each other to think when you depend on that person hourly. It's driving us both nuts.
It was his turn to roll his eyes but then grimaced.

"I'm pretty sure I had a panic or anxiety attack" my eyebrows rose, the cogs turning in my brain faltered as I was slow to process what he had said. He refused to return my gaze, probably seeing the shocked expression on my face that I quickly tried to recover from.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I didn't want to pressure him into talking because I know that he will clam up tighter than Fort Knox.

"No" he glared fiercely with nostrils flaring. I threw my hands up, surrendering the line of questioning for now.

"Ok, ok. But if you do want to..." I look down at my fingers, fiddling with the tissue. "I'm going to go finish what I was doing with Mathias, but I'll come to check on you every hour. You may have a concussion after that fall...you should get some rest", his glare had mellowed out to a hard look.

"I don't need to be coddled" his eyes sharpened to razor blades "Well what are you waiting for? Go finish your babysitting with that fool", this conversation was going now where he was hurt and probably embarrassed, so getting anything out of him would like blood from a stone.

With one last look, I spun on my heel and left still holding that bloodied tissue.

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Hours later

I returned later with some broth; the sun was hanging low in the sky, ready to set. I had stuck to my promise of returning every hour during the day to check on Tom. He remained consistently cantankerous throughout, dispelling vinegary words in every response before it became a staunch standoff again over how I didn't need to be his nurse- he is a grown man thank you very much.

I remained resolute in my decision, after scaring me half the death, I think I deserved to be reassured.

We are settling in for the night, both propped up by pillows and with a hefty tome a piece. My curiosity is gnawing at my insides, and I'm jittery.

"Mrs Granger can you please stop fidgeting", I frowned he only ever called me Mrs was when he was being sarcastic or trying to distance himself.
"Sorry, can you put my book on the chair, please?" I was too restless to read so after he took the book I flopped back down and rolled over.

Sometime later, I was still awake staring at the ceiling, mulling the day over in my mind. It must have been the 590th time I thought about it, and on the 227th time, I pulled myself out of denial about how much I cared about Tom.

The monster. The villain in my own story.

Except...I like him. He's been remarkably different- from what I initially anticipated being stuck here with Lord Voldemort. I want him more than I should even be entertaining. When I look back over the last two, and a bit months he's been there almost every step of the way. Saving me from the brothel, helping the young boy, caring for me while I was seasick, comforting me after I killed Noma's uncle and every other situation I have thrown us into. I know he must have some feelings for me, kissing me like that and relinquishing control is telling.

But what made someone who has a titanium shell encasing them have a panic or anxiety attack?

As if hearing my thoughts, Tom shuffled in the dark and cast a lumos which bathed our bed in a soft yellow glow.

"You're not going to let this go are you?", he rolled onto his side and propped up on an elbow, giving me a hard stare- the edges of his eyes crinkled in frustration. "A pertinacious little Gryffindor from whom I cannot evade".

He made me feel small when he gave me that look. It was a stern reminder of the power imbalance in this potential relationship. I chose to ignore his jab.

"I want to know you're ok. One acquaintance to another", I shrugged trying to be casual, but I am not that good of an actress.

"Acquaintance?" he seemed baffled.

"Um...tentative pre-friends?"

"Pre friends" He tried it out on his tongue but was bemused by the concept. I turned and mirrored his pose, answering a little flippantly, trying to quell the ball of anxiety rapidly expanding in my chest.

"Pending reciprocation from the other party that is", I couldn't look at him- where was my Gryffindor courage now?
"That is the most peculiar offer of friendship I have come across" he reaches out and grips my chin, turning my head to face him.

"We can't be friends Hermione we will never be friends" I sucked in a deep breath, that ball of anxiety expanding to extraordinary levels attempting to suffocate me from the inside out. My heart felt like it had been struck with a sledgehammer. My eyes are watering- I wanted to slap that look off his face.

He pulls me forward until our foreheads are touching. His hand is cupping the back of my head, holding me to him.

"I have a hunger inside me, Hermione. It craves you in a more than friendly way", I could have sworn my heart stopped beating.

"But you're still not ready for anything-"

"But", he silenced me with his lips. I felt like I couldn't function; I was so overwhelmed by my emotions.

"The monster in me wants to squeeze you tight until you can't breathe; consume every part of you- you're not ready to be entirely mine, because once you are best to be prepared for the long haul. I will never let you go". I closed my eyes, trying to process this onslaught of information.

I take in a shaky breath, and I grip his shirt, the feel of the familiar fabric grounding me.

"You scare me", I whispered spoke against his soft full lips. He moves back a little so he can see my whole face.

"You think you don't frighten me as well with these intense foreign feelings? Your gravitational pull has engulfed me into your orbit, and I cannot escape" I hadn't given it too much thought to how he felt, other than I presumed I was hurting him.

"Is that why you had an attack?", he hummed a non-committal response. A wave of shame flooded me; I felt terrible for being so in my head this past month that I didn't notice his upheaval.

"You're having a crisis of existence?"

"I am not having an existential crisis!" He snapped abruptly gripping my arm a little tightly. He huffed, then turned back to me. "Ok, maybe a little. You're making me look at things differently. The Horcruxes were a bad idea for my sanity. I just...don't know what to do when we return- I want to achieve power, but I don't want to continue the war", I practically threw myself on top of him. "ooof", he patted me on the back awkwardly. That was fantastic and made this whole event worth it- I doubt Dumbledore would have expected this result.

"Are you ok with that? Not that I want you to go back to what Lord Voldemort was doing...."
pulled back and shuffled back to my side of the bed.

He sighed and carded his hand through his hair. "Honestly?" I kept quiet waiting until he was ready. "as I have already told you I wanted to conduct genealogical studies on all the magical families- yes all. Since discovering my heritage as a teenager I wanted to look more into it, more so the non-pure-blooded familial lines as the purebloods have already been catalogued by Cantankerous Nott. My goal was to see how the half-bloods and muggleborns intersect with the older families. Are the banished squibs the cause of the muggleborns appearing in the later generations; like muggles say... a dormant gene? Or is it just magic?" His voice was sincere, so he was either telling the truth or an outstanding actor. I would like to believe that he wasn't hoodwinking me and spouting pretty words.

"You want to see if all the magical citizenry in Britain are connected?", this excited me, the thought of research of that degree. It was something that I could sink my teeth into.

"Yes, that is a goal. Of course, I couldn't tell that to my devoted followers who thought I wanted to round up everyone who wasn't pure-blooded and exterminate them. I have studied muggle biology, and I know that by doing that we will corner ourselves by limiting the gene pool. They are almost down to marrying first cousins- there isn't another step after that, I am surprised there aren't more genetic deformities. They have been lucky so far with only some mental problems- take the Blacks for example. I would like to include magical children who aren't brought up in the wizarding world at an earlier age than eleven. It would solve some of the more outlandish magical accidents and networking between parents to assist non-magical parents in caring for a magical child. I would like to include in the Hogwarts curriculum an Advanced Dark Arts elective for outstanding seventh years and start a primary school for the younger children ages five to ten. Overhaul the Wizengamot, dispose of the antiquated laws that no longer apply to the modern age" I blinked at him stunned I wasn't expecting it to be so...reasonable.

"I can't see anyone opposing that- other than that you are Voldemort" if we return I don't know how we would go about campaigning for that. Getting passed the Voldemort issue would be a problem and avoiding Azkaban. "Dumbledore would be the first hurdle - what are we going to do about him?"

He just stared at me for a while deep in cogitation, and I couldn't avoid the blush that suffused my cheeks.

"I'm thinking about it; there's a lot to account for" he reached for his wand again and extinguished the lumos, but the sunlight had already begun to seep through the flimsy curtains on the window. My mind was too alert to go to sleep, and I will surely regret it later.

I let my head fall to the side as I listened to Tom's soft snores. My mind still reeled that a man of his talent and erudition conclusively showed me his soft underbelly. The anger he showed earlier
revealed much to me whether he realised it or not; the scared little boy from the orphanage—starved of love and taught to fight for everything. He was drowning in the persona he carved out, a shield to hide behind.

I reached out and ran my fingers through his ruffled hair and kissed his closed eyelids.

What am I going to do with you, Tom Riddle?
Preparations

Hermione POV

One week later (Approximately 81 days lost in time)

I wake to the sound of glass clinking and the pounding of the pestle in the mortar. I crack an eye open but remain snuggled in the pillows and blankets. I watch Tom- laser-focused as he grounds something while skimming one of the multiple books he has open on that small table. The cauldron is bubbling away, and a peculiar smell is emanating from it permeates the room. I bury my face down into Tom’s pillow and inhale a deep breath. The usual spicy scent- perhaps allspice or cloves? An earthy aroma that my olfactory sense delights in.

I decided that after last night’s mishap- I am nineteen after all I can make my own choices. That I best make an appearance and help Malia with the preparations for our journey to Toulouse. I throw back the covers, lamenting having to leave the warmth of the bed to get ready for the day. The only thing about having to share such an enclosed space with Tom was lack of privacy, especially when having to use the chamber pot or washing in the tub that also doubled as the laundry and kitchen sink. However, I managed to string up a sheet from the roof, so we had some semblance of privacy- because I was not ready for Tom to see me naked. I had had the odd vessel dilating fantasy, but I seriously needed to tramp down those desires. We were on a precipice. While that fantastic fumble of a kiss out by the fence was- world tilting and revealed our feelings to a degree- acting on it again made me panic. There was still so much to get passed before I would feel comfortable having my heart in his hands. He was so intense with everything that he did, his words from last week have been haunting me. I shudder at the thought of the ‘monster’ inside him that simultaneously hunger and longs to suffocate me. I don’t want to be someone’s possession. I want a partner- intimacy. Tom didn’t strike me as someone who dealt in halves; he was all or nothing. Was I ready for that? Was he? I doubted Tom had ever been in a relationship, did he even know what that entails? I exhale slowly now was not the time to brood over Tom’s relationship history.

I stretched and squeezed past Tom to get to the tub on the floor to wash my face and brush my teeth. Tom does not acknowledge my presence, most likely still grumpy from last night’s heated encounter. I came back to the wagon very late after spending time with Malia, her husband, Johan and Mathais. I was a little drunk. I found Tom fuming and waiting up like an angry parent. I reminded him again that he is not my parental figure, and there was no need to scold me like a child. To which he replied rather angrily like he was irritated that the words were forthcoming, “No parent alive should have the thoughts I have about you”, I remember gaping like a fish, my brain unable to formulate a response. It did spark something in me that burned hot- lust. If I were more drunk or confident, I would have pounced on him right then. I snorted at that; I doubted Tom was the kind of man that could be distracted by sex- I could practically hear his voice in my head saying I don’t give in to my base desires. Now that my brain isn’t pickled from the alcohol- whatever those gypsies brewed, it was strong- I am a little embarrassed and straight-up angry at Tom.

Ten minutes later and still unacknowledged, I was slipping my shoes on ready to go back to Malia’s wagon when Tom finally spoke.
"Where are you going?" he snapped at me, slamming down the glass vial so hard I was surprised it didn't shatter in his hand upon impact. His sharp countenance was rubbing against my already foul mood like sandpaper across skin.

"Back to Malia's, there's stuff I -"

"I don't want you around Mathais."

I narrowed my eyes; he had a challenge in his blue orbs that I was more than happy to rise too.

"Don't start spewing that patriarchal bullshit with me, Thomas. That may work on the women here, but not me". I walked up to him and poked him in the chest. "I choose who I want to spend my time with, not you" I punctuated my point with another fierce poke to his sternum. His hand quickly latched onto my wrist, yanking me forward into his chest.

"You will listen. I. Don't. Want. Him. Near. You." I couldn't understand why he was so angry about this. But I wasn't going to let him dictate what I wanted.

"No", his nimble fingers traced the seam of the dress sleeve, up along my shoulder and to the exposed skin of my clavicles and neck. His jaw ticked. His fingers cupped the back of my neck, and his thumb sat in the jugular notch.

"I could just press down, and you wouldn't be able to stop me", his eyes flickered to mine as I felt a slight pressure on my trachea. I knew he wouldn’t kill me, but I wasn't sure how far he would push the point he was trying to make. My heartbeat picked up a little more as he pressed down more firmly. I could still breathe, but it hurt too. I refused to look away or beg for him to stop. He sighed, then dropped his hand. I quickly rubbed my neck; my throat was going to be sore for the rest of the day.

"That may work on your idiotic followers but not me. I know you well enough by now Tom. Not everything is about you and your selfish needs.", my throat stung a little, and my voice was rougher compensating for the discomfort.

“You are mine, not his!” , he pushed one of the wooden chairs violently into the stove, causing one of the legs to come away from the base. The abrupt potent display of fury, coupled with the sudden change in his outwardly calm composure frightened me marginally. I’m sure most of his minions knew that when his fuse blew, and temper rained down, it was smart to run and duck for cover.

"Talk to me like that again, and I will shove that wand where the sun doesn't shine.
I'm not a commodity that can be traded or bartered. How dense can you be Tom?

“Oh, you want to talk about oblivious Hermione, maybe take that mirror and turn it around. I haven't exactly been subtle in my affections.” He spoke like nothing in the last 30 seconds had occurred.

“You’re the one stalling Tom. I said I was-“

“No! you do not get to turn this around”, it was his turn to sharply poke me in the chest “I have one word for you, Hermione. Harry” his blue eyes were drilling into mine waiting for me to deny that everything hinged on Harry. I couldn’t. The betrayal of a friendship superseded how I felt as much as it warred heavily within me. It was nice at times to think about being with Tom and what the future may hold. But that was all it could be- a fantasy. When it came down to the wire- it was Tom or Harry. And Harry won every time. Was it wrong to sacrifice my happiness? Maybe. But it was what it was. I was being selfish now- wanting both but was ultimately dragging us down into misery.

“I’m sorry” it was barely a whisper; my eyes stung with hot salty liquid.

“Do you even want…?”, his question trailed off, but I knew what he was asking. I looked at him, my eyelashes heavy with thick tears.

I could feel my throat tighten, and a choked sob escaped as I considered how to answer correctly. The problem was this wasn’t a yes or no question not really. This was a delicate and complicated situation. We were fooling ourselves these past few weeks, living in a bubble of our design.

"I do", I didn't know how else to express how much I wanted that. I wanted it so badly now that I was on the verge of losing it. There didn't seem to be enough words in the English language to communicate that message.

“You don’t want a monster like me”, his voice was fridged, making the atmosphere in the wagon drop rapidly, well within the temperature range of subzero. I hated that he could hide his emotions so well behind that blank look, while I wore mine on my sleeve for everyone to see.

“Don’t denigrate yourself like that. I won’t let you”, my voice was stronger, but still quavered under the strain of overwhelming emotion.

The pretence dropped, and his beautiful face contorted into an ugly mask of primal savagery; his
lips pursed- small and rigid barely masking a twitch of cruelty. *This* was Lord Voldemort making an appearance not Tom, *my* Tom.

"Are you going to try to change me? *Save me?*, the contempt woven through the words made me feel sick. This was not how any of this was supposed to go. How did we end up in this position? There was a small part that I couldn't deny wanted to change him. Mould him into the man I wanted him to be, *to become*.

"Is that all I am to you a pity project?", he spat the words out like they were disgusting and vile. My legs hit the edge of the bed we shared. There was always a detachment in our earlier confrontations- but now this was personal. My heart stuck in a vice that was slowly being tightened. I am captured in the claws of a predator whose talons were slowing digging into my flesh with every step- every word.

I had to look away, needed those few precious seconds to get myself out the tailspin that he had put me in. I didn't want to be in this position. I never wanted him to look at me like that again like I was the filth beneath his shoe. My anger had simmered down to barely a flicker- almost extinguished by his sudden assailment.

A sharp pivot with a false bravado that I was certainly not feeling- I desisted the idea of him beating me down, with barbed words- that I countered with an inelegant thoughtless statement or some would say a *cheap shot*.

"No. I want you to have a second chance! You could *do* something remarkable that isn't contingent on murdering and enslaving the masses!", with every word my voice increased in volume, my throat now at its limit almost gave out — the flicker, now a roaring inferno.

Of all the variable and fugacious emotional outbursts I have personally witnessed from Tom, pleading desperation was not one. His perfectly crafted façade cracked and shattered. In one wide arc, he swiped everything from the table. Books, potions, the cauldron- *everything* hit the floor in a desultory mess. It was a befitting representation of this moment between us.

"What the *fuck* do you want from me?"

"I should hate you! I should loathe every fibre of your being", I tried to shout, my insides a tangled
ball of yarn, twisting and turning, giant knots forming. After a few beats of heavy breathing; I swallowed thickly, throat sufficiently parched I croaked out "I hate I have to choose between you and Harry. Why does it have to be you?" I sat down on the bed, not looking at him, I don't think I could handle whatever expression adorned his face in this moment — minutes ticked by with our breathing the only soundtrack.

"Feelings aren't rational or logical. You're trying to fit everything neatly into a nice little box", the feel of his breath against the shell of my ear was both surprising and created a physiological reaction that I would rather not have right now. It distracted me from my thoughts.

"Tom, what are you doing?" I queried as the mattress shifted and jostled me. My eyes widened as he crawled into my lap, straddling my legs, forcing me to lie back. His persistent and transitory changes in mood gave me whiplash. He loomed over me, a ghosting of a smirk graced his lips.

"Showing you why it has to be me." a low, smoky timbre curled around his words, making me flush.

He lowered and monitored me from beneath his dark lashes, eyes possessed by a vulturine hunger-sharped with a near demonic gleam. His curly hair ruffled. A sheen of sweat glistening across his brow. His shirt was untucked and askew. He looked indefectibly dishevelled. I was so transfixed by the state of him, that I couldn't summon the will to tell him to stop as one hand found its way under my skirts.

Long graceful fingers that had an unexpected strength to them threaded through my hair, wrenching my head to the side, exposing the sensitive skin. The threat was there. Clear. No misunderstandings as his lips and teeth grazed my neck- like he would rip my throat out if I denied him. He pulled back, adjusting my head marginally, his pupils were blown wide and deep-bottomless black pools- an eternal abyss, tinted with a hint of obliquity that I hadn't seen before.

I trembled with emotion as I reached up and traced my fingertips along the outline of his mouth, full and sensual. He kissed my fingers then parted his lips and grazed his teeth along the sensitive pads. The wet heat of his tongue blistered, as his fingers left a blazing path up the soft skin of my inner thigh, causing my nerve endings to tingle with the rush of exhilaration his touch evoked until he reached the warmth between my legs. I couldn't stop the moan that ejected from my throat as he gently stroked the edge of my knickers. I felt utterly scrambled- a feverish sort of frantic when his head dropped to my shoulder, placing gentle kisses on my neck. I was unable to commit to a single course of action of where to put my hands on his person. It was like being offered an all you can eat buffet then being overwhelmed by all the choices.
He slowly moved back, albeit reluctantly; my fingers moved quickly to prevent his wrist from moving anywhere- my indecision of hand placement must have made him unsure.

"Don't you dare move", he chuckled darkly as I forced his head back down and tugged roughly at his bottom lip. I gasped as he pushed the edge of my knickers aside and touched my tender flesh. He took a weighted breath before tilting his head to mould his mouth to mine. His tongue teasingly rubs against mine, igniting a sting of desire that sets my body aflame. Kissing Tom was incendiary.

A guttural sound from Tom vibrates my mouth, making my lips tingle when he circles my entrance feeling how wet he is making me. Even through the haze of desire, I can feel how his hand is trembling against me, movements uncertain. I had never given any thought to Tom being nervous or inexperienced.

Rocking my hips forward, hoping he would understand what I wanted, the liquid heat pooling in my abdomen was almost becoming unbearable- I wanted more. I wiggled my hips, hoping to get his fingers right where I wanted them.

Frustrated by his lack of attention, I felt a more direct approach would move this along. Sliding a hand down over his, Ighosted his movements, then gently nudged his middle finger coaxing his finger to slip inside of me. I tensed, and he stilled, his hand was still trembling as he pushed inside. A voracious hunger rose and crested at the sensation of his finger slipping in and out.

I broke the kiss and chanced a look I wanted to see what the great Lord Voldemort looked like in an intimate moment. His face was flushed redder than I have ever seen it, panting and biting on his bottom lip at an attempt to keep himself together. His eyes darted between my face and his hand like he couldn't believe what he was seeing and not wanting to miss a single second.

My body broke out into a sweat, I felt hot and skin too tight-curse this dress. The rhythmic rocking of my hips in sync with the thrusting of his finger, with the odd flick of that small bundle of nerves-he learned fast- was edging me closer to insanity. I welded my teeth together, reaching for his hair again, but somehow just ended up clutching at his shirt, ripping it slightly.

"..." I could barely catch my breath, let alone form a coherent sentence. I arched my back, and my legs quivered as the coil tightened- I was so close. I ground down on his hand as hard as could to get that delicious friction needed to push me over the edge. The pressure built higher and higher as he thrust faster and twisting his hand ever so slightly to the right. I clawed at his shirt, pulling him down on top of me, burying my head into his neck. I sunk my teeth into the junction of his neck as he curled his finger one last time, and I came with a violent burst of exquisite torturous ecstasy. The small sparks erupted in every molecule, rippling throughout my entire body, almost liquifying my bones.

I sucked in deep breaths; forcing air into my lungs. I still clung tightly to Tom, almost afraid to let go. Thoughts began to trickle in as my head cleared from the fog of lust and just wanting. Before I could give into my mutinous train of thought -of being mortified- Tom drew a long ragged breath. He looked pained, like pulling away from me was the hardest thing he ever had to do and was restraining himself.
He swallowed hard, removing his hand from my knickers- I couldn't help but blush even though it seemed utterly ridiculous. Not that anyone would be able to tell, I'm sure my face was red as a tomato. 

He leaned down again, and I thought he was going to kiss me, but instead, he just rested his forehead against mine. 

"God, I want to do that again. I want to taste your sweetness and breathe you into the very depths of my soul. I would give everything." 

"Even the world?", my voice a little shaky, from all the emotions coursing through my system. 

"If you want the world I will conquer it, then where would civilisation be when I lay it at your feet?" I shuddered and pushed him back so I could look into his eyes. He was serious. My heart was beating like a sledgehammer. I didn't know whether he was truly serious or just saying it in the heat of the moment. He held a dangerous intensity, and the thought of wielding him like a weapon was both thrilling and terrifying.

"Well that was one way to finish an argument", I thought a small joke to lighten the mood and veer this conversation into safer territory was appropriate. Besides all this material and Tom's body heat was making me hot and not in a pleasant way. 

"Yes, it was. I would provoke you more often if I get to do that afterwards", a rare genuine smile formed on his lips. He shifted off the bed and proffered a hand, which I hesitantly accepted. His fingers slipped to my wrist; his thumb circling my pulse point as he observed his earlier destruction.

"You're overthinking everything", his eyes which only moments ago held unspent desire, reverted to a coldness - he was expecting rejection? 

"That" I gestured to the bed, "complicates things-" then try to straighten out my skirts and fix my knickers which annoyingly will be damp for the rest of the day. 

"Is it so bad...to..to feel for me?", his tone was flat, but his face was a mask of hurt and fury. He turned at stormed off towards the door. 

"Wait!" He stops at the door but doesn't turn around. "Give me a little time to process this. I'm sorry", my chest ached, but I did need time. Him touching me like that was not what I had planned.
He fished around in a pocket for something, then chucked it over his shoulder. All I heard was the metallic clang as it bounced on the floor. My eyes darted around, trying to see where it went, I caught sight of it confused and looked up, but he was gone. I reached out briefly wondering if it was cursed- it is Tom after all.

Closer observation, it was a ring- I am such an arse. It was a reasonably close design to my mother's wedding band- two thin bands twisted together. He must have seen the photo album. We hadn't discussed my parents again, since the kiss. It was sweet and thoughtful- words I would typically never associate with Tom.

I slipped it on, it was silver or another metal, but I didn't care- it was perfect. I wiped my cheeks. I hadn't even realised that I had been crying. I most likely looked like a hot mess, but I didn't have time to fix myself; I was already so late to help with the preparations.

I ran out then remembered I hadn't closed the damn door- cursing I turned back to shut it. Running into a larger body than my own- for a split second, I hoped that it was Tom, but I looked up, and it was Mathais.

"Hermy-nee, are you unwell?", he went to reach up to touch my face, but I shifted back. I didn't feel comfortable with someone else touching me after I had shared an intimate moment with Tom. It felt wrong.

"I'm fine. I'm just on my way to your sister's so I can help divide the supplies, but I stupidly forgot to shut the door to the wagon", I tried to smile and laugh it was more a choked cough.

He looked dubious, I knew he didn't believe me, but he chose at that moment not to bring it up.

"I will escort you", I turned and walked quickly back up the stairs wanting to shut the door before he saw the absolute mess we left the wagon in. Unfortunately, he caught up taking the stairs in two giant steps.

"I can-" I started before he interrupted.

"What happened?", his eyes crinkled around the edges, a squint of sorts- I almost see the cogs in his mind turning.

"We just had an accident nothing to worry about", I hastily shut the door in his face, wanting to leave. Instead, he grabbed at the collar of my dress intending to prevent me from walking away. I slapped his hand, glaring and shrugged my shoulders to right my clothing.

"What is that?", he reached out again, but this time he went to touch my neck. "Did he lay his
hands on you? Ah..bruise?", he was talking so fast in French it took a few seconds for my brain to catch up.

My eyes widened, a hickey, he left a hickey on my neck! My sudden change in demeanour, caused him to interpret the worst-case scenario "Don't worry I sort it", before I could even get my brain into gear to respond he patted my head and walked off to find Tom. I couldn't help but think that confrontation will most likely end in murder or severe bodily harm.

Continued……

Later in the Day

"Her-minny are you ok?", I felt a weight on my shoulder and turned towards it. I looked into the concerned eyes of Malia. I honestly didn't spend all that much time with anyone else, other than her brother.

"Just thinking about Tom again", I stuffed a squash rather harshly into a cotton bag, it is a target for my frustration causing the seam to split. Unceremoniously, the parsnips and artichokes no longer constrained by their imprisonment rolled off the table onto the wooden floorboards. " Oh, for pe-", I went to bend down to pick them up, and a hand shot out gripping my forearm. I narrowed my eyes at Malia, annoyed.

"Have you talked to Tom", I huffed out a bitter laugh that was almost a sob and wrenched my limb out of her hold.

"Talked?...Have I talked to him? Yes, I have tried, but he is doing a remarkable job of imitating a brick wall", I scrubbed my forehead with the back of my hand.

"He is a stubborn man", I snorted, talk about an understatement. "You have feelings for him", my head snapped back, and I opened my mouth to respond but found I couldn't refute the assertion- because I did, unbidden, but they were there lurking.

"Was it that obvious?" she gave me a look, a surprisingly sculpted eyebrow rose- just daring me to repudiate the statement. Her eyes flicked to the ring currently residing on my finger.

"The pair of you are...asses", she wavered her hand like she was conjuring the word asses out of the molecules. The metal of her bangles jingling together rhythmically to the movement of her
"It's complicated...we have a history before all of this", dumping my arm full of vegetables on the table, I didn't move back and remained hugging them. I started playing with the mid-green leafy steam of a parsnip, rubbing the coarse, hairy leaf between the pads of my index finger and thumb. Some of the parsnips had an umbel of little pastel yellow coloured flowers, indicating a second growing season. I vaguely remembered that the parsnip was used as a sweetener before the arrival of cane sugar. I was avoiding having to continue my answer, by rattling off random details about parsnips... some Gryffindor I was.

My gaze drifted off the root vegetables and returned to Malia, and she was frowning with her arms crossed, looking every bit of a mother that she would be in seven or so months. Her chocolate eyes igniting for a fight. I sighed and slapped a butternut squash.

"He tried to hurt my friend Harry; he's...he's a menace to society. No one likes him, he's cold and threatening and has probably done some horrible things. You've seen how he is", how much could I really tell her? And Tom is not the most likeable person; everyone here at the encampment actively avoids him when they see him coming- however they tolerate him when they need something. Surprisingly, he doesn’t turn them away; I think he likes ‘teaching’ more so than he lets on.

"Has he hurt you?" I frowned at her dipping my head looking at my scuffed shoes- Tom had charmed them with a warming charm so my feet wouldn't get cold and my hand unconsciously flew to my neck. A smile tugged at my mouth- it was a kind gesture. I shook my head, unable to get the words past my lips, suddenly choked with emotion.

"Here" her hands move to her hair, she fiddled with something, and I could hear a faint sound of a small mechanism. In her hand, she proffered a skeleton key. It was on the larger side, a thick stem, the handle was four intersecting circles, grey metal with a gold or brass collar. She had a ribbon looped through the top ring and a plain brooch that looked like a coin attached.

"A key?" Malia smiled like she knew something about this key that I didn't.

"Not just any key Her-minny", Malia picked the key off her palm with her other hand carefully, so it was upright holding it by the stem. The hand it had been resting on held the handle, twisted it slightly and pulled removing it from the stem. My jaw dropped a hidden compartment.

"What does it contain?" my curiosity was piqued.

"Arsenic", my eyebrows rose even more surprised and a little shocked.

She secured the handle of the key back to the base and placed it in my hand. It felt like a dead weight.

"If Tom hurts you, you can rid of him", I looked at the key in my hand- so many possibilities. I
could kill Tom, and everything would be over; I would still be stuck here, however. But I couldn't. Nausea churned in my stomach, the inside of my oesophagus was being scorched from the agitated acid. It was a hard thought to swallow that after everything I couldn't kill him.

"I can't take this" it was barely a whisper. Malia touched my shoulder once again.

"It is an option you never know when you might need it. Now let's get this organised for Toulouse", after the key I felt in a daze like I was going through the motions. The mere presence of it on my person was revolting.

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**Tom POV**

I'm so furious and humiliated; I managed to keep it together until I get the edge of the property and let out a scream of frustration. I put myself out there *genuinely* not for some manipulation, and I get rejected again. But I wouldn't be me if I gave up now. I know she feels things for me; otherwise, she wouldn't have let me do *that*. I grip the fence hard, the feel of her...Salazar, I can still imagine it vividly. I wonder if she noticed I had never done that to a woman before? Usually, it was only ever about my pleasure- once I got what I wanted, it was over. I don't know why with her I want to put her first. Which is so unlike me because I know I'm a selfish fuck.

It was almost akin to torturing someone- watching her authentic, visceral reactions- the clawing, ripping, moaning and biting. I very much want to participate in that activity again. But when she orgasmed on my finger- at that moment I knew I was so completely gone, I will stalk her to very ends of the Earth just to be near her.

I won't be second place to Potter again. I won't.

"*Thomas!*" I rolled my eyes because the bane of my *new* existence has taken upon himself to prod me at every chance. If I didn't know that he liked Hermione so much, I would almost think that he was trying to get my attention.

I turn around and mould my face into an expression that I hoped resembled boredom.

"*Yes, Mathais?*" I folded my arms over my chest, standing defensively. His tone and body language indicated to me that this was going to be an aggressive encounter. What has surprised me the most about being thrust into this...place...was that I had adapted rather quickly to not using magic. Sure, I do small things that mostly pertain to basic hygiene for Hermione and me, but like this, my first thought wasn't what spell I would use, but how would I handle him physically.
"I saw the mark on Hermione and the wagon. You need to keep your hands off her", I frowned confused because I wasn't immediately sure what he was talking about. However, this is the first time he as explicitly told me not to touch my wife.

I take a step forward, he may be taller and broader, but size has never caused me to back down from a challenge before.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me!", he puffed out his chest like that was supposed to be intimidating. I scoffed and rolled my eyes, as an icy wind billowed my ripped shirt. His eyes widened as his gaze was transfixed on - oh the bite mark Hermione left when she sunk her teeth into my neck when she. I couldn't help the smug smile and a strange sense of accomplishment that washed over me- which I will analyse later.

"She does get rather ravenous when she is in the throes of passion" it wasn't exactly accurate, but he didn't need to know that. He spluttered- which wasn't a good look for him. His eyes skimmed the rest of me like he imagined he had x-ray vision to see if there was anything else that Hermione did. They rested on my hand, flicked back to my eyes and said, "I don't know what she sees in you". I cocked my head, weighing his words.

"That makes two of us."

He gave an indecipherable look, which was unusual for him because he usually was so easy to read. He turned silently and wandered back off in the general direction of the encampment. Maybe I should have gone into the grove of trees on the western side if I wanted to be left alone.

I leaned back against the fence and glanced around the countryside. It was...nice. I didn't want to contemplate my future, especially after last week. How embarrassing, such a show of weakness. I have never felt so out of control in all my life at that moment.

I puffed out a breath of air not wanting to continue down that train of thought. She has turned me into a sap. I want her to accept me for me, even the worst parts of me that lack humanity. She has me utterly be-spelled whether she realises it or not, with her innate goodness and purity — only her.

She is my light in my darkness. We are like two neutron stars spiralling closer and closer until our
inevitable collision. She is my star. She sates the rapacious beast like no one else before her with her sweet innocence and fierce determination.

If we get back, they will be in for a hell of a fight. I will fight for her- they will have to drag my cold dead body away to separate me from her.

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Hermione POV

For the rest of the day, we worked in comfortable silence as we packed and sorted supplies for the rest of the families for the journey to Toulouse. My eyes every other minute darting to the pocket that held the key.

The short walk back to the wagon I remained deep in thought, my gaze firmly on the frozen ground. Do I tell him or keep it a secret? I had calmed down marginally from the 'gift' given. I didn't have to use it; I could lose it or lock it in a drawer and never look at it again.

I look up to check I was going in the right direction and abruptly halt at the sight of Tom. He hadn't closed the shutters or drew the curtain across the window.

A sense of deja-vu washed over me, similar to last week only this time Tom was facing away from me-presumably doing a task at the stove. He moved fluidly- a sense of purpose, almost pre-determined. It was domestic and a little endearing.

It struck me like a punch to the gut the depth of my feelings for him. I brought my hand up and looked at the ring that now adorned my ring finger. I was trying to apply logic to a situation were logic couldn't and doesn't work like he said feelings were irrational and not logical. Most of the time, we were happy, would it be so bad to live in the moment instead of worrying about a future that we may never return too? Would Harry begrudge me for being happy? I would like to think he wouldn't.

I hesitantly opened the door and entered closing it behind me. Tom was indeed working at the stove, I gazed around the wagon, and everything looked like we hadn't been arguing this morning. He didn't lift his gaze, but I knew he knew I was there.

I rummaged around in my bag for the finished leather wand holster that I had made for him. Mathais dropped it off during the day- he completed the parts that I couldn't. I was also relieved
that he didn't appear to be injured in any way. However, he did give me a strange look and an off
the cuff comment about biting.

I edged closer to him, and he stilled, his posture tense he was eyeing me out of his periphery. He
was just as unsure as I was at this moment. We haven't spoken since we parted this morning.

"Tom?", he turned to face me now, but he gave nothing away to how he was feeling and I don't
blame him one bit for that.

"I see you have cleaned up after your paroxysm of frustration this morning", I was nervous my
heart was thumping in my chest I can feel it pounding it in my ears. He raised an eyebrow, and I
could see the amusement in his eyes. I sagged in relief he wasn't…- honestly, I have no idea what I
was expecting - his mind was a complex web of interweaving thoughts and ideas, constantly
changing and rearranging- an enigma.

"I...made this for you. I know that it's late, but I thought that it would be practical and not
frivolous", I held out the wand holster for him to take. He slowly inched forward, unsure- he
looked confused. Had he never received anything before?

"What is it?"

"It's a wand holster. I know that you don't really need it, but I thought that it would be useful...", I
watched him turn it over in his hands, flexing the leather and the testing the buckles. That I noticed
his left hand, specifically his ring finger- there sat a thin band of jet black shiny metal.

"No, I like it. Where does it go?"

I was struck dumb — my synapses where scrambled. I just stared at him instead of answering, it
was like some of the puzzle pieces connected, and I got a much better picture than only some
random parts. I reached out and touched it; I had to feel it.

"Thank you for the ring. And what have you done with my Tom?" I smiled, still running my finger
along the metal.

" Your Tom?" The huskiness of his voice tugged at a primal piece of me.
"Mine" I panted out as he lowered his mouth to mine. I cupped his cheek, and I opened, letting his tongue caress mine. It was gentle and tender.

He broke the kiss, picked up the wand flicked his wrist and music began playing out of thin air. He put both the wand and the holster down on the table and held his hand out.

"Care to dance Mrs Granger?"

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**Tom POV**

"Sure, but what are we dancing for?" she sounded perplexed but looked amused.

"Our first date", now she looked bewildered but recovered quickly.

"Are you going soft on me?", she brought her arms up around my neck and started playing the curls within her reach, while swaying to the music.

"I'm still the Dark Lord Hermione", she just snorted and replied, "No, you're just a big fuzzy teddy bear with fangs". My lips twitched with the urge to smile. She was smiling up at me, and I felt an acute stab of affection for this woman, my chest filled with a warm sensation.

I reach out and cup her cheek, rubbing my thumb in circles on her warm, smooth skin. I can see the freckles beneath her whiskey coloured eyes and across her button nose- a perfect little star-map-dotted on her slightly tanned skin from the sun. I want to think that I am the only person close enough to be entranced by those constellations.

My star.
Toulouse

Chapter Notes

As I promised. I split this chapter and the next one so you weren't waiting too long for the next update.

Harry POV Third

Present

Hermione had been a driving force in the trio since first year even if he and Ron didn't immediately acknowledge it. Hermione was rather a nosy little know it all back then after all.

But her persistent personality wiggled its way into their hearts with her unwavering loyalty. Harry felt that Hermione was the sister he never had. She was family and loved her as such. Watching Dumbledore fret over things was making him nervous but tried not to show as much.

"Do we need to do anything? Have you worked out what you need to bring them back?", he couldn't take this waiting any longer and felt as though it was driving him insane. While it hadn't been that long since Hermione got sucked in every minute counted as far as he was concerned.

The illustrious Headmaster, although he had to physically restrain himself from rolling his eyes over that thought- appeared to have finished jotting down instructions and ushering the other adults in the room to do whatever it was he needed them to do. Harry was frothing at the mouth, itching to do something anything to be involved in the retrieval of Hermione.

The pale blue eyes that once he held in reverence now, he just thought they were a little shifty from concealing too many secrets.

"No, Harry, your involvement is not needed, just be patient" and Dumbledore turned away once more, pouring over his notes.

He gritted his teeth, clenching them so hard that his jaw was aching and giving himself a headache. He sighed and yanked on his unruly hair in frustration, he swore if something didn't happen in the next ten minutes that he was going to....well, he wasn't sure what he would do, but he would do something god damn it!

As if his prayers were answered Tonks came running into the room with Remus hot on her heels, she spoke low and faster to Dumbledore, with her hands making frantic movements as if that would
help her speak faster. Whatever was happening made Dumbledore smile—however, to Harry, this
smile was not one he had ever seen from the former Headmaster; it made him look a little crazed.
That made Harry shift uncomfortably in his seat. This whole situation was on a knife’s edge—what
would Voldemort do once he was in this plane of existence once more? Kill everyone in a blaze of
glory? Or just solely focus on Dumbledore?

As much as he despised Voldemort or Tom for ruining his life, he never got the feeling that this
whole shitstorm was personal. Because of the prophecy, Tom felt at the time he needed to kill him
not necessarily because he wanted to. Harry had gathered from snippets of conversations and
viewing particular memories that Tom had initially ignored the prophecy—probably because
Trelawney was nuttier than a bag of nuts—that it wasn’t until Dumbledore made a fuss over the
‘vision’ that Tom took notice. That’s what has grated on my insides the most that half of this
rubbish could have been prevented if Dumbledore just kept quiet about it. He may still have his
parents or at least got to know them. He wasn’t naïve to completely believe that they would have
survived the first wizarding war, but he can’t help but think things would have been different. In all
honesty, what would have happened if everyone just ignored the blasted prophecy? He didn’t
remember much from the divination classes, but wasn’t its belief in the said prophecy that gave it
power? And since he doesn’t give a sod about divination shouldn’t that then negate some of its
magic? And then if Tom doesn’t give a hippogriff’s arse about it then wasn’t this all for naught?
Definitely food for thought and people thought he was dumb.

He was pulled from his reverie by his best friend Ron bumping his shoulder and shoving a plate
full of food into his hands—which he so wasn’t ready for; the sudden unexpected movement meant
that he fumbled with the plate nearly dropping it. He wanted to snap at Ron but knew that he was
helping in his own way. He tried to ask where the hell he managed to get a plate of food but
changed his mind because quite frankly he didn’t care.

Just as he was lifting a fork loaded with food to his awaiting mouth, Dumbledore’s voice prompted
the silverware to halt its approach, “Are you ready, Harry?” Harry shut his mouth, so he didn’t
look like a gaping fish gulping for air and flicked his eyes to meet Dumbledores. The man had a
hairy eyebrow raised in question waiting for a response. Harry placed his fork back on the edge of
the plate annoyed because he really was hungry after not eating much, or anything over the last two
days, and now it was causing his stomach to pinch painfully.

“Ready for what?” the older man gave him an indecipherable look.

“To get Hermione back, of course.”
Hermione POV

Two weeks later

Toulouse

Time.

Time was a fickle and slippery intangible thing.

Time.

I found myself getting pulled into the habit of counting time. By contemporary standards, the modern calendar is measured by the gravitational force of the Sun pulling Earth into a heliocentric orbit - which we know takes around 365.256 days or 52 weeks. However, being stuck here wherever here is, my peculiar habit is not measured in hours, minutes and seconds. But instead, the clinking of the glass jars as Tom rattles the table, the cauldron bubbling away and the sounds of the wagon or carriage wheels clanking against the stone.

This self-measured scale was how I passed the time while we departed onto the next town on our route to Greece. Being unaware for the most of what time of day it was- which was somewhat liberating. There was no rush to be somewhere other than setting up our stall for the day. Our travelling apothecary stall was particularly popular here in Toulouse, despite how gypsies are treated and represented. Tom’s natural charm and good looks still made the women of all classes swoon. We incorporated not just essential slaves and potions for medicinal purposes but also some beauty products. While Tom was loathing to help make these, they attracted a greater range of customers.

Such as this woman in front of us now. I couldn’t help the glare that was firmly fixed upon my features and the persistent and unwelcome undulation of jealousy that crested inside me. I am not unaccustomed to feelings of jealousy- yes, on reflection, I was jealous- like when Ron was dating Lavender Brown. But looking back it wasn’t entirely that emotion and not as most people assumed. So yes, jealousy is not unfamiliar, but I have never felt it so...fiercely, not until Tom Riddle walked into my life- and then suddenly I’m Glenn Close in Fatal Attraction. I chop the red mint tubular suckers vigorously making the glass vials tremble against each other on the table, in turn making Tom cast me a side glare. I stick my tongue out in return making his eye twitch. He dislikes me acting so childishly, but I know that in doing so I rile him up. He and a great many other’s back home claim that he is an emotionless monster, but I have discovered that he feels an extensive array of feelings- much to his chagrin. His possessiveness needs to be taken down a peg or two; however, while being Toms’ is thrilling; it also chafes rather harshly against my independent feminist nature. No one will own me. I will not be chained and held down by someone else’s desires. I am my own first and foremost.
Placing the sliced suckers off to the side and reaching for the dried fig leaves, I feel a distinctive heat seeping through my dress. The subtle scent of Tom enveloping me as he moulds himself to my body, it may sound cliché, but it amazes me how well we fit together. He uses one arm to pull me close and anchor me to him around my waist and the other gently brushing my braid out of the way exposing the sensitive skin of my neck. He runs his nose along my throat, taking a deep breath, humming as his bottom lip snaps- then latches on sucking. One thing I have discovered is Tom’s preference for biting- which I shouldn’t be surprised he seemed like the type to mark his territory. On the occasions he decides to dispense his affection, they take on an animalistic quality like it is coming from a primal place and the base needs are taking over temporarily. If we ever get to the stage of engaging in carnal activities, I shudder to think of the bestial attributes that will be unleashed.

“Mrs Granger, you know I hate that type of behaviour. But your jealousy is enticing”, I feel his tongue lick his lips against my neck. I very much want to feel his lips on mine. Since that morning of him exploring my wetted heat with his fingers, we haven’t done anything else, aside from a few closed-mouthed chastise kisses. I am grateful for him not pushing me, but by Godric, a girl can only take so much.

I don’t know if it is the jealousy fuelling my actions or just general frustration, but I twist in his grip and manage to push him back behind the tent, just wanting a smidgen of privacy- Tom and I are not the types of people that do public displays of affection. A gentle brush of our lips or an acquisitive grip of entwined fingers- but nothing like I feel like doing now. Once I get him right where I want him, I freeze, I was captivated by those cobalt orbs- that held amusement and the beginnings of lust.

We just stood there staring at each other, gazes locked- our world reduced to only the two of us. Under oath, I would have sworn that in these shared, minutes and seconds, that entire lifetimes have passed. It takes an inordinate about of time to summon the courage to draw his face close to mine. I had never realised until now how much bravery it takes to kiss someone, even someone who you know wants your mouth on theirs. Uncertainty will knock you off your feet every time.

His long fingers comb through my hair, and I’m soon gasping into his mouth, he grips onto my hair tightly, fisting my locks in a firm hold before tilting my head back to deepen our kiss further. He presses against me, pushing me against the rough brick next to our tent, bending down, so I don’t have to remain on my toes. I readily oblige him, opening my mouth to grant him entry and can’t help the pleasured moan that escapes my throat as his skilful tongue twines against my own, igniting my desire further still for this gorgeous dark creature.

I hear the rough brick snagging on the back of my dress as I grip his hips and feel him going stiff against me. We’re so close that we may as well have melted into one entity.

I find myself reaching for the waistband of his trousers, not sure what my plan was. In my nervousness, my fingers fumble with the buttons, unable to get a proper purchase to undo them. He stops me chuckling at my awkward eagerness. “Darling, not here how scandalous”. My response is
to reach for the offending buttons restricting my access.

He grabs both my hands halting their mission, “Now my little vixen a gentleman doesn’t remove his pants in public” I snorted at that declaration, Tom was far from a gentleman. “We need to put a pin in this; there will be people lining up at the stall as much as I would prefer indulging in a more pleasurable activity” Almost as he finished speaking the bell on the counter of our stall started ringing. I sighed. He left a lingering kiss on my forehead and walked back around the front. I let my head fall back against the brick, wondering what the hell was I thinking. Well, I wasn’t precisely; the fog of lust was obscuring rational thought. I was never so bold even with Draco in the room of requirement where no one else would see us. But there is something about being with Tom that just…I can relinquish control, or he will let me have it. I am under no illusion that it is him controlling everything, but he doesn’t force me. He treats me differently, and I like that.

I take a deep breath and square my shoulders and push off the wall time to return to do some work. As Tom suspected, there is a line up at our stall. I just put on a smile that I hope doesn't look too fake and throw myself in the job.

I am not sure how much time has passed but am relieved for the reprieve- so I can go back to the potion I was in the process of making earlier. Hopefully it isn't ruined by the wait. Over the last few days I have been tossing up whether I should mention the key- on the one hand, it would be practical to keep it a secret- for obvious reasons, but on the other hand, I don't want to have secrets between us.

“I have a confession”, I slip my hand into the pocket of my dress, grasping the cold metal of the skeleton key, never disconnecting my gaze from Tom’s.

“Ah the key”, he says with a sly smile.

“How did you…?” I frowned I don't recall leaving it out anywhere and thought I did a pretty good job of concealing it from him. He gives me a pointed look.

“Yes, how could I forget about your Vulcan mind-melding abilities”, I roll my eyes and slap the key down on the tabletop, then suddenly regret it because what if I broke something on the inside. He snorts a laugh, a desperate attempt to not laugh at my quip and mutters ‘Vulcan mind-melding’ under his breath and I wonder if he understands the reference.

“Don’t worry darling did you think you could hide it from me?” he isn’t looking at me when he says it, but I could tell that he was irritated by this development even though he already knew of the key's existence- I swear you can never win with Tom.
“Well….no, I just didn’t know how to bring something like that up….”, I frowned while watching what he was doing….how the hell…and why didn’t I think of that?! I stepped forward and grabbed his arm roughly pulling it back.

“What in Godric’s name are you doing?”, my voice was a little pitchy, and I cringed a little at that, but I was astounded.

Tom had a look of incredulity on his face that screamed ‘Is she crazy?’, if this weren’t bloody well important, I would have been momentarily offended by that- I am not stupid.

“Have you lost your mind, woman? It’s the basics of Gamp’s Law of Multiplication. How do you not know this?”, he gently pries my fingers off his sleeve and brings my hand up to his mouth to plant a soft kiss to my fingers.

“I just…god I feel stupid now…we wouldn’t have starved ourselves while on the run from you if I had just remembered that simple thing”, much of that hardship was lack of food and being able to find something edible in the forest.

“It’s over now don’t be too hard on yourself you had other things on your mind and need I remind you, that you also had Harry and the redhead with you. It wasn’t solely your responsibility to mother them, and they could have thought of it”, I scowled at that assessment but knew he was right. Watching him refill the jars of dried herbs, I don’t understand why it had taken me this long to notice.

"When we get back you are multiplying a whole heap of Curly Wurly's", he laughs deep and full of amusement.

“Ok my dear, I promise the first Curly Wurly I see I will multiply it”, I know now I could do it myself, but I just want to see Tom use his magic to multiply chocolate bars. It just seems so puerile.

“Does the multiplication affect the quality of the ingredient and in turn the potion?”, I couldn’t help asking, my brain now whirling with possibilities.

“No, not the dried herbs. I don’t recommend doing it with the speciality ingredients like fluxweed because it needs to be picked fresh under a full moon. That’s why there are still potion shops and not everyone doing this”

“I can’t imagine you walking into a potion shop to purchase anything, and I certainly can’t see professor Snape doing this” thinking back to the ample store cupboards that Snape had, there must have been every ingredient that you could imagine.
“I prefer to procure my ingredients, and then I know they are to my specifications. However, Severus did always have an eye for best, nothing subpar in his store cupboards” Isn’t that an understatement.

“You know Severus is a double agent” I blurt out, not sure exactly why I couldn’t hold my tongue. The dawning of realisation of what I just did comes over me. Oh god did I just put a death sentence on Snape?

“Mmm…yes he thought he was rather clever”, he smirked.

“But if you knew why did you let him continue?” What I really wanted to ask was, why did you let him live? I was half surprised, annoyed and frustrated that other than the Horcruxes we didn't seem to have been able to pull one over him.

"Because despite his treachery I rather like Severus. He was a breath of fresh air compared to those other bootlickers. He was honest, blunt. Not afraid to tell me something wasn't working. It was like he had a death wish, which I found to be particularly droll. Yes, I knew about his want for revenge for Lily Potter, just too bad he was focusing in the wrong direction.", the wistful look on his face was disturbing.

"Wrong direction…? Are you telling me you didn't kill Harry's parents?” I swear I could feel the world tilting under my feet.

"Mmmm…since you are not going to leave this alone. Yes, they were already dead when I entered the home. In hindsight I shouldn't have done it- but I was too arrogant. I don't go around indiscriminately killing Hermione”. He rolls his eyes at my unimpressed look. “Fine I do on occasion, but most of the time it serves a purpose. Otherwise, it just attracts too much attention” He waves his hand as if the killing was of no consequence which I guess to him it isn’t.

“Are you serious? You're not just saying that because of me?” I so badly wanted to jump on this revelation, but part of me was reluctant to let go to what we have been told for the past seven years.

“Yes. At the time it didn’t serve much purpose trying to prove something I couldn’t, after all who would have believed me?” the sincerity and conviction of what he spoke, was certainly swaying my original thought. I opened my mouth then abruptly shut it, not being able to decide what to say. My brain is struggling to process this enormous revelation.

“Darling, why don’t you go see Malia and take a break”, he kissed the crown of my head and pushed me out of the stall. I stumbled a little trying to get my footing; the physical stumbling was indeed an accurate representation of what was going on in my head.
I needed time to process this adumbration of immense magnitude; it changes things and brings about a voluminous amount of questions that I don’t even know where to begin to answer. I feel like I have been tipped upside down and shaken vigorously.

Practically, the last two decades have been about not only the stupid prophecy but also about that night—*the night* that Tom killed Lilly and James Potter. It is also rather confronting to know that some of what Tom has been saying since we ended up here was right, we are pawns on a chessboard. A sinister game playing with our lives. It makes me angry and quite frankly insulted. No, maybe *offended* would be the better word. I don’t like the thought of having someone making me do something either through force or manipulation— and that is exactly what this is an illusion of free will. It disgusts me. And a teeny part connected to my wounded pride finds it humiliating. That I could have been hoodwinked for this long and not even realise it.

When, yes, *when* we return home something tells me that this whole situation is going to blow up. I have had enough of being played around with like a doll, and it is clear to me now a little more of why Tom was—is the way he is and the choices he has made. Not that I agree with any of it. I could never condone that kind of behaviour. But I can see that he was in a position of not many choices and he chose the most violent and bloodthirsty option playing right into the hands of Dumbledore regardless of what he thought—pride and ego will prevent him from ever admitting that.

The afternoon is still chilly, but the sun is shining, and the freshness in the air is signalling spring. The mornings are always the most beautiful with the lavender beginning to sprout and other early spring bloomers still curled into themselves. The dew drops glimmering in the first morning rays, make the open fields look they have been dipped in glitter.

Toulouse is a cleaner city than Paris—although I’m sure the smaller population helps with that. We are set up along the Garonne River on the Prairie Des Filtres. I head towards the northern end of the embankment the Pont Le Nouf providing a link between opposing shores and the Basilique Notre Dame La Daurade a rather imposing building sitting on the opposite side of the river looming over the canal boats as they lazily float past.

I turn back and look at our little stall with the words *Apothicaire* carefully painted on a spare piece of lumber and nailed to one of the large posts, on either side of our table. It’s not pretty by any standards, but it does the job of advertising. The large strip of cloth hanging over our stall looks like a poor example of an umbrella or medieval tent from one of those Renaissance fairs.

With a small smile, I resume my aimless wander to weave around the local markets and get a better feel for the town. Only to be bumped into by a group of giggling children, I am nearly knocked off
my feet. I am briefly annoyed, but that quickly dissolves by the look of happiness on the children’s faces, only to see one of them run into the back of a man who looked vaguely familiar. I hazily recognise those jodhpurs, those scuffed boots….that bowler hat. Oh fuck! I was not one for cussing generally, but I think this circumstance allowed a slip of the tongue.

By some weird twist, the highwaymen have ended up in the same town at the same time. What are the chances? Perhaps not the most conspicuous but just going on pure adrenaline I spin on my heel and run. I try not to bump into anyone not wanting to cause a scene and draw attention to myself. But damn if my heart is not attempting to beat out of my chest.

As I draw closer to the stall, Tom looks up and notices my panic-stricken face. His eyes dart around me, trying to discern what has me in this state. I don’t stop and throw myself into his chest bowling us both over.

"They're here!" I gasp out as we collapse on to the ground behind the counter, hoping the lush green grass has broken his descent.

"Who… is here?" Tom asks slightly breathless from the sudden change in gravity and my weight pressing down on his chest. In any other circumstance, I would have been blushing profusely in this position, and I’m sure Tom would have made some innuendo.

"The highwaymen, from the forest in England. How the f-hell they managed to end up here in the same town at the same time is beyond coincidence". I whisper yell, even to my ears I could hear the panic begin to take hold in my voice. Get a grip, I tell myself.

“Darling calm down, panic is not conducive to rational thinking. Now as much as I love to have you sprawled over me, the ground isn’t comfortable”

“Right sorry” and I slip off to side resting against the shelving underneath the table.

“We should have just disposed of them when we had the chance,” he says as a matter of fact while brushing himself off and moving into a kneeling position.

I send a glare in his direction. “Murder is not my default setting Tom,” I say with an underlying sibilation to my words.
He hisses something under his breath, and it sounds a lot like parseltongue. I was momentarily distracted, entranced by the distinctive language that was smoother and more seductive coming seamlessly from Tom's mouth. Rather than Harry's harsh butchering of it. That was akin to nails on a chalkboard. Although I'm sure, he was cursing my moral compass.

I follow his lead and we both peak over the edge of the counter, we must look utterly ridiculous doing this. It is not too much longer before I spot the three highwaymen off in the distance, but they are heading in this direction.

“Do you see them?” I whisper to Tom; he nods his head once frowning in thought. I watch them intently- Ringleader now walks with a limp, Tobacco is scowling at everyone walking past and randomly lunging at a few who dare make eye contact- what a ponce and Pirate who surprisingly hasn’t lost his tricorn or his cutlass. Machete didn’t make it, and I can’t say that I feel remorse for that. We sink back down behind the counter, and I know I was thinking of ways to remain concealed until the highwaymen moved on or even more drastic confronting them head-on. Tom must have sensed or caught the tail end of that thought.

He gripped my forearm painfully, pulling me close to him. "Don't go do anything stupid", indignation rose in me, furious that he would say such a thing. I opened my mouth to reply with some snark but was cut off by Tom squeezing my arm even tighter and covering my mouth with his other hand. Angrily I nipped at his fingers, letting him know that I do not appreciate being silenced like a toddler.

"Ouch! Did you have to do that?", he whispered, but in no way did it mitigate the incensed undercurrent of his words. While we were busy riling each other up, we failed to notice the shadow slowing blocking off the sunlight above us. It wasn't until the audible creaking of the timber that out of my periphery I caught the movement of a large male hand curling his fingers around the edge of the tabletop.

"Well well well, what do we have here?", the smugness coating his words was thick like tar. I jerked almost unconsciously wanting to stand up and punch him in the face; the only thing stopping me was that Tom still had a firm grip on my arm. Right, I wasn’t to do anything stupid.

Tom decided to stand rather than be looked down upon by this thief. He eased me up slowly, never relenting on the pressure on my arm. I am going to have a bruise tomorrow.

The glint of metal in the sunlight catches my attention. My eyes dart to the source and realise that Ringleader was discretely pointing a gun in my direction, most likely thinking it would subdue Tom, or at least make us think twice about doing something rash.

"Come along. We don't need prying eyes for this", Ringleader's voice was gravelly- I wouldn't
have been surprised if he heavily smoked cigars. I don't remember paying too much attention to his voice last time as he had almost his entire face covered with a cloth. Distracted by this irrational thought I missed Tobacco sidle up behind me and feel of the nuzzle of his pistol pressed painfully into my flank; the layers of clothing doing nothing to dull the effect. I was irritated that I wasn’t paying as much attention as I should have, not that it would have made any difference one way or the other. I still would have ended up with two guns pointed in my direction.

I relax in Tom’s hold, and he finally loosens his grip noticing my muscles going limp. They usher us out, Ringleader leading the way with Tobacco still leering at my side and Pirate at the rear. They lead us south of the markets to the other bridge Pont Saint Michel, right where it connected to the shore there was minimal land and thus a quiet spot. Great, just our luck possibly dying under the bridge then having our bodies dumped into the river. Just how I wanted to die.

I was flippant with my thoughts, and this started to fall in the realm of what Tom called 'doing something stupid', so I decided to do something ‘stupid’. Tom had completely let go of my arm along the way- I had a feeling he was trying to be prepared for every eventuality. That was all well and good, but we had no weapons, and I was a woman with virtually no fighting skill. I was well aware of being the weak link, but that didn’t mean we couldn’t manage as we had last time by being spontaneous and creative. Tom was quick on his feet and was able to think just as fast, and that played in our favour.

I slowed my pace a little, wanting Pirate to end up next to Tom- Tobacco nudged me to walk faster, but I just gave him a nasty look that made him chuckle, he didn’t see me as a threat. The rough path if you could even call it that narrowed, and I saw this as my chance. I purposely bumped into Tom sending him into Pirate, who fell forward not sideways as I wanted into the river. However, Pirate in all his lanky ungracefulness managed to knock the back of Ringleader’s knees causing him to fall to the ground, simultaneously dropping the pistol from his hand and watching it skid off the side down into the water. Tobacco decides that going after Tom would be the way to go, but I purposefully step in front of him as he moves forward. His full weight slams into me; I almost have no time to register this fact until I hit the ground knocking the breath right out of me. Tobacco lands on top of me mere seconds later, causing my head to hit the ground and I can feel the instant the gash splits open. I push off and roll over, so I am not breathing in the dusty ground. In his scramble to try to get to Tom and untangle our legs he kicks me viciously in the stomach, I curl inwards trying to catch my breath. I look up and watch as Tom brings down Pirates own cutlass on his person killing him swiftly, it was quick, decisive and ruthless. Then is instantly on Ringleader.

Tobacco is clawing and the ground to make his way to Ringleader and then stops remembering he has his pistol. My almost non-existent breath hitches. This is going to hurt. I scramble feeling disoriented but manage to stand then throw myself on top of Tobacco, grabbing his head and slamming it into the ground as hard as I could muster. You could hear the sickening crack of bone and the crumpling of cartilage. He howls like a wild animal, with blood gushing from his broken nose. He twists underneath me and, in his rage, and frustration, he takes a mindless swat in my direction- with the hand holding the pistol. I try to duck but was not fast enough, and he clips me across the face. I grab at his arm and try to wrestle the pistol away from him and then there is a deafening bang.
I don’t immediately register the pain. The first thing I notice is the smell and taste of gunpowder in the air. My ears are ringing. I can’t hear anything externally; all I can feel is the pounding of my pulse inside my skull. I am working on pure instinct, knowing that I have to keep going. I kick, claw, bite anything to distract or get the gun away from him.

Time was moving slowly or felt like it was going in slow motion. Soon enough, Tobacco was yanked backwards from me, and then suddenly, the cutlass was thrust right through his torso. I watched as the life drained from his eyes. His face heavily bruised from where I smashed his face into the ground and heavily caked with dried blood and dirt. I tracked a small droplet of blood as it dribbled from the corner of his mouth down his chin and fell onto the dusty ground. Tom pulled the cutlass out and with one final expelling of breath Tobacco slumped and with a heavy thud hit the ground.

I looked at Tom who was sweaty and dirty and his white shirt splattered with garish red splotches. He threw the cutlass off to the side carelessly and kneeled in front of me, cupping my face with both his hands and kissing me fiercely.

“You silly girl. Don’t do that again”, he turned my face to get a better look at the gash on my forehead. Fuck, my arm hurt. His eyes immediately went to my arm and gently lifted it to inspect the wound.

“You’ve been shot”, I could see his face trying to conceal his panic. “Just keep your hand on it, darling, until we get back to the wagon, ok?” he placed his hand over mine, and I watched with some detachment him pressing our joined hands over my wound. Seconds later I could see the blood making its way in between the gaps and running down our fingers, then hands and wrists. Tom removes his hand from mine, and then my hand slips down- I feel so exhausted. My head aching like it is trapped in a vice that is slowly being tightened.

“Come on, Hermione, you just need to keep your hand there”, I try to focus and concentrate on what I must do because Tom is asking me to do it. He shifts and hooks an arm under my legs and lifts me against him in a bridal style hold. My head swims, and I feel myself begin to sweat. I am aware enough to know that I am probably going into shock.

I don’t remember much of the walk back to the stall then the wagon, other than a few frantic whispers from Malia and Tom yelling at them to go away. Suddenly, I find myself being placed on our bed; my head again feels like I’ve been dunked in water- the pain in my arm much more acute now. My breathing is shallow like I can’t get enough air in my lungs.

Tom is crouched down next to the bed, gripping my chin and turning my head to face him. “Breathe, sweetheart. When you wake up, you’ll be fine” the tug of unconsciousness too strong to deny.
Chapter Notes

A/n: Another chapter for all you lovely people. This is more of a transition/informative chapter as we are edging closer to them returning to the present time and to settle down from the last chapter’s excitement. Just a reminder that this is naturally an Alternative Universe, somethings will remain canon, somethings will be canon but twisted to suit the story, and other things will be entirely made up. So I don’t want message/comments etc complaining about canon facts not being correct in this chapter as I have touched on the prophecy and Voldemort’s ability for unsupported flight. There isn’t much on the flight aspect, so I mixed the film and book elements and added my explanation for how I think it would be done. Thanks, and Enjoy!

Sorry for any mistakes, I am practically falling asleep at the keyboard to get this out.

Seven months later

"Ok...that's it I've had it with the staring Tom!", I huffed as I slammed down my book on the table. I was sitting by the window enjoying the summer sunshine, while Tom was also reading but lounging on the bed. Although, he wasn't really reading just sneaking looks in my direction which turned into full, unabashed stalkerish staring. I know getting shot freaked him out- not that he ever said it out loud, but I knew. Because I felt the same way, it certainly put a few things in perspective and other things I just blatantlly tossed out the window.

In hindsight, I made a similar move after being tortured by Bellatrix, but it wasn't quite the same....? I had accepted death in those moments- fully expecting not to make it. This was unexpected; Tom and I have somewhat made a life here. Together. The thought of one of us suddenly being yanked away is-was jarring. I have relented because if the shoe was on the other foot, I'm not sure how I would have reacted. But now it was just getting annoying.

"Could you go do something else you're not even reading!" I pleaded with him; I just needed a bit of breathing space from his persistent hovering.

"I'm r-", I picked up a pencil and hurled it at him. He sat up, trying to dodge the projectile; it clattered against the wooden slats on the wall next to the bed.
"Don't even bother finishing that sentence, the book is upside down", I rolled my eyes unimpressed. "What is going on? You've been weird for a while now" He frowned at the 'weird' comment but seemed to concede that point. He looked down at the offending book that gave away his rouse while considering his answer.

His eyes glittered with an emotion that I couldn't place. "I was just trying to imagine life without you in it". I blinked rapidly and looked away. I wasn't sure if that was good or bad- and I didn't know if I wanted to know the answer.

"..." I went to say something but couldn't find the words to express my confused feelings. I knew I felt something more for Tom, that I have been actively denying for a while, not letting myself think too deeply on them. But letting Tom know that or even saying it out loud was...unthinkable. This was the man that had mixed feelings on love.

Either through saving himself or me from continuing on this heavy conversation, he switched topics abruptly.

"I can't swim" I did a double-take. How could he have not mentioned this earlier? Anger bubbled inside me- the river, the channel crossing!

I stood up, suddenly knocking the chair over I was sitting in.

"What! Are you stupid? We crossed the bloody English Channel, and you tell me now you can't swim!" Well, my mind was sufficiently off the love topic and focused solely on his brief dalliance with insanity. "All it could have taken was one rogue wave, and the ship could have capsized. You would have been the Jack to my Rose. A few wooden slats, rusty nails and a bucket was all that was between us and the frigid water....how can you not swim?" I screeched out; I was getting worked up, and half my brain was telling the other half to calm down because I was overreacting.

"One" he held his fist in the air and started checking off each point "- he could have fitted on that door with her, and we both know it" I snorted in amusement. Then I narrowed my eyes when did he watch Titanic? "Two- do you think the orphanage would have taught us how to swim?" Ok, he had me there, I hadn't thought about that. "and three- we are and were fine. Why was I going to broadcast a weakness to someone I barely knew". I tried to stifle my agitation at that last point and focused on the orphanage.

"Well that's just negligent; learning to swim is an important life skill for any child. And when exactly did the great Lord Voldemort watch Titanic?" I crossed my arms, not letting this go unanswered. I was highly curious.

He groaned loudly, not wanting to answer. "Narcissa dragged me along to watch". I wasn't
expecting that.

"Mrs Malfoy? But isn't she?" I waved my hand for him to finish my thought.

"A bigot? Hating all things muggle? She caught me one night watching a movie, *Highlander*, if you must know, so we agreed- she wouldn't mention this if I didn't mention her erotic romance novels hidden in a false wall behind the portrait of Cassius Malfoy next to her study." I couldn't contain my laughter- *it was just so ridiculous.*

"Are you quite finished?"

"Sorry", I had the prickling of tears forming in the corners of my eyes because I was laughing so hard. "It's just so surreal".

"Everything is not always as it seems, you should know that by now my dear" And I did. It was a sobering thought- thinking back to the revelation about Harry's parents and well *everything*. "Come here", He held his hand out, and I hesitated for a second. Then I linked our fingers twining them together. I always enjoyed either at night or in the morning while lying in bed just playing with his fingers. It wasn't sexual, but there was something so *intimate* about the simple contact that superseded the sexual component.

He offered a brief smile revealing an alluring hint of his perfect white top row of teeth- he has a crooked bottom tooth which he is embarrassed about. But to me, it just makes him more *real*. They teased his bottom lip, drawing my attention to his full masculine mouth.

"Do you know what you need?" he tugged me into his lap and I settled in moulding my body to his in a well-practised movement.

"A stiff drink and time machine?" he chuckled, and I could feel his chest rumble against my arm.

"No, my dear. While a time machine would certainly be handy, I am out of those and a stiff drink I could offer, but there is only that brackish swill they call whiskey. I was thinking of something a little more *stimulating*. He drawled the word out, and it made it sound so empathically filthy; a shiver crawled up my spine at the implication. I swallowed thickly as he nuzzled his face into my neck. Then an idea popped into my head.

"Oh! I could teach you how to swim" I knew he would hate the idea.
"No-"

"Yes! and you could teach me that flying thing you do with the black smoke", I was practically bursting with excitement and anticipation of learning something new.

"Hermione, dear, while I would love to teach you that. The reality of our situation thus far is that we will not have access to our magic in the fullest capacity" Sometimes I forgot that I didn't have magic- I was virtually living as a muggle. Tom had to do everything. That being said, he was growing stronger, small increments but progress. Whereas, I hadn't managed anything. I could still feel it buzzing underneath my skin, pushing at the seams that didn't want to give.

"Ok, I sense you already had an idea?" frustration heavy in my words.

"Duelling" he wants to duel?

"How can I duel when I have no magic or wand?" I didn't understand where he was going with this. He gave me a knowing smile as he rubbed circles on my lower back. I sensed a lecture coming on.

He tutted before continuing onwards. "We are not going to duel my dear, but I would like you to be prepared in case we make it back" I remained silent and waited. " I care for you. I don't think that is much of a secret. However, I would be most displeased if something were to happen to you. Again.", a small burst of exhilaration erupted inside my chest, and I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face. "Which is why I want to do this. I didn't get as good as I am solely through power alone. I practised regularly. I am assuming that in your time at Hogwarts a duelling club is not something Dumbledore allowed?"

"In second year we did have a bit of an introduction, but then it was scrapped. Silly really now that I think about it, we were on the verge of war but had no practical experience", he squeezed my hip painfully, getting my attention.

His eyes were blazing, almost as if they were backlit. "Which reminds me what the hell were you thinking in the Department of Mysteries? Bloody 14 year old's fighting grown wizards? Yes, even in my anger at losing that damn prophecy I was surprised that you were bull-headed enough to engage my Death Eaters".

I hopped off his lap and stood by the edge of the bed, my ire rising with each word spoken. "Of
course we had too! We couldn't let you have the prophecy! And we went there under the pretence of saving Sirius."

"And why was that?" I didn't know which part he was referring, so I ignored the question.

"You knew that Harry would go to the ministry, but I don't understand why? To kidnap him?" I frowned concentrating hard on trying to piece together the pieces of information, and I felt insulted that he would again underestimate me.

He rolls his eyes and sighs. "Hermione, I'm not underestimating your abilities."

"Ugh, stop reading my mind!" I snapped.

He stood up his earlier fury returning, but I was not scared of Tom anymore. I held my ground and levelled him with a pretty fierce glare, I thought.

"You projected that thought loud and clear. There's a difference between knowing and doing, my dear" condescending ass.

I snorted at that. "I thought we did ok..." Initially, that is, but my pride would never allow me to admit that out loud. He narrowed his eyes a maelstrom of emotions swirling in them, making them look like those large storm systems you can see from space.

"Really Hermione, is that why you have that scar from Dolohov across your chest? I can sense the dark magic seeping out of it. You're damn lucky, and you know it; otherwise, you would have died in the bowels of the ministry". He poked my shoulder where the edge of the scar sits. He must have seen it while undressing me when I was unconscious.

"You can't talk, Tom with an ego the size of yours-"

"Don't give me that, Hermione. You want to talk about my overconfidence; your classmates have a ridiculously inflated sense of invulnerability. My death eaters could have easily killed you".

"We stopped them from getting what they came for so I would call that a win for us!"
"A win? Are you saying a bunch of unskilled teenagers are better than the Order of the Phoenix? As I recall the order where defeated by my underlings and Sirius perished. You were playing a dangerous game that you couldn't necessarily win" I scowled knowing he was right and that I couldn't say we were better duellers than seasoned Aurors. So, I decided to hit him where it hurts. I was petty.

"Yes, then Dumbledore showed up and bested you" I crossed my arms, I needed to knock him off his high handed perch and come back to reality.

"You keep playing his game which is why you've never beaten him. You are a frighteningly intelligent man Tom, but you can be just as obtuse. Your hubris thwarts you time and time again. He is always one step ahead because your arrogance makes you predictable".

"Can you be a little less honest and a little more tactful?" I raised an eyebrow at his attempt to brush the truth off. "He had the elder wand. I most likely wouldn't have beaten him, and besides I had just unintentionally revealed myself, which wasn't my plan".

"Exactly, I think I just proved my point, Tom. You keep falling into that same trap time and time again" he looked at me, a stoic expression settled upon his face once more.

"I know Hermione. I see that now, my mind is clear. But I think I am at somewhat an advantage" he was looking at me with a calculating gleam. I never liked that look. Planning. Plotting. Scheming.

"How is being stuck here an advantage?", he crowded me, pushing his body firmly against mine. One hand snaked around the back of my neck, cupping it steadfastly. The other crooked the index finger and tilted my chin up and with an excruciatingly slow pace leaned in.

"Because I have you", my heart leapt in my chest as his lips tenderly brushed mine. I couldn't help chasing his mouth with mine making him laugh. I felt my face burn, and I stomped on his foot.

"Stop playing Tom".

"Whose playing Hermione?" he met my lips again and teasingly pried them apart with his tongue. The kiss was demanding, arrantly deep and more sensual then I could ever imagine Tom being. It was an exploration of my mouth that had my knees buckling, the intensity of it left me breathless. It exuded more passion than all the kisses we had shared so far. It should have worried me, feeling this, feeling him. He was perfection in a twisted façade. Something about him had burrowed deep inside, that would be absolutely gut-wrenching to rip out. I don't know how I could ever walk away
from him now, and that was terrifying. I had tried to remember all the acts of moral turpitude,-
horrifying lacking in humanity the callousness and narcissism. But my brain refused to go down
that road and only decided to indulge in his acts of protectiveness, attentiveness, intelligence and
the feeling of luxuriating in the sybaritic pleasure he bestows upon my body.

With one last sweep of his tongue, he releases my mouth, and I suck in a shaky breath. "What were
we talking about?" I tried to get this conversation back on track, but my body was not entirely on
board with that. I wanted more. I wanted to take that last step and connect our bodies with not only
our tongues and hands.

"My advantage" he whispers and then with the tip of his tongue he traced the shell of my ear.

"Right advantage- me... how am I an advantage?" I try to push him away so I could clear the fog of
lust clouding my head. But his next words snapped me out of it reasonably quickly.

"Because you are mine-"

"-I am not a possession!-"

"-Not in the mercantile sense-"

"-Bellatrix 2.0-"

"-an equal partnership-"

"one of your minions-"

"you're not even listening-"

"I am worth more than that-"

"Hermione"
"I won't roll over and be a lap dog-"

"Hermione"

"some trophy to show off."

"HERMIONE!"

"..."

"Would you let me get a word in woman?" I blushed heavily in embarrassment and a little residual righteous indignation.

"As I was saying before I was rudely interrupted, that I value your worth- as an equal. You balance me, and we work well together as a partnership. I think that when we return home we would be a formidable combined force", I was a little speechless, he saw me as an equal? We haven't spoken about going home; it has been an easy topic to avoid. The longer and more comfortable we have gotten here, it is starting to seem like an abstract idea than a potential reality. In all honesty I had thought if we ever did return and Tom was reacquainted with his minions that he would drop our relationship instantly. It would hurt, but it's almost impossible to imagine our relationship surviving upon returning- there's just so much history back home that is hard to ignore.

"Yes", his eyes were sparkling and wore a self-satisfied devilish smile. "that is why we have a certain advantage. Dumbledore continues to underestimate me; he won't see this happening" that seed of self-doubt is beginning to sprout.

"Am I just a propaganda tool for you? A way to stick it to Dumbledore?" I thumped his chest to make my point, and I was preparing for the worst.

He went deathly still, and I panicked trying to jerk out of his hold, but he latched on tighter.

"I wanted you the moment that I saw you in the forest. I have told you that you best be prepared for
the long haul, so you better start believing it, my dear. I will never let you go. I will protect you
even if that means killing and I will have no remorse over extinguishing their life” he runs his
knuckles over my cheek; his eyes boring holes into mine- *unalteringly intrusive*. He releases me,
and I hate to feeling of his warmth disappearing, making me feel cold. My tongue was stuck to the
roof of my mouth unable to form a response. It was another raw confession, and it felt sincere.

I clear my throat as I watch him sit back down on the bed, fiddling with the corner of the book,
before pressing forward. "Since one of you cannot live while the other survives or such nonsense;
how did you know that it was Harry and not Neville Longbottom?” I had always wondered why he
chose the Potter's first since it could have been either Harry or Neville. Was it just a toss-up and kill
both? Or a carefully made decision?

"Both fit the initial description, and it just happened that I found the Potter's first. If nothing
happened at the Potter's I would have gone on to the Longbottom's as well" he shrugged as if it was
a forgone conclusion and that irritated me - the nonchalance of killing. But I held my tongue
because I knew this about Tom. "However, now I realise that I self-fulfilled the prophecy. That
being said it should be null and void at least in theory because I understand the power sacrificial
power of love that protects Harry and I don't need to kill Potter any longer", while I felt relieved
that the prophecy is possibly broken and Harry now safe; a stab of anger towards Dumbledore
resurfaced. If he had just kept his mouth shut Harry wouldn't have lost his parents *possibly*, and
Neville wouldn't have either- *well that was a toss-up.*

"The Longbottom's... You know that they were tortured into insanity after you disappeared?” I
wasn't sure what I was asking, but with his extensive knowledge of magic, maybe he could help.

"I am aware of their...*condition*"

"In your research is there a way to help them?” a small smile curled at the edges of his lips. "Don't
tell me you know the answer to that as well? Is there anything you don't know?”

"While I would like to claim I have all the answers, my little star, I don't. That being said if and this
is a big *if*. If the Longbottom's where proficient at occlumency, well more than proficient, they
could have theoretically retreated behind their shields and whatever is left of the mind is what you
see now-scrambled by the curse. That is also if they were able to hold onto those shields long enough through the consistent cursing".

"But their minds are broken; it's been eighteen years".

"Yes, they are broken. But, it could be pieced back together. I think that because what's on display for the world is a blubbery mess, that fractured part hasn't been able to communicate effectively to let the core know that it can lower the walls. Because of that, they remain trapped in their own mind" I stared at him a little in awe.

"You have thought about it?" he cocked his head to the side.

"How could I not? Bellatrix wouldn't stop going on about it in her annoyingly high pitched voice. I think she must have rejoiced every day for a year after I returned. What surprises me is that Dumbledore would have known that and hasn't done anything about it. He is a proficient legilimens to at least try to breech the Longbottom's shield or find someone who can".

"Is it not common knowledge?"

"Not exactly" he reaches out again to pull me in between his legs. "Now, enough of that. Duelling, when I couldn't use magic, I use to practice the wand movements in drill sets so that I would know them by muscle memory and on instinct. I want you to do that, so when you get your wand and magic back, I know you will be a prolific dueller. I want you to be able to defend yourself properly." I glowered a little but didn't say anything because DADA was my weakest part of my magical education. "We can start this afternoon after you have finished your essay- don't think I haven't forgotten about it" I groaned, not because I didn't want to do it, but because I had about a million other things on my list to get done today. I felt his hands edging the hem of my dress up, skimming the skin of my bare legs.

"If you can't show me, can you tell me how you do it? Ever since I saw your Death Eater's doing it, I've been curious. I researched, but I couldn't find anything anywhere, and no one else has an idea how you do it" he flashed me a fatally charming smile reminding me what a predator this man was. What doesn't kill him had better run pretty darn fast when he comes back into his full powers. I realise now that with his sanity back, he will be a force to be reckoned with- not that he wasn't before.

He watched my face as he put a sticking charm on my dress to hold it up so he could run his hands
up and down my thighs unencumbered. I tried to keep eye contact, but it was hard to do with my
heart rate increasing and a tightening in my stomach.

"I created it, so no one on your side will be able to tell you how to do it except Severus, and it
seems he hasn't divulged that piece of magic to anyone else", he became focused on tugging down
my knickers, which I quickly tried to swat away his hands.

"Well?" I really wanted to know while I could still think straight; his hands on my body is
distracting.

"A multilayered piece of magic that combines a modified apparation, a stripped-back levitation
spell and something I created that manipulates the air molecules in the area surrounding the witch
or wizard, thus giving unsupported flight". His intelligence I found was such a turn on.

Before I could answer and push away his wandering hands, distant yelling, a shriek and a scream-
the kind that makes the hair on the back of your neck stand on end, pierced the air in the
encampment. Tom’s hands stilled, his eyes flicked to mine, and all traces of arousal had dissipated.
We both waited and listened as the sounds of running feet approached our wagon. Footsteps
hurried up the wooden steps, making the wagon sway a little and then proceeded to pound the
door.

“Herminny, come! Help!” it was Mathais, and his shaky voice spurred us into action. Tom stood
up and yanked my dress skirt down so hard that it nearly split the seams and I lurched sideways
from his roughness. He pushed me off and strode over to the door but turned before he opened it. I
frowned wondering what he was waiting for; then I noted my knickers on the floor beside my feet.
I swooped down quickly to get them as Tom opened the door.

Mathais didn't even take any notice of Tom and barged in looking distressed- his face was ruddy
and eyes bloodshot.

A sense of dread curled in my chest and dropped into my stomach like a lead balloon.

"Malia, she needs help...in childbirth."
A/N: This was a tough chapter to write, so I hope you don’t judge too harshly. But it is a long one!

Trigger warning of childbirth, just in case anyone has had a traumatic experience with it. Sorry for any mistakes I missed!

My eyes widen, and I sensed there was a lot more to this than he was letting on. I discretely bunched my knickers in one hand and swiftly moved around locating my bag. I promptly stuffed them in the deep recess, hopefully unnoticed. I yanked the top drawer to our chest open and picked out vials of what I thought she would need. Mathais's agitation was creating a tense atmosphere, and I found my hands trembling. A couple of times, the glass slipped through my fingers as I tried to lift them from the drawer, making them harshly clink together.

I felt Tom's hands cover mine stilling them. "Take a deep breath, Hermione, you're panicking unnecessarily. You won't be able to help if your mind is not clear". I relaxed slightly in his arms, taking a deep calming breath. He was right; I just needed to assess the situation, then work out what to do. It was simple, and it was the logical course of action.

I squeezed my eyes shut, taking another breath to calm my thoughts, but I couldn't stop the intermittent tremors in my hands. My magic was going haywire underneath my skin, rolling and pushing against that invisible barrier containing it.

"Herminny", Mathais' voice sounding hopelessly desperate again drew me back to the present. I pulled everything into my bag mentally checking off my list, but knowing if I needed anything Tom would be there and the wagon was only seconds away.

Following Malia's pregnancy, I had been reading a couple of biology textbooks I had kept with me during Hogwarts. At first, I was amazed and still am at magic, but I was stunned at their lack of health education. It is absurd having a school filled with mostly a bunch of teenagers and not having a health education class. There where a few girls I remember who panicked when they got their periods and were confused about their bodily functions. I was lucky, having very health conscience parents.

However, reading about topics in textbooks is one thing but suddenly turning it into a practical
experience is daunting. Tom's words from earlier echoed in my mind, *'there's a difference between knowing and doing'* I was certainly feeling the full weight of those words upon my shoulders.

Approaching the steps of Malia's wagon, I could hear the commotion inside- women crying, groaning sounds and a host of mixed and rapid languages being shoehorned together in distress.

I ignore Mathais and Tom. I didn't want to question and doubt; I needed to focus. I gently pushed open the door almost afraid, this wasn't just some random person- this was my friend, and an image of Ron flashed in my mind when I accidentally splinched him after we were nearly caught by Yaxley. I still felt guilty over that.

I take in the chaos that is in front of me- first and foremost, there are bloodied towels and torn cloth strewn around the floor. Malia is not on a bed but a table instead, propped up by pillows. I am assuming for ease of movement around her rather than the awkwardness on the wagons bed positions. The women have surrounded her so I can't make much out from my place in the doorway. I feel like I am intruding on a private moment and in some respects, I am.

Malia's mother in law spots me and ushers me over. My first impression of her is that she is pale and looks tired. Silent tears are flowing freely down her cheeks. I hesitantly step over the bloodied cloth and clutch my bag strap tighter, the magnitude of what is happening starts to dawn on me. Something must be very wrong. She says something to one of the women next to her, and they move a little further down to make room for me. I pause, and my eyes go wide when Malia is revealed. Her hair is matted and damp from sweat; it clings to her forehead and cheeks. She is pale, almost ghost-like, and that worries me. I turn my head and look down at her canted legs, the midwife wiping more blood seeping from between her legs, smears it on her inner thigh, and I swallow down the lump in my throat. She had her eyes closed, and her breathing was erratic- we were losing her.

"Is she?... Is the baby?" was all I could manage.

"*She still birthing. I am not sure about the little one, if she is too tired to push*", she replied in quiet French. My mind went to the potions in my bag, perhaps a *pepper up* and a blood replenishing potion may give her enough strength to get the baby into a position where we could assist in helping the baby out of the birth canal. It was an unspoken agreement that Malia was haemorrhaging internally. I had read that it can be caused by the placenta pulling away from the uterus. I knew that this and infection where the two leading causes of women in childbirth to die up until the turn of the 20th Century when belief in modern medicine started to take flight rather than prolonged ignorance by men in the medical field. This makes me want to keep my legs closed and never have children.

I didn't know how to help Malia- how to stop the bleeding internally. *Maybe Tom could*... A
pronounced groan interrupted my thoughts on trying to figure out how to save her. She blinked sluggishly, and her head lolled to the side. Her eyes were a little glassy, but she was still lucid.

"Hermin -"

"Shh... Save your strength" I brushed her hair out of her face and reached for a clean piece of cloth to wipe the sweat from her brow. "We're going to help you, ok?" She groaned in pain again, and I decided to give her the potions. I clutched the potions and got her mother in law to tilt her head up so I could pour them down her throat without choking her. I massaged her neck, assisting the foul-tasting liquid to go down easier.

"I know it tastes horrible" I spoke in clumsy French, my stress was making it challenging to think bilingually.

Her hand reaches up and grasps my forearm, another contraction squeezes her stomach, and she digs in her blunt fingernails into my skin. It hurts, but I don't try to remove her hand- I want to give her a pain potion, but I fear that if she is unable to feel the contractions that she will relax and let go much quicker.

One of the women standing at the end of the table is talking in a jumble of languages her voice rising in octaves. The fear was palpable you could practically taste it every time you took a breath. I looked back towards her mother in law, and she had shifted to the window gazing out, the sunlight slanted in coating her face in a glow. The warm glow was cooled slightly by the melancholic expression steeped in resignation that creased her features.

Malia dug her fingernails in again as she scrunched her face up and a constricted breathy whimper escaped her dry, cracked lips.

"Time to push", the potions must have helped somewhat because her eyes looked much brighter than before. But they were swimming in fear.

"I can't" it came out as a sob, and I felt my heartbreak.

"You can. You are strong, and this baby is going to be gorgeous" my eyes prickled with tears beginning to well, as I gently placed my hand on her stomach. I was never one to make friends easy, in fact, I was rather socially inept, but Malia had taken me under her wing, and I appreciated it. I would do my best to be here for her; it was the least I could do.

"It...hurts so...much", Malia is panting heavily struggling to get the words out- I wish she would conserve her strength. Another sharp contraction ripples through her body and she clenches her teeth in an attempt to push through the pain, both figuratively and in reality.
"Pousser" the woman rather gruffly yells out telling Malia to push. This baby is coming, and it is happening now. I watch in a flurry of activity the other women discarding the soiled towels and cloth for fresh, unblemished ones, only to watch them soak in the precious fluid that pumps throughout our bodies. The amount of it is bewildering and alarming. The feel of Malia twisting the skin on my forearm and clutching at the fabric of my dress diverts my attention once again. She grunts as her energy ebbs, her chest heaving and arms going slack.

"You did well", I was at a loss of what to say. I felt her husband Johan should have been here, but men at this stage were not permitted to witness the births. Ridiculous. I found myself brushing her hair back out of her face and just patting her head. It was strange for me to do this, but it just felt instinctual. With barely any break, I sense a contraction come on again only by her body language.

"Repousse" push again. I wanted to snap at the woman, stop telling her what she needs to do. I knew her strength was waning as I watched another tub of bright red liquid gets tipped out and changed. Her hold on me wasn't as bruising.

Someone else I didn't know bumped into me and said "Encourager" and with a hand gesture towards Malia. Perhaps she needed it, maybe she didn't, but with eyes on me, I did as I was told.

"You are doing so well, just another couple of strong pushes and the baby will be here" the woman made another hand gesture as if to say keep going. Another also came up next to the woman between her legs holding a mirror and well... I could see everything. My eyes widen, and I was momentarily struck dumb. It was a rather confronting sight. The baby was crowning, and if everything went correctly that in another couple of strong pushes, the baby would indeed be out. If Malia could manage it.

My mother had once told me that giving birth was like pushing a watermelon through a toilet roll. I never understood what that meant precisely...but seeing this- I now understand. The top of the baby's head was thatched in black hair and covered in gunk; there was no other word for it.

"Again!", the midwife called out. Malia's whole body seemed to tense up, and muscles shook under the strain of the powerful contraction. With my eyes glued to the mirror, I proffered words of encouragement.

The head squeezed passed those outer muscles and made an appearance in the world for the first time. More commotion and a fierce discussion were going on between the ladies. I was pushed forward and told to hold onto Malia's leg- lift and pull back. My eyes migrated back to Malia's face; she had her eyes closed and was exhaling gentle puffs of air through her lips. Her mother in law's singing voice was a soft susurrarion, melodic and beautiful in this otherwise chaotic room. Something calm to anchor yourself too; I needed it as I could feel the chains of dreaded anticipation tightening around my limbs.
I saw the midwife pull a small pocket knife and gesture to another woman for a towel and a damp cloth. As contractions began to retake hold, I saw her quickly slice open the skin that was on the verge of tearing, making the opening a little wider. I wondered if Malia felt that although I quickly squashed the thought as more blood oozed. The midwife tried turning the baby in the limited amount of time the contractions offered; I soon caught on to the fact that the baby was stuck. I so badly wanted to bombard them with questions, but now wasn't the time.

The next set of contractions hit, only a minute in between, but Malia wasn't handling these last couple well. The muscles in her legs were becoming limp, her complexion paler and even her cries her we're quieter. At this moment, I wished I knew healing spells like Madam Pompfrey.

The small cries of the baby snapped me out of my reverie, and I watched in amazement as they manipulated the baby to get the shoulders passed, twisting and pulling with each weak contraction. I rubbed her leg soothingly; tears swelled - I felt helpless. I sniffled and wiped my eyes. Finally, the baby was pulled free from the confines of her body, the umbilical cord clamped and cut, and the baby making its existence known rather emphatically. I was unable to prevent a small smile as they bundled the baby in blankets.

Her thighs were slick with blood. Her life essence was pooling underneath her, and I didn't know how to make it stop. I reached for towels and pushed my way around in between her legs. I bunched them and held them against her. My hands and they were becoming coated in the red sticky fluid. My movements are shaky and frantic. I was crying, and I could taste the saltiness along with the sharp metallic tang of blood in the air. I didn't want to lose my only friend here, and I didn't want her missing out on meeting her child and never seeing them grow up.

A hand gripped my shoulder, and I turned sharply to stare at a woman whose face I recognised but wasn't familiar with personally. She had a look of pity. I hated it.

"Get Tom", It was supposed to be firm and robust sounding, but instead came out like a broken sob. She shook her head.

"Please", I could see the hesitation in her features. Her gaze left mine briefly and looked at Malia. A heartbeat passed, and she complied; relenting to my request. Moments later, I heard the heavy thumping of Tom's boots on the wooden steps. I turned when they stopped in the doorway.

"Help me", I grabbed more towels, swapping the heavily spoiled ones for fresh ones, a sense of deja-vu washed over me.

"Hermione", I closed my eyes. I knew that tone of voice. I didn't want to listen. I didn't want it to be true. Another sob wracked me and my vision blurred; my eyelashes thick with heavy tears.
"Help please." Desperation weighted the words and made them hard to speak. I went to brush my hair out of my face, but a hand gripped my wrist. It was an unconscious move, and I was momentarily grateful for Malia convincing me to cut my hair. I looked up at Tom's emotionless face. He took in my dishevelled hair; my eyes were probably red-rimmed and bloodshot; cheeks ruddy and tear-stained, stinging from the briny moisture.

"She's gone", I heard the words, but I couldn't quite process them. I looked down at my blood-soaked hands then looked at her. Her body limp and lifeless. Her head was lolled to the right, with an arm stretched out as if in her final moments, she was reaching for her child. I turned away, unable to look at that heartbreaking scene any longer. Tom waved his wand, and in my peripheral, I could see a white sheet cover her to give her some dignity in death.

I looked up and watched him cleaning up around him; I doubt he cared what they thought about how everything was miraculously cleared. He caught my gaze and just stared. He looked hesitant like he wasn't sure how to deal with an emotional crying woman.

He was always so composed while I was here breaking apart. Sometimes I hated the way he personified the stereotype of the British stiff upper lip. A tight grip of his emotional responses in public- not showing weakness. Actually, no, I resented it. At times I wanted to smash him against the ground like a china doll and watch him shatter. Then I would puzzle him back together with my glue, so I was intricately woven into every piece of his being. I would remake him, not Dumbledore. But first, both of us needed to shake free the invisible manacles around our ankles from that man.

Exiting Malia's wagon for what would be the last time before her family organised the wagon burning - felt like I was leaving a small piece of myself behind. Small, but noticeable.

Mathais was standing off to the side, his gazed fixed at the ground like it had all the answers and was the cause of everything that had gone wrong. I reached out to touch his shoulder.

"Mathais, I am so sorry", it took every ounce of strength remaining in me not to breakdown again. He tilted his head to the side and looked over me, but there was no recognition. I frowned.

"Thanks, but who are you?" I removed my hand and took a step back.

"Umm a friend. Again sorry about Malia" I fumbled my words, talking rapidly then spinning on my heel. How could Mathais not remember who I am?
Walking back to the wagon was a surreal experience, my mind whirring with possibilities, but only one stood out.

Tom closed the wagon door with a soft click. If it were me, I would have slammed it, with the frustration, confusion and anger I was feeling.

"What did you do?" I was in no mood to listen to excuses if that was what he was going to offer. I chucked my bag onto the bed.

"I erased you from his memories", I blinked not expecting a blunt, honest answer.

"Why?"

"Because I didn't want him taking you away from me", anger flared hot along with my magic. It bubbled and hissed underneath my skin; searing my veins inside like a slow-moving magma. I was like a volcano ready to erupt.

"Are you kidding me? You're like a toddler with a god complex! Do you think so low of me that you think I would leave you?" it made me angrier that he would make that assumption, even as a small traitorous voice whispering in the back of my mind thought that it wasn't an outlandish supposition. We were on opposite sides of the war, after all.

He didn't say anything; that was all the answer I needed.

"Go to hell Tom Riddle", I was so hurt and upset, and he was the person I could take it out on. I knew it wasn't fair to lash out at him, but at this moment I didn't care.

"I'm already living it!" he testily snaps back.

Equally as quick, I jab back, "If it is such hell being with me, then go on leave!"

His was face an impenetrable mask; the only indication that my words had any effect on him was the subtle flair of his nostrils and hardening in his eyes. Instead, I storm out, but I am hurt that he doesn’t attempt to stop me. A sob chokes my throat as I have so many conflicting feelings swirling like a tornado inside of me.
I wander in the woods nearby and get angry at why everything is so fucking shit - damn this life, damn Dumbledore, damn Tom and damn everyone! I scream at the sky. I kneel on the ground and pound the dirt until my hands are aching to get all my hurt and frustration out. I can feel my magic swelling upside me with each fist hitting the ground. My heart is sore, and I pour all of that into my magic until I can feel the block crumbling- it hurts. Like the fabric of my being is tearing. The block must be deeply rooted within me — something tightly coiled around my magical core. But I steel myself to keep going.

Determined.

Until finally, sparks fly from my fingertips. The rush of my magic feels exhilarating and leaves me breathless. I close my eyes and revel in the sensation that I had missed most of this year. I feel whole again. I drop back on my heels and slowly open my eyes and see Tom a few trees over just watching me.

I get up still fuming with anger- seething if I'm honest. The closer I get a small smirk appears on his lips. I can feel the power radiating off him; he must have broken through his block too. Prick.

I stalk in front of him, raise my hand and slap him hard across the face. It wasn't my initial plan, but that smug smirk irritates me. He slowly turned his head back to face me, the red palm print blazing on his cheek.

A different heat began to unfurl when his blue eyes latched onto mine. I shouldn't be feeling this when Malia had just died, but I could feel the pull of his magic wrapping around mine- cocooning it in a blanket of safety. Like a warm hug. Everything slipped away, and I didn't think I could recover from this. The kiss from earlier popped into my mind- the knee-buckling intensity, the overwhelming passion sucking the air from my lungs. I knew without a doubt that I loved this man, despite his inherent darkness.

I lunged at him, forcing my tongue into his mouth, pulling at his hair painfully, keeping him attached to my mouth. It must have hurt, but he assaults my lips just as much in return. It made him stagger backwards, accommodating the changed centre of gravity as he stumbled. It was aggressive; neither of us was backing down; giving up control.

I needed him like I needed to fucking breathe.

He bit my lip hard drawing blood. He is attempting to assert something over me.
I've been waiting for this moment" his fingers traced my jaw "I'm going to have you my little star..." the dexterous digits wound themselves in my shoulder-length hair, gripping tightly. "You're fucking mine", he pulled me harshly against him, slanting his mouth over mine delivering a punishing kiss. My lips were swollen and bruised, but I was just as aggressive digging my fingers into his shoulders. Without breaking the kiss, he dragged me down onto my knees; then pushed me down on my back. I was expecting to feel grass and twigs, but he must have transfigured a leaf or blade of grass into a soft plush blanket.

My dress was gone a few seconds later, leaving me just in my bra and knickers. I instantly covered my chest in the act of self-consciousness. I could handle him seeing my womanhood, but the whole of the Dolohov curse scarred skin- felt more intimate...and well embarrassing. It was silly because I know that he had seen some of it, but me being able to witness his reaction was different. What if he thought it was ugly?

"Hermione...let me see", I moved my arms away, slamming my eyes shut tightly so I couldn't see the disgust on his face. I felt my bra disappear, his firm, confident hands traced the scar from my hip, across my ribcage all the way up to the opposite shoulder. Then his lips and tongue followed the same path.

"You're perfect the way you are", those words nearly broke me. I never thought I would hear such gentle words from the Dark Lord. I opened my eyes and watched him watching me; I felt like I was drowning. Then everything narrowed down to how his mouth felt on me, how his strands of hair felt running in between my fingers, his tongue tasting every inch of skin and his lips etching words onto my soul. He was insatiable; getting hungrier and hungrier. I understood because I had never felt this burning hunger underneath my skin before.

His eyes were hooded and dark; glittering with many erotic desires. I shuddered as he slipped inside my knickers, running a finger between my slick folds. He stroked me again, making feather-soft circles against my clit, and I whimpered in pleasure, both relieved that the wait was over and impatient for more.

"Oh, Tom", I didn't resist the pleasure that he was evoking from my body, having done this a few times he knew all the places and right the pressure to have me splintering into a million pieces. I couldn't take his gentle but firm ministrations and was blinded by my release bursting behind my eyelids. When I came down from my blissful high, he rose up onto his knees and vanished his clothing. He was perfect. My perfection. He was pale, but arms tanned from being in the sun, dark chest hair lightly covered his torso. He had a scar an inch or so in length on his abdomen. He was toned and athletic- not some unrealistic version that you usually only see on fitness magazine covers. I wanted him. I wanted to taste him and hear him moan in pleasure.

He crawled over me with purpose, drawing me into another drugging exquisite kiss, that made my hypersensitive body come alive again. He parts my thighs and situates himself. I thought he would immediately enter me, but instead, he remains kissing me profoundly and grinds himself against
my wet tender flesh, stoking the flames of desire to burn hotter and brighter. It was a sweet kind of torture. My hands were all over him, roaming, scratching and trying to pull him closer. I reached between us to grasp his length, trailing my fingers along his stomach and feeling his muscles clench at the touch.

"Tom, please." There was a small amount of begging tugging at the words.

"I love hearing you whimper my name like a fucking prayer", I dragged my nails down his chest urging him along.

"Please", shamefully I wasn't above begging and rolled my hips. Hegroaned as he slipped between my wet centre, exhaling as he pushed into me fully. It was like nothing I have ever felt before. I was awash with various sensations- a sensory overload. The feel of his chest rubbing against mine, him nuzzling his face into my neck, me having one hand in his hair tugging roughly and the other gripping at his back or ass cheek; his hands roughly pulling my thighs around his waist then moving to grip my hips bruisingly. I should be appalled by it, but it affects me on a visceral level. He must feel it too; he looked like he was in pain, the pleasure so intense. His brows pinched together in concentration, sweat coating our bodies as we moved wildly together.

He rose up on outstretched arms; his hair was tousled and some of his curls plastered to the side of his face with sweat. He closed his eyes tightly and swallowed thickly, "oh...I..." He panted, unable to string a coherent thought together. I arched my back to feel closer to him again. I didn't think it was possible the readily want someone as much I wanted Tom in the moment—raw and unguarded.

If it wasn't for the laws of physics preventing two people from existing in the same place, our molecules merging, then I'm sure we would have become one — a singular entity.

His hips moved wild and untamed, and every muscle was straining with effort. I could feel my desire building, a ratcheting tension along my skin and in my abdomen that crystallised into a heavy ache in my bones. He was rough but steady; however, there was savagery in his movements.

"So close", I plead. My thighs shook as I circled my hips, trying to get that friction to push me over the edge. He lifted a leg and pushed it closer to my chest, making the angle he thrust that much deeper. I looked up at him as he caused the most delicious sensations to spread throughout my body. I was in awe as he whispered things, dirty things, about how I made him feel; how much he craved me. I realised that I had a certain amount of power over him if I was brave enough to take it.

The tension snapped as he captured my mouth, the taste of his sweat on my lips sent me hurtling
over the proverbial edge. Molten euphoria surged through me as I clung to him, grasping to pull him closer, needing to feel every inch of him. This is what making love was supposed to be like- unrestrained passion for each other tittering on the edge of devouring each other.

A few moments later, I feel Tom still and release a guttural moan- the look of pure ecstasy crossing his features; it was a sight to see. He collapsed on top of me exhausted, his muscles shaking and heart racing- I could feel it against my chest. I ran my fingertips along his spine as our breathing calmed and we basked in the afterglow of post-coital contentedness. I was expecting to feel guilt and regret for what we had just done, but I didn't. Nearly ten months ago, I would not have expected to be in this position. I would have laughed and thought whoever predicted this was off their rocker.

He shifted his weight and cleaned us both up with a quick scourgify. I couldn't help but think that he was the peak and everything else was downhill after this.

"Well, Mrs Gr-" 

"I love you", the words tumbled from my lips before I could think about what I was going to say. I clapped my hand over my mouth to prevent anything else from slipping out. I waited for his reaction; this was a huge turning point in our...relationship? I still wasn't one hundred per cent what we were. We had had one date that was very sweet, but I needed a more concrete answer because I didn't want to invest any more in this if this was just a passing of the time for him.

He froze for a millisecond then turned his head slowly offering me a smile that made me panic for two point five seconds that I had just sold my self to the devil.

His hands went to my face, and he pushed me back down on to the blanket, his mouth firmly pressed on mine, sucking on my lips and tongue. It wasn't precisely gentle- because Tom was not gentle. The kiss was almost reverent and less like we were warring with each other. He rolled back on top of me, and I let my legs fall apart so he could nestle between them. I rocked my hips forward, teasing him because I knew that I was too tired to engage in unchaste activities again. He reluctantly pried his lips from mine.

"You're going to be the sexual death of me." I laughed.

"Yes, because that was my plan all along to stimulate you to into a heart attack, old man" he smiled, then turned serious.

"This is new to me, Hermione. I know we've discussed this before..but..."

"That was before", I nodded. I understood we were in uncharted territory; neither of us was
experienced in relationships.

"I was never interested in carnal pleasures while at school" I smiled. I liked it when he was actually forthcoming, despite us being fairly close he still was immensely private.

"So, in other words, you were a giant nerd" He gives me an orgulous glare.

"Takes one to know one."

"Really how childish Tom. I would have thought playground speak was beneath you?"

"Only when the situation calls for it, my dear. I am not above playing dirty", I rolled my eyes.

"Can you be serious for a moment?" I wanted to go back to address my unplanned confession. All my self-doubt rose to the surface again- would he think I'm just some lovesick schoolgirl? Even though I would technically be twenty now and not a teenager.

"It's a little hard to when your glorious breasts are uncovered", to punctuate his point he ran a finger along the underside of one. That's when I discovered that Tom was a breast man. I wonder if I could use that to my advantage in the future.

"I want this to work between us. I just...I don't know how this would work between us when we...if we return. I want you Tom", I figured I might as well be honest I have nothing else left to lose after the previous confession.

"I don't know why you want me. Besides, their simple minds won’t understand the connection we have."

"You say that, but then you go and scrub Mathais's memory of me. I'm still angry about that by the way."

He runs his hand over his face and clicks his finger, and we have dressed once again. "Don't start, Hermione." I didn't question the clothes he put me in. I think it was an unconscious choice to dress me like a gypsy girl.

"No, Tom, we need to have this conversation. I need to know where I stand with you" I was just as
uncomfortable about having this conversation, but it needed to be had after what we had just done.

"Of course I want you, Hermione. I've explicitly told you that...but that doesn't mean that you wouldn't leave. It's fine now while we are away from your friends at the Order, but as soon as you are surrounded by them that's it...we should just finish this now..." I was surprised by how insecure he sounded. Although, not really when you thought about his history, despite the megalomania, he would have to have some deep-seated insecurities. He did overcompensate.

"I don't want that, Tom. I want you!"

"..." he was shaking his head about to repudiate my declaration.

"Don't interrupt me, Thomas" I bite out at him, getting frustrated and annoyed. I hated when I was interrupted. He scowled and crossed his arms fuming- I could see the muscle in his jaw ticking. "Don't tell me what I feel and don't assume that I will leave. I could say the same thing about you. What do you want with a mudblood like me?" He flinched when I said mudblood, but he needed to get his head out of his arse. "Do you not think that I haven't thought about this? If I weren't serious about us, then we wouldn't be having this conversation. I didn't just say I love you for the hell of it¨. I walked over to him and pried open his defensive stance, for someone who often verbally attacks he is rather defensive. I held his hands in mine, running my thumb over the black ring that has not come off his finger since it appeared. "While it may not be real, it still means something to me. So get it through your thick skull, I'm not going anywhere. Yes, I know right now I sound hypocritical, but we are both stubborn people, and I think that we have managed this far, we could weather the storm upon returning. We need each other, Tom. I will find you and bring you back home to me if you leave for some asinine reason".

He smirked so I must have something that resonated.

"I have never had anyone care enough...to..", I lifted my hand up and placed a finger over his still plump lips, stopping him from trying to articulate the thought. He was feeling particularly vulnerable.

"My star?" I referenced the term he called me now and then.

"A term of affection", I smile and hug his arm. "Do you not like it?"

"I do; it's personal. Why, Star?"
"Because you're my light in the dark and I am your shadow in the light."

"But as your light, if you cast me aside or hurt me Dumbledore will be the least of your worries", he raised a brow and with a slight upturn of his lips he answered.

"I expect nothing less, love"

"Good"

There was a rumble in the distance and a strange array of colours, kaleidoscopic in appearance lighting up the sky. It was still the middle of the day, so to see something like this was unsettling.

"Tom", I looked at him hoping he would have an idea of what was going on.

"Well Mrs Granger I have a strange feeling we will be returning home sooner than we expected", my jaw dropped, and I'm sure I looked like a gaping fish struggling for air.

"How?", he slung an arm around my shoulders as we both looked up at the sky, colours whipping about like the Northern lights were on steroids.

"I've had all these months to think about it. Nothing definitive, however, but something must be happening as we have broken our magical bindings and now this. I would say your knights in shining armour must becoming".

"But...when we spoke of where here was we didn't....weren't sure where or when...", I was struggling to remember the conversation we had two weeks after landing here. It was so long ago now.

"I've been ruminating. I don't know anything for sure as this magic feels like nothing I've come across. It's dark, but I can't pinpoint it. This is something Dumbledore has created himself."

"Created? I distinctly remember you saying he couldn't create something like this.", he rolled his eyes and huffed.

"I changed my view. I think this was supposed to be a prison of some sort. The magical bindings on our magic gave that away. The strange alternative past...I'm not sure about perhaps something
went wrong when you hitched a ride, he didn't account for another passenger." We both were lost in thought. I honestly hadn't given any thought to how we got here other than for the first few weeks. I was focused on getting home and my complicated feelings for Tom. I hadn't wanted to dwell on it and push forward until we got to Greece. I was surviving I didn't think there was anything wrong with that. I felt guilty that I was ambivalent on returning home.

"Darling?" I shifted in his arms I hadn't realised I was crying. I wiped them quickly, feeling embarrassed.

"Sorry...I just felt guilty under the realisation that I haven't given much thought to all of this since the beginning...and I'm not looking forward to returning as I was expecting", Perhaps I would feel different having more warning than it being sort sprung upon us — returning to the war felt...exhausting. It was lovely waking up, each day having a simple breakfast with Tom, we would discuss what he would be teaching me, the potions we had to complete and make for the day, then go about setting up our stall for the day, alongside various other chores we had to do. It was a simple life, it wasn't what either of us wanted, but there was something oddly satisfying about it.

"I...feel the same to a degree. On the one hand, I am looking forward to exacting revenge on Dumbledore for this...and on the other I am not looking forward to rectifying my mistakes and dealing with the bunch of idiots I surrounded myself with, I'm tired just talking about it" I snort because I do not envy him for that. He glares.

"You chose them, Tom. What happens when we return? How are we going to...see each other?" At this moment I didn't want to sound pathetic, but I felt like we needed to be prepared. It was going to be an absolute shitstorm upon returning. We have been out of the loop for months; there will be a lot of catching up to do.

"We won't at least not at the beginning. I don't particularly want to be captured by Dumbledore again, and I don't want you getting hurt by an overzealous Death Eater. I will come to you, or you will come to me when it is safe enough to do so. In the meantime, go to Severus."

"But...he is still siding with Dumbledore, and he doesn't even like me!" I groaned.

"You will be safe with Severus. Get him to help you with your occlumency shields. I won't tell you any details about what I will do, Albus is a strong legilimens, I would rather you be in the dark about some things."

"Ok, I will seek him out as soon as I am able."
"I have no doubt Sev will be in the thick of it, right now. Albus will have him running an endless list of errands. That being said, he wouldn't be impressed that Albus didn’t inform him that he wasn’t dead. I would love to see that confrontation" I remained quiet as he looked pensive. I wondered what was going on in that rather impressive brain right now.

"The ring" I looked down at the ring he had crafted to look similar to my mother's.

"What about it?"

"Keep wearing it". I threw my arms around him and nuzzled into his neck; he smelt like sweat, sex and Tom.

"Wait my bag did..I?"

"You left it in the wagon. Once I felt my magic breaking the bindings, I quickly packed everything. I wasn't sure how much time we would have", he handed me my bag, and I was thankful- I didn't ask if he got everything because Tom was more anal than I was about our belongings.

"How much time do you think we have?" I laced my fingers with his, and he planted a soft kiss to my temple. Almost as I had finished saying the words, I could feel that familiar tugging in my stomach signalling a portkey. I guess not that long at all.

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**Back In the Present**

Harry wondered how much longer this was going to take. Because right now, he could be shoving his face full of food and possibly be taking a quick nap. Exhaustion was creeping up from all this waiting around. It had been just over an hour since Hermione and Voldemort disappeared, and he wasn't going to deny he was getting antsy. As much as this was all Dumbledore's idea, he can't believe that the man didn't have backup plans for back up plans. Although, he will concede that Hermione getting sucked in as well wasn't planned.
He was just so damn tired and wanted everything to be over. Maybe when the war was over, he would travel and escape England for a while. He could seriously use the break after these past few years.

He looked around again, and everyone was visibly agitated, Dumbledore was about the attempt for the third time to bring Hermione and Voldemort from wherever he sent them. Something was happening; it just wasn't enough to completely drag them back. He should have felt worried about facing Voldemort again, but he wasn't. But for them, it wasn't every day they came face to face with the Dark Lord.

Most of the Order, including Severus Snape- who had been revealed to not be a traitor to the order. Dumbledore had explained that he had asked Severus to kill him- absolving Malfoy from having to do it and that he had been a double agent for quite a while. He wouldn't want to be him if Voldy ever found out that tidbit. Everyone was standing around in a field near Dumbledore's house. It was leaving us exposed to danger, but Dumbledore insisted that it had to be out here because, if anything did happen we could get away quickly- a cornered Dark Lord would not be a happy one.

"One more time! Positions everyone!" Everyone shuffled to their positions behind Dumbledore fanning out, alert and ready. Even Fred and George were serious.

Dumbledore moved his wand and other hand around in the intricate wand movement required of this spell. He chanted in Latin, and another language that Harry didn't know, and the area in front started to swirl around like a mini-tornado. Slow at first; then it got faster and faster.

Dumbledore stumbled a little under the strain of having to maintain this powerful spell for an extended amount of time. Harry had to cover his eyes from all the dust flying everywhere. After what seemed like an eternity but was only three minutes, the mini-tornado suddenly stopped. And coughing could be heard.

"With all the magic in the world and they still couldn't make travelling more comfortable", the sound of that voice brought much relief to Harry- Hermione was alive and appeared to be okay. However, the light chuckle that came afterwards was not recognisable.

"At least with muggles it is with some comfort", he could hear whispers from the other Order members about who this was with Hermione. But with the dust in the way Harry couldn't get a visual on this mysterious person. It didn't sound like the Dark Lord, what if Dumbledore accidentally brought some else here? He heard a few mutters and the thick dust instantly evaporated like a vacuum had been turned on.
The man with Hermione was taller than her, but not by much. He had thick curly hair and grey-blue eyes. He had stubble like he hadn't shaved in a few days and was wearing period clothing—black pants, boots and a long-sleeved white shirt. Harry thought he was oddly attractive for a man. Then he looked at Hermione, and she looked different. Older than when she left, and Harry wondered how much time had passed since they left. She had shorter hair that sat just above her shoulders, it was not curly at all, but a gentle wave. She was thinner in the face and looked more mature. She wore a long skirt that was a mixture of different fabrics that were layered on top of each other, a vest shirt that left her arms exposed and a scarf tied in her hair. She had bangles on both wrists and numerous necklaces on with a key attached to her scarf. Harry knew the outfit looked familiar, but he couldn't place the muggle reference just yet. However, he did see that they were sent backwards in time.

Harry also noticed how close they stood, and there was a comfortableness between them. He wasn't sure if he liked it or not. There was something about the man that unsettled him.

"Hermione", Dumbledore called out in a calm, even voice, not giving anything away. Harry noted the way that both Hermione and the man stood straighter, eyes narrowing towards the older wizard. Wasn't she happy to see them?

"Albus", the man saluted and smirked before suddenly bursting into a plume of black smoke, that surrounded Hermione before dissipating. Hermione just stood there staring at everyone but Dumbledore, while he seemed to be boring holes in her head, neither saying a word.

"Who was that bloke?" Ron piped up asking what everyone else was thinking but unsure to break the moment between Hermione and Dumbledore.

"The Dark Lord" replied Dumbledore gravely.

Oh shit.
Entropy

Chapter Notes

A/N: Dialogue is not my strong point! Definitely something I need to work on, so I ended up re-writing parts of it like three times. I apologize if I have made any mistakes and hope you enjoy the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Three days later... The Burrow

Entropy is often called the **arrow of time** because matter in isolated systems tends to move from order to disorder. As one goes 'forward' in time, the second law of thermodynamics states that entropy of an isolated system will increase - it is one way to distinguish the past from the present.

While it is synonymous with disorder, it can also be applied to the contextual measurement of perfect internal disorder or in other words - equilibrium.

I closed the book I was reading and thought the concept resonated with me and to a degree a fitting parallel to describe the current state of affairs of my life. Everything felt muddled; slipping back into where I was supposed to be didn't feel quite right. I was like a puzzle piece whose space had been altered.

I had holed myself up in Charlie Weasley's old bedroom; I smiled because it still had posters of dragon's stuck to the wall. Perfectly preserved, the room was like a time capsule from his Hogwarts days.

I extricated myself from the confines of the bed and padded over to the window that looked out onto the Weasley's backyard. Charlie's bedroom was one of the room's at the top of the house near the attic- where occasionally I could hear the ghost or ghoul that haunted it. I sighed as I watched the trees lazily bend in the summer breeze and then my eyes dropped downwards as caught sight of Ginny hurling a gnome over the hedge. That certainly brought back memories of every summer de-gnoming the backyard before we were allowed to do anything else.

It was strange, everything was the same for everyone else as my disappearance to them was only a few hours, but for me, it was ten months. Ten long months of tribulations, heartbreak, exciting adventures, new friendships and...**love**.
The last three days, I haven't once doubted my love for Tom even as I felt the proverbial rug being pulled out from underneath me again. I missed his now-familiar warmth and smell enveloping me as we would settle in for the night—both reading books from the large selection I carried with me. I missed the way he would skim his fingertips across my skin or whisper things that would make me blush from my roots to my toes. Hell, I just missed his soothing voice when I would wake from a nightmare. Not that I had them often while we were gone, his mere presence seemed to chase those dark images away. But the last two days I have been plagued by Malia's death with Bellatrix's maniacal laugh as the twisted soundtrack. I scrubbed my hands over my face, I was exhausted and a little overwrought emotionally.

I know everyone was getting impatient because I had yet to say a word, but I needed time to adjust to this. I needed time to process. I needed time to think. Standing out in the field after Tom left theatrically, I felt the full weight of all their stares. The air was thick with questions, suspicions and curiosity. It was suffocating. I had just been on an emotional rollercoaster—Malia's death and then making love with Tom. Even now, a blush suffused my cheeks. Tom wasn't the most experienced, but somehow that made the experience all the better. He was good at following directions.

As soon as I had locked eyes with Harry, I burst into tears. I was filled with relief and grief. I still held a sliver of guilt because I couldn't but want to stay in my bubble with Tom away from all this mess and responsibility. Every day they would knock on the door, and every day I would ignore them—b ut I knew they wouldn't wait much longer. Mrs Weasley's motherly instincts and protection could only hold them off for so long. My tears at seeing Harry prompted her in action, shooing everyone out of the way end even chastising Dumbledore about wanting to question me before I was freshly showered and fed.

"Really Albus, shame on you! The poor girl has been through something horrendous let her have a nice hot shower, and I'll whip her up something to eat—look how thin she is!"

Molly proceeded to conjure a beautiful fleece blanket and placed it around my shoulders. It was calming having someone mother me slightly. Previously, I would have resisted it, but it was nice to have something normal happen. Plus, I didn't want to be interrogated by Dumbledore in that field when I wasn't at my strongest.

There was a soft rap on the door which I took to be Harry; they seemed to be walking on eggshells when someone came—like they didn't want to startle me. I wasn't made of glass I can handle myself. I knew the incoming questioning wasn't going to be easy. I didn't necessarily want to lie because I was not the best liar, but I will have to bend and twist the truth to protect Tom but also myself. Upon reflection, I knew what I did was right for me and not just for survival, but also because it made me happy. The by-product of my and Tom's relationship is that I gained knowledge and new insight which will significantly shake up the British wizarding society— I think for the better. Not that I intended to share that with anyone. Yet.
I sucked in a deep breath and smoothed down the crumpled skirt of my summer dress. I felt light. I had serendipitously gotten used to the heavier fabrics of the 1800s, so wearing something like this short summer dress felt freeing. As I walked over to open the door, I ran a hand over my shortened hair and felt a pang of grief for Malia, but I reigned in that feeling and used it to make me stronger. Malia would be displeased if she saw me as a blubbering mess over her. She would have told me to steel my spine; I was no weak woman.

I slowly opened the door. Any other time I would have practically flung the door back hearing the hinges protest vociferously, but this time was different.

"Hermione", Harry greeted me warmly. I looked around, expecting Ron the jump out of the shadows and surprise me. I felt relief that he wasn't here; I knew he still held affections for me.

"Harry" I couldn't help the smile that lazily morphed upon my lips. I captured him in an unexpected hug, gripping him tightly.

"Oof Hermione...struggling...to...breathe", Harry held me in an equally crushing hug. I had forgotten that I was slightly taller than Harry.

"Everyone is waiting downstairs...I tried to hold them off as long as possible...but", I sighed and pulled back still keeping my hands on his shoulders.

"But we are at war", it felt like bile was coating my tongue to say those words. Not that I expected Tom to end everything suddenly when we returned. I wasn't so naïve to think that it would be that simple. He would also face a colossal mutiny within his ranks. Tom was right that we wouldn't be able to see each other safely at least at the beginning. My main concern was that everyone would think I was some sort of traitor- manipulated and tainted by the Dark Lord. I know that Tom didn't do any of that. I may not agree with everything that Tom has done and will still do. But some of his agenda will be good for the stagnant wizarding world if they would get their heads out of their arses and, accept that muggles don't need to be looked down upon like animals.

"Look, Hermione, I just want you to know that I don't care what happened while you were gone. I...am just happy you're safe” a small tendril of guilt curled in my stomach, but I tamped that down. I closed my eyes and made sure my occlumency walls were as strong as I could make them. I still needed to seek out Snape but wasn't sure how to do that without arousing suspicion. Especially with Dumbledore lurking at every opportunity.

"That means a lot to me, Harry."

"I've got your back Hermione you know that" I wondered if that promise would still hold once the revelation of mine and Tom's relationship came to light.
I followed Harry down the rather steep staircase of the burrow, with each step I began to feel sick, and my heart was pounding so loudly in my ears I swear everyone else will be able to hear it too.

I reached out and grabbed Harry's jacket collar roughly, stopping him abruptly on the step below mine. I swallowed thickly before asking.

"When you say, everyone?" I loathed hearing the quiver in my voice.

He turned with an air of concern, "Everyone...well almost everyone". This what I was afraid of, that I would be turned into a spectacle- a circus act on how the brightest witch of her age was corrupted by the darkest wizard of this century. But a spark of determination and Gryffindor courage broke through because I did nothing wrong at least in my eyes.

They weren't there.

I could hear everyone chatting, and at least there was some laughter in these dark times. It would have been downright depressing if there wasn't. I know it wasn't quite the same since Sirius died, especially for Harry.

"Are you ready?" Harry asked when we reached the bottom of the stairs. But before I could answer with an as ready as I'll ever be; Ron yelled.

"'Arry! 'Mione!" I stifled a visible cringe at his sudden outburst. I didn't want my appearance broadcast for the whole of England to hear.

A few seconds later, Molly barged her way past Ron, opening her arms wide when she laid eyes on me.

"Hermione my dear, come I have prepared some lunch for everyone, and I even made an apple pie for dessert", she had on her best hostess smile, but I could tell there was a tension that clung to her presence. She wrapped an arm around me and guided me into the kitchen. However, this time, it didn't feel as comforting- more like I was being pushed towards my execution. My yellow and white polka dot summer dress suddenly felt like a straight jacket.

The view upon entering the colourful kitchen, I immediately noticed that the table had been magically widened and lengthened to accommodate the extra guests. When Harry said everyone, I
thought he meant everyone. There were all the Weasleys except Percy, Dumbledore, Snape, Tonks, Remus, Kingsley and Hagrid. It was the principal members of the Order of the Phoenix, and I was expecting some of the Dumbledore's Army members to be here also. Everyone had a plate full of food, and they stopped eating when they saw me. I wanted to fidget under their stares. I caught more than a few looking at my scars. Dolohov's was most prominent and most likely the first time they had seen the scar, the same for my mudblood scar and my newest addition thanks to Tobacco's pistol. I was not ashamed of them any longer if it weren't for Tom I probably would have covered them up completely.

"That's a nice dress, 'Mione really shows off those badass scars!", George said, trying to lighten the mood in the room. I smiled and relaxed a little maybe this wouldn't be so bad?

My inner voice mocked my naivety- their simple minds won't understand the connection. Do you think they'll let you go once they know? The voice was unsurprisingly Tom's. Though I suspected a ring of truth, I wasn't ready to believe my friends would do that.

"Thanks, George" I sat next to Ron who patted the seat indicating that was where I would be sitting and Harry on the other side. I relaxed slightly, being cocooned by my best friends.

No one said anything else as we ate in silence, it was like nobody wanted to break this peaceful moment, but it was ratcheting my anxiety level up into the upper atmosphere.

"I must say Miss Granger I'm surprised you are alive", Dumbledore stated calmly with almost no hint of emotion, but there was a fire in his eyes. My eyes flicked briefly to Snape, who was seated next to Dumbledore. His face was impassive, but he radiated curiosity.

Ron elbowed me getting my attention.

"Yeah, Mione, I thought for sure that snake faced git would have done something to you. But I said to Harry that you would have given him a piece of your mind", I smiled at Ron while I may not have feelings for him, at times he could be an excellent friend.

"The fact that you are alive. Miss Granger is a testament to your strength and resilience", I smiled at Kingsley, but I couldn't help but snort at this. To a certain degree they had no idea who Tom is. Most of these people won't even say Voldemort; it is always He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. I am only alive because Tom didn't murder me or let me be killed, not because of a superior skill they seemed to think I possessed.
"Hermione that was rather rude", I felt my face flush at Molly’s censure.

"Sorry Kingsley, I appreciate the vote of confidence. It's..." I didn't know how to say it without it looking like in their eyes I had Stockholm Syndrome or was under a spell.

"You've had a hard time we can all see that Hermione. Where did you go exactly?" Tonks asked a fairly innocuous question, which I could quickly answer without lying.

"We were sent back to the early-ish 1800s, London. I'm not sure what year it was, the history was a little different. We were there for about ten months" I looked down fiddling with my fork, twirling it in my fingers.

"Te- ten months? You spent ten months with...Oh, blimey!" Ron was flabbergasted, and my anger was starting to rise.

"Yes! Ten months I spent with the Dark Lord. I did what I had to do to survive", I glared as I spoke to challenge anyone to disagree with that pronouncement. Then the questions started flying.

"Hermione...did he...do anything to you?"

"What?No!"

"What is that scar from?"

"A gunshot."

"You were shot? Oh my"

"What did you do for food?"

"Where did you live?"
"Did he try to kill you?"

"We stayed in the tent for a while then we crossed the English Channel to France and then travelled with Gypsies selling potions."

"You lived with him?"

"Again, what was I supposed to do? Do you know nothing of history, Ron?" I was getting tired of being peppered with questions, and I could feel my magic crackling around me, ready to lash out.

"Nough!" Hagrid boomed getting everyone to quieten down.

"Well, Miss Granger, can you offer us any insight into his thinking? His Horcruxes?" I frowned because I didn't want to tell them anything about Tom. What he shared was in confidence, and it didn't relate to the war. There wasn't anything concrete, to offer in regards to his plans moving forward; but the Horcruxes didn't matter much anymore.

"He has his soul back, so the Horcruxes are no longer important", I could say that with conviction because they genuinely didn't matter.

"Anything else, Miss Granger? You spent all those months with him there must be something", I knew he was trying the goad me into revealing more than I wanted. I shrugged my shoulders; then, a glass tumbler was set down in front of me. I stared at it. I wasn't an idiot... how dare they! I picked the glass up, making it look like I was going to drink it, then lifted it a little higher then slowly tipped it out on to the table. I was not going to let them do this to me.

"Veritaserum? How dare you try to drug me! Invade my privacy without asking? I would tell you if there was anything important, but there isn't! We read the books in my beaded bag, made potions for our stall to earn money and for somewhere to sleep, and he went through the seventh year curriculum with me so I would be up to date. He doesn't care about Harry anymore", I was furious, that they would try to trick me and livid that they would think I would fall for it.

"He...the Dark Lord... taught you?" I had never seen a look of bewilderment grace Snape's face ever.
"Yes," I didn't feel like elaborating further while harshly stabbing at a piece of lettuce. This conversation was going nowhere; I wanted to go.

"Tom did always have a thirst for knowledge" Dumbledore spoke up looking pensive. "We'll resume this discussion later Miss Granger, and you will drink the serum" But before he could make a hasty exit.

I stood.

"No", such a small, simple word could evoke the most dangerous of emotions, could hold so much power, and such defiance.

"No, Miss Granger?" everyone watched as I openly defied Dumbledore. I would not be cowed into giving them free rein in my mind. They could ask anything. My moral countenance was wary of such a slippery slope. Veritaserum while extraordinary trampled on the ethics of privacy.

"No, I will not be drinking the serum" I crossed my arms, tipped my chin and narrowed my eyes. I wanted to add immaturely, and you can't make me! Or what part of no did you not understand? Dumbledore looked a strange mix of exasperated fury. He was not used to being challenged in such a way.

I felt a cold hand touch my forearm, and I looked down into the bespectacled covered green eyes of Harry. "Hermione, maybe you should just get it over with quickly". My heart sunk into my stomach like a cannonball trying to float in water. Did they not trust my word? But then again, I didn't trust them to ask the right questions either. I shook my head...no the difference is that my free would temporarily be muzzled.

"Hermione you're being unreasonable", I blinked staring at Remus like he had slapped me.

"Unreasonable?" I scrunched my hands into fists, clenching them so tightly my fingernails cut into the flesh of my palms. I wrenched my arm away from Harry. I heard Ron mutter under his breath that sounded suspiciously like here we go again.

"I am not unreasonable! What I went through is immensely personal" I was so angry that I was shaking. But I had to get this out so they would hopefully understand and if they chose to ignore it then, I guess I'll have to figure it out. "I have given you what I know. We didn't exactly sit around
and chat about the war!" My conversations with Tom were private moments, yes we discussed the war but nothing that would benefit either side. It was all hypotheticals, arguing and impassioned opinions.

I turned to storm out, needing a break from the feeling that I was slowly being suffocated.

"I worry for you my dear the seeds of corruption..." A few people gasped at that assertion. It was like a geyser had erupted inside me, unable to contain the anger that been building but also the hurt. I had no wand because they worried about me having one. That thought made me fume even more. My magic sparked visibly around me- I was like a Tesla coil producing artificial lightning.

"Corruption works both ways", I said as coldly as I could, a direct contradiction to how I was feeling inside. I could see the looks on their faces as I left through the kitchen out into the back yard- concern, pity and worry.

"Hermione, wait!" I heard Harry call out. It's not like I can go anywhere without a wand. I needed to be alone for a moment to get my thoughts organised again. I kept going, and I walked to the edge of the boundary wards on the Burrow. I wasn't dumb enough to step out into the open field, risking unnecessary exposure.

I stood outside, the grass beneath my bare feet and the breeze ruffling my hair. I stared at the horizon wondering what Tom was doing now...actually I might not want to know what Tom was doing probably something nefarious.

I could hear someone come up behind me; they were trying to be quiet so not to startle me. I turn and see Harry with a sheepish smile.

"You're about as covert as an elephant Harry Potter."

"Sorry I didn't want to scare you. I'm sorry about all of that in there, Hermione I should have done something" Harry walked close and laid a comforting hand on my shoulder. I leant into him needing reassurance from a friend. "I managed to convince Ron to stay inside. He means well, but...I think he would have a hard time understanding." I looked to Harry he seemed utterly exhausted, battle-worn but he had an air of maturity that I hadn’t recognised before.

"You're right; he wouldn't. But I don't expect anyone else to either." Harry squeezed my shoulder gently in assurance. How could I explain that everything would be different now- Tom wasn't the snake faced nutter we had all had grown to love to hate? But now was a level-headed man that had strong affections for a muggle-born witch? That I didn't trust Dumbledore anymore and was a little
disenchanted from the light side?

"Talk to me Hermione, and I will try to understand and not judge", tears sprung, stinging my eyes and a small sob escaped unbidden. "I didn't mean to...", I tried to laugh at Harry's discomfort.

"Sorry...a lot has happened Harry and just know that things will be changing. What happened over those ten months, changed my views, offered new perspectives on the war and what I want for the future. But know this, I would never betray you" I made him look into my red-rimmed eyes so he could see my pleading gaze. I needed him to remember this moment, so when Tom emerges, he will know I didn't try to deceive him.

He nods, then we notice Snape loitering at a respectable distance.

"Miss Granger", he drawled in his usual monotonous way. He just stared at Harry to which he rolled his eyes a silently walked off.

"Professor Snape", I nodded at him and waited for him to engage in conversation as I knew he wasn't particularly fond of me.

"I may not like you, Miss Granger, but I am glad you are still in existence", even as that was mildly insulting, it was practically high praise coming from this man. "Here" and he held out my wand. I looked at it cautiously expecting something to happen. Was this a trick?

"Where did you get it?" He rolled his eyes.

"Really? And I thought you were more intelligent than that", I snatched it out of his hand, scowling in annoyance while he had a small quirk in the corner of his mouth.

I waved my wand casting multiple spells of silencing and notice-me-not, I didn't want anyone interrupting this conversation. I still wasn't one hundred per cent sure I could completely trust Snape not to inform Dumbledore of what I was about to say.

Snape remained silent as I did this, his eyebrow lifting the only acknowledgement on his neutral expression. I figured if this goes downhill, I can always go on the run again.
"I know you don't like me Professor Snape, but I want to know what I discuss with you, you will keep in confidence from Dumbledore" I tried my hardest not to let my voice shake while I asked him, because Snape was an excellent actor- to cross Tom it would be literal suicide for anyone else. But here I was asking him to keep secrets from Dumbledore. I raised my head and looked him dead in the eyes and asked, "Can I trust you?"

He looked at me for some time and for a brief moment I thought perhaps he was using legilimency, but I check my shields, and though they weren't perfect I would know if he was doing it.

"Do get on with it Miss Granger I don't have all day", I smiled and took that as a yes.
"I need you to help me improve my occlumency shields. Tom said I should seek..."

"Tom?" I gulped I assumed he would know Tom's real name.

"The Dark Lord," I said quietly watching his reaction.

"Miss Granger...you...he..." I had never seen Snape at a loss for words before, but this was getting ridiculous.

"He said I could trust you, that I would be safe with you if ever anything happened. He likes you."

"You discussed me?" a few emotions crossed his face then went back to stoic again, so I wasn't sure what he decided on.

"Yes...?" I hesitated to offer more,

"Does he...has he..?" I knew where this line of questioning was going.

"Does he know that you are a double agent? Yes, he does, he's known almost the entire time" Snape was already pale, but he paled even more- he looked like he was on the verge of fainting.

"He's not going to kill you. I told you he likes you. He thinks your flirting with death is particularly droll" I couldn't help a small watery smile thinking back to that conversation.
"I'm glad you think this is funny, Miss Granger. But getting on the bad side of the Dark Lord is no laughing matter" he snapped, shielding his eyes with his hand. I rolled my eyes, while I knew that yes if I ever betrayed Tom I would be in for a world of pain. But currently I had no intention of doing so unless he went all *snake face delusions of grandeur* again.

"I am aware. I just spent ten months alone with Tom. I saw him at his worst and his best, he is a complicated individual...but I like him." Snape's facial expression changed to befuddled- like I had seamlessly switched to speaking Swahili. I fiddled with my fingers; I never lasted long under Snape's unrelenting gaze during school and now was no different. "Ha-have you had a meeting yet? Has he called you?" I wanted a small scrap of information. I was a woman parched with a potential oasis shimmering in front of me promising the libation I so vehemently wanted.

"I have not had the pleasure of his...esteemed company yet."

"Can you tell me how he is when you do?" I was hoping he would be agreeable, but I realised I must have looked like some desperate lovesick fool. A vision of Bellatrix crossed my mind then, and I shivered. I was *not* like her.

"I will do my best to endeavour to keep you apprised of his dealings amongst everything else I have to navigate", I wasn't sure if he was serious or derisive.

"Thank you anyway."

"Good luck Miss Granger, I think you will need it with those imbeciles in there" He gestured towards the Burrow, before making the motion to leave.

"Wait!" I yelled probably a little too loud. "Sorry...Do you think...do you think that..."

"Spit it out, Miss Granger. I have things to do!" I flushed at his chastisement.

"What do you think they would do if they knew about Tom and I? About....about our relationship?" I couldn't help but twiddle with the ring Tom made for me. Snape caught the action and his eyes riveted to the simple movement.
He cleared his throat stalling for a little more time to gather his thoughts.

"Miss Granger as much as you love those dimwits over there. They will never understand a relationship between you and the Dark Lord" my heart pounded in my chest threatening to break my rib cage from the unflagging thump. I couldn't explain why it hurt so much more coming from Snape- a bystander. "By the look on your face Miss Granger you know the words are concordant with the uncivilised behaviour earlier. If these feelings are reciprocated...then I warn you to exercise caution. You may not want to hear this, Hermione, but they will place great effort to keep you separated, and they will tell themselves it is for the greater good" I wanted to protest on behalf of my friends and surrogate family, but the catastrophe that was lunch made it evident that there was a kernel of truth to what he said.

I hated the phrase for the greater good; it has done nothing but cause so much suffering. I will not let them railroad me. I will not be their prisoner if it comes to that.

"Miss Granger" he flourished his wand, and a piece of paper appeared in my hand. It looked like an address. "It is for my second home in Hornsmouth; the Death Eaters do not know of its existence or the Order. I will adjust the wards for you in case you find yourself in need of somewhere to hide. But only for you" and with that, he disapparated away with a resounding crack.

I sagged in relief in knowing that I had somewhere to go if I needed too. It was the escaping that would be the tricky part. I looked out over the field again then turned to walk back to the house-the smell of apple pie to tempting to resist.

Getting closer, I could hear voices just on the other side of the fence. I cast a silencio over myself so that I could listen in. I was curious if they were talking about me and my situation.

It was Harry and Ron.

"Do you think he put her under a spell?" I frowned not liking what Ron was implying.

"What? Just because she is uninjured and alive, then she has to have been imperioused? Doubtful" Harry sounded irritated that Ron would even think that.

"Yeah, but she's a you know what and he hates them" I ground my molars together, I choose annoyance instead of crying.

"True, but I get the feeling there is something else going on", the ever perceptive Harry, he never
got enough credit for his intuition.

"Do you think she is angry at me?" I was confused now what was Ron talking about.

"Huh?" Harry, apparently had no idea either what Ron was on about.

"In the chamber of secrets right after she destroyed the Horcrux, I kissed her. I was hoping she would go out with me", there was silence from Harry after that disclosure.

"Oh. Ah, I don't think she is in a position to be in a relationship right now, Ron. A lot is going on", Oh thank you, Harry, for helping me dodge that bullet for now. I don't want to hurt Ron's feelings more than he is already going to be.

I think just before I release the silencio that the science textbook was correct; my little isolated chunk of the world really is going from order to disorder quicker than Harry can yell expelliarmus.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter- Tom and his minions!
I enjoyed writing this chapter! Lots of things happen!
StarDrifter759 I included something in the chapter for you- once I saw your comment!
To everyone else who commented, thanks guys!

*Over at Malfoy Manor- the previous day*

Lucius Malfoy stood in the room swaying slightly on his feet, hoping that the other occupants do not notice that he is...was only mildly inebriated.

He was struggling not to see double vision; he felt the only reasonable explanation as to why he wasn't seeing duplicates of everyone is because of the shock. The disbelief of seeing this dark-haired curly man claiming to be the Dark Lord was just too shocking. And Malfoy's did not do surprises. However, even in his pickled state, he could not readily deny that this wasn't the Dark Lord in disguise.

The magic that seeped out of him and engulfed the room was undeniable; the power was definitely the Dark Lord's. But it was different...less sinister, less like a cold dead fish was rubbing against your skin; a horrible feeling that created equally severe shudders of disgust. The only person that seemed to revel in the sensation was Bellatrix, and everyone that came into contact with the Black woman knew she was a few hippogriffs short of a herd. Lucius snorted ungracefully at his wit, causing the usually proud Malfoy patriarch to pitch sideways and stumble on wobbly feet. He reached out unthinking to steady himself, but in the unbalanced act of reaching out, he knocked his drinks cart making it roll quickly, causing it to hit the wall. The expensive Cumbrian crystal jostled together emitting a long resonating ring; many of the taller stemware toppled over with one tumbling over the edge shattering into numerous shards upon impact.

After all that effort, he still found himself on all fours and world spinning before his eyes.

"Lucius Nicholas Malfoy, you will take yourself upstairs to freshen up. You smell like a distillery and in turn, embarrassing yourself and our family in front of our guest" his lovely, but annoying wife had to point this out in front of said guest shrilly. He didn't appreciate the scolding like a child, though right now he couldn't articulate that thought. Maybe he was drunker than he had realised if only he could get up off the floor. He found it all somewhat emasculating.

The dark-haired man quirked an eyebrow while holding out a hand for Lucius to take. He
attempted to glare at the proffered hand, but instead, the surrounding muscles twitched repeatedly, making it look like he had a facial tic.

He batted the hand away. However, that loss of stabilisation caused him to lurch forward-smacking his forehead against the hardwood timber flooring. He groaned heavily, letting his body slump on to the side, cursing his inability to resist that last nip of Ballanhairn's single malt whiskey. His humiliation was complete with the barely stifled snort of laughter from both the man and his dearest faithful wife.

"Narcissa your hospitality has been gracious as always, and I will not intrude any longer. However, I need to discuss with you some plans I have moving forward when Lucius isn't in the process of trying to preserve himself from the inside out", if Lucius was in a better frame of mind perhaps he would have said that the dark curly-headed man was actually sincere, aside from the apparent distaste in his tone in the last remark about his liquor consumption.

While Narcissa was in the process of helping him up off the floor she promptly let go clapping her hands together- she always got excited at the prospect of entertaining guests- in the action of letting go it meant that Lucius had nothing propping him up, and he once again slumped to the floor. Hearing the thud, Narcissa looked down and sighed.

"Essa! Bartle!", she called out, the sound making Lucius cup his ears in a startled state. Two simultaneous pops resounded nanoseconds later. The accompanying elves were two of four that remained in the Malfoy household. The ones that the Dark Lord didn't kill and the ones he seemed to like. Lucius couldn't understand this line of thinking they were inferior creatures only worthy of servitude! He threw a disgusted look at the creatures, Bartle was dressed in a pale blue pillowcase that was fraying at the seams and Essa in a navy blue one with yellow flowers that was ripped and heavily stained. Pitiful creatures.

"Essa, Bartle could you please take Mr Malfoy up to our bedchambers and give him a sobering up potion. Make sure he showers as well. Also, inform Pip and Gerdie that we will have Lord- "

"Please Narcissa, none of that formality call me Tom", this man Tom interjected, rendering the Malfoy woman temporarily speechless. Lucius just closed his eyes and hoped that this was just some weird hallucination that he was having, albeit not the most exciting one, but after the last few years a welcome reprieve.

"Ah...yes we'll be having T-Tom for brunch tomorrow served at 10 am sharp and then a lunch course at 1:45 pm. Please pull out the best silverware," Lucius watched as she turned sharply back to Tom to give him her full attention. Whereas, he was currently trying to evade the elves unsuccessfully.
"Stop you pathetic creatures get your grimy hands off me!" He yelled at the top of his lungs, his head was sore, and he was angry and frustrated at being treated like this in his own home.

He heard a bored, "stupefy" and then everything went black.

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The Next Day At Malfoy Manor

Lucius woke with a start. His vision blurry-eyed. He won't admit to the fact that it took him longer than it should have to realise where he was. He didn't immediately recall how he ended up in his nightclothes in bed. The last thing he remembered with clarity was hitting the floor face first. Heat rose in his cheeks at least he could wallow in his shame without an audience.

Like all things in Lucius Malfoy's life, it was short-lived.

Bartle appeared at his bedside, causing him to jerk back. The elf started twisting and untwisting the hem of the pillowcase with his small but knobbly fingers. "Mrs Malfoy would like to remind master that brunch will be served shortly", but before he could open his mouth to reply or give it his best haughty sneer the elf disappeared. He groaned and questioned why me? But he knew if he didn't make it down Narcissa would be insufferable and make his life a living hell more so than the Dark Lord.

He got up and tentatively stood next to the bed, alas on shaky legs. He reached for his cane to help him remain upright; he wasn't taking any chances this morning. With a bit of well-practised wandless magic, he dressed in his finest clothes showing off the Malfoy wealth- dressing nicely made him feel more confident. He needed that extra boost of morale to get him through this brunch. He would never admit it out loud that he was nervous about this meeting. Part of him- his sense of self-preservation- screamed that he needed to take his family and run. He was a Slytherin after all. But...there was curiosity as well. He was a proud Malfoy man and this time he would not be intimidated in his own home again.

He walked over to his wife's vanity table and opened the wooden chest that had been in the family for generations. It was made from a laurel tree that was on the Malfoy property in Greece. The family crest had been exquisitely carved into the lid. Lucius quickly perused the contents looking
for pepper up, hangover and revitalisation potions. Once he downed the potions and they kicked in, he steeled his mind and held his head high as he descended the staircase to the ground floor landing, making his way to the dining room.

He reached the entryway to the dining room- not the dining room were Voldemort conducted the death eater meetings, and where we had to watch his snake consume that Burbage woman. He thought that perhaps creating a giant bonfire of that table and chairs would be an appropriate way to get rid of it.

He paused, from this angle, he a perfect view of the man that he knew was the Dark Lord, but his mind was having trouble reconciling the visage before him. Maybe it was some sort of glamour? A trick?

The man was seated, his elbows on the table, brows furrowed in concentration and fingers steepled underneath his chin reminiscent of a prayer pose. He was anything but a holy man.

Tom was not a man. He was a force of nature. You lived from moment to moment with him, never genuinely scratching the surface of who he was. He was untouchable. The only person that he could think of who got close enough to know this Tom Riddle was his father, Abraxas. And he wondered at times if something had been going on between the two men, not that he wanted to think about that.

"Father", a sullen voice spoke from behind him breaking his internal reflections. He turned to look at the pale, grey sunken eyes of his only son Draco.

Tom POV

The last few days, I have been doing some heavy thinking- well more so than I usually do. After leaving Hermione in the field, which made me uncomfortable, but I know she would be safe with those people. They were too wrapped up in their morals to hurt the beloved witch. I apparated to Riddle manor.

The decrepit building heavy with mildew and smelled of decay was rotting away in some areas. I killed a few squatters and then turned their bodies into dust; I have a lot of work ahead of me. I began repairing the damage done to the structure. It will take some time to get the mansion to the point of complete habitability and somewhere Hermione might...live? Cohabitate? Perhaps I was getting ahead of myself with that, but either way, the manor was unliveable.
I wasn't kidding when I told Hermione she wouldn't be able to get rid of me, and now that she said those words I longed to hear but also loathed...well she was stuck with me for life. She was an amazing young woman that I missed, and I never thought I would miss anyone. I missed the smell of the shampoo she uses, I miss the warmth and weight of her body sprawled over mine, and I missed the taste of her skin on my lips and tongue. Sleep was a rather elusive mistress that first night having to sleep alone.

Hermione was my equal. The closest person to being like myself- morality aside. I found my plus one after having to wander the world for seventy years in solitary.

She was unparalleled.

She was a beautiful piece of classical music- both compelling and aggressive with a haunting aria-to ensnare your mind completely. She makes everybody else look like children bashing pots and pans together.

So, here I was in Malfoy manor ready to pitch my deviation from my original plans. I will have to ditch the death eaters and separate myself from them. Radical and controversial, but Dumbledore will not see it coming. He would never believe I would be willing to separate myself from my death eaters, but I am for her. Only for her.

I think back to a conversation we had one night; it was only a few weeks before we returned, we were cuddled in bed, and she was drawing runes on my chest as she spoke.

"What does anybody want Tom? Figure that out, and you will quite literally have the world falling at your feet."

"I don't want to be another Dumbledore, Hermione."

"And what exactly has Dumbledore done for wizarding society? Yes, he's 'taken' out Grindelwald and became the headmaster of Hogwarts. But he hasn't advanced the rights of half-bloods and muggleborns or any other magical creatures. He is this supposed shining beacon of righteousness, but in actuality, he has managed to fool everyone. I think that it is time, Tom to put your Slytherin attributes to use and devise a plan to take Dumbledore down a few pegs. You need to make him look like the bad guy this time. What is the one thing that Dumbledore cherishes?"

"I...don't know."
"He is a lot like you in that he values his reputation. It is his currency, so to speak as Chief Warlock- or was. He has the Wizengamot in the palm of his hand; the majority of them would do almost anything he asked without question. You need to get them onside- no underhanded tactics or threats. Create real genuine emotional responses, get them to fight for you, defend you- he won't be able to counter that. It will just make him seem unstable".

I look up from my shifting thoughts as I hear Narcissa's heels clicking on the floorboards. I plaster on a small smile for the Malfoy matriarch. I had a small soft spot for the woman even as Voldemort, the tiny woman was fierce and formidable. Now she reminded me of Hermione- the two women together would be a force to be reckoned with if they ever got on friendly terms. Narcissa was a sensible woman who didn't buy into the blood prejudice rubbish- in hindsight no intelligent and logical person could. But she was lumped with Lucius. For this, to work, I needed Lucius onside- not the cowering simpering drunk. No, I needed the power-hungry political animal version.

I shift my gaze to the other two Malfoy's now entering the room. Lucius looked clear-headed and eagle-eyed, hopefully not about to mount an assault upon his liver. And Draco, the-boy-who-failed. Not that I will hold that against him, I knew he would fail and thus I have no idea what my soulless self was thinking. My Horcruxes clearly depleted my brain cells, along with my soul.

I stood. I may not have been raised in distinguished households growing up, but I certainly do not lack manners when the occasion calls for it.

"Lucius. Draco. Narcissa", I grasped Narcissa's hand and kissed the back of it as per the custom dictates.

"Tom, so lovely to have you over again...in better circumstances", I laughed, which seemed to startle the two Malfoy men. They were unaware of the friendship between Narcissa and me.

"How can you be laughing with this madman mum when he tortured you!" Draco was incensed, his eyes ablaze. I raised an eyebrow with a small smirk dancing on my lips. I knew of the relationship between my Hermione and this young man. Part of me wanted to pry open his mind and see everything then erase it, but Hermione would be livid with me if I do. Besides, it would negate everything I am about to do.

"Draco sit down. Sit. Down and I will tell you what he did" Narcissa was firm with eyes narrowed and I knew that look. It made many fierce death eaters shrink beneath her, not wanting to cross her. Like that time, I spilt blood on her antique Persian rug in the office I was using at that time. I couldn't sit down for a week- not that I let anyone know I couldn't. He huffed and grunted but
"He didn't torture me... don't interrupt me! He didn't. He set up an elaborate optical illusion and sometimes he would just implant the memories of doing such a thing. We needed to make it look real. He didn't want to torture me, but at the same time, he couldn't not torture me either. Everyone knew we were out of favour, the bottom of the pile. We had always had an odd friendship outside of all this nonsense. He couldn't be seen favouring me; it would have put you, Draco, at a disadvantage, you would have been targeted by the older death eaters. This way, it kept you off their radar. I know it hurt you Draco and Lucius, but it had to look real. Bellatrix as much as she is afflicted by the Black madness... she can be strangely perceptive. And if she even picked up a hint of something wasn't quite right, she would have done something rash, and I couldn't have that. It was my and his way of indirectly keeping you safe", I kept my face neutral as I looked at them they seemed to be weighing her words in their mind. Indeed, I didn't torture her, and it was also true that I couldn't be seen favouring her when Lucius had fucked up and Draco. It also meant I didn't have to torture Draco. Listening to Narcissa talk, made me realise how valid Hermione's words were, 'create real genuine emotional responses, get them to fight for you, defend you.'

"Ok, if you didn't torture my wife, then why are you here?" I sensed that Lucius wanted to argue the point more, but decided to leave it because Narcissa had him pinned with another one of her looks.

Before I could start to explain my thoughts, the floo roared to life in the next room. I already knew who it was. I had summoned Severus Snape before I came hoping he would show before I started explaining things because I didn't want to have to go through it all again.

"Severus", Narcissa rose and greeted her close friend and godfather to Draco. Lucius also stood and shook his hand. He looked cautiously over at me. He most likely presumed to be punished for his few instances of betrayal. Not the case, but it was always fun to watch them sweat.

"My Lord", he was an excellent actor I will give him that, but I could sense the undercurrent of fear coming off him. I used to revel in that feeling- and I still do- but in this instance, that is not going to serve my purpose. He has probably seen my little star.

"Severus, you are not here to be punished. You have seen her I take it?", the room was quiet, the others wondering who I was talking about. I flexed my fingers in front of me, a subtle threat for him not to lie. His eyes dart to the movement and widen marginally as he sees the ring. Good that means she is still wearing hers.

"Do you want to talk about this privately my lord?", he was fidgeting, and Severus never fidgets.
"No Severus, take a seat we can all talk like adults. This is why I summoned you here, my plans have changed, and I would like your input moving forward. Now, have you seen her?" I asked the last question more forcefully than I intended, but I was impatient to know how she was.

"Yes, I have seen her. She seems well considering the circumstances. I wasn't sure if what she spoke of was true..." I understood the implication.

"What circumstances? And what are you asking me, Severus?" I was getting angry and frustrated.

"My lord.."

"Stop!" I snapped. "Call me Tom, Severus."

"Yes...", he clears his throat "Tom. She naturally was interrogated by the order, and they tried to drug her with veritaserum...but she was smart enough to know what they were trying to do. She stared Dumbledore down and gave him a piece of her mind. I was particularly impressed by her tenacity", I smiled at that. I could see her with fire in her eyes spitting venom at the older man for underestimating her.

"Oh Tom!", I frowned at Narcissa's, "you like the girl, don't you?" I scowled.

"The mudblood?" Lucius asked. Four pairs of eyes locked on the Lucius, and he must have sensed the danger. He shrunk back in his chair.

"Never use that word in my presence or hers", I had to be careful how I handled Lucius because I still needed him on board. "Yes, to answer your question Narcissa and that is all I will say about it. My relationship is my business. Severus you will keep me appraised of what happens with Hermione."

"Yes, Tom. She has also requested me to do the same for you. I have given her an address for a residence in case she needs to flee."

"Thank you, Severus", I was grateful for him giving her assistance since I was not in a position just yet to offer her that. It chafed my pride. "Now the reason I wanted to discuss with you aside from Hermione" I looked at Draco. Briefly, I knew that he and Hermione had a relationship in the sixth year- but I wasn't sure if his parents were aware of the affair. His face was red- but I couldn't tell if
it was in anger, embarrassment or something else. "I intend to do away with the Death eaters". I waited for the words to sink in.

"W-what?" Lucius asked in disbelief. I smiled, and I know it was a Cheshire cat smile- full of knowledge they didn’t have.

"Yes, I need to distance myself if I am too accomplish what I am going to do with Hermione."

"She's defected?" Draco asked, surprised.

"No" I shake my head. "She wouldn't defect to the dark side. I am creating a new side a third side- I intend to defeat Dumbledore in a political game rather than a physical one."

"She got to you, didn't she?" Severus asked.

"She reminded me that I could do so much more than I was. Splitting my soul was a disaster and a mistake. I lost track of what I was trying to do. I'm rectifying that now or trying too. No more fighting unless I have too. I want to take over the ministry, but legitimately. Dumbledore is comfortable, but he has made some mistakes, and I think we could take advantage of that. I'm doing away with blood purity as well. More inclusivity for muggleborns and half-bloods, school programs for younger magical children to mix earlier on-"

"But...you can't do that! The pure-" I slammed my hand down upon the table, making it shake, cutting Lucius off.

"Lucius you need to stop that thinking. Stereotypes are barriers to corral your mind into narrow-minded thinking. I'm a half-blood, Severus is a half-blood, Harry Potter is a half-blood, Dumbledore is a half-blood and Hermione is a muggleborn, yet we are stronger magically than most. Whether you want to hear it or not, Lucius, pure-blood lines are dwindling and will die out in roughly two generations. Do you want your great great great grandchildren marrying each other? Our magical population is getting smaller, and I don't just mean because of both wars, but because birth rates are low. Most pure bloodlines are lucky to bear one child let alone two. We need to mix more and encourage more children. Otherwise, there won't be much of a magical population in Britain." I waited, hoping my words would have an effect.

"You've thought about this?" I nodded.
"Of course I have, for much longer than most of you realise. I wasn't satisfied with Cantankerous Nott and his Sacred 28 bull crap- so I did independent study. Yes, even as my soulless self. I saw the trend much earlier than most because you were too involved in your purity lines to notice you were careening towards a cliff. But that is just one facet of my plan. Dumbledore hasn't done as much for the magical world as he could have- too busy moulding and inciting me to be his next big villain. I want to discredit him politically make him look like a fool. Are you in? Drag the Malfoy name out of the dark and be an influence once again" I leant on the table, keeping eye contact.
"Well?"

They all nodded. I pulled a vial out of my pocket and held it out for Severus to take.

He took it silently and just looked at the silver wisps floating around in the glass tube.

"The night the Potter's died. My memory of it, you may want to take a look Severus- I didn't kill them."

"Yo-you didn't...but"

"I didn't, but I couldn't exactly do much about it after I was dead. After that well, there was no point everyone believed what they wanted. Apart from this, I don't have any other evidence, but it may give you some closure, Severus."

"Let me get this straight...Tom. You didn't kill the Potter's, you have your soul back somehow and now want to separate from the Death Eaters and create another group to take over the ministry legitimately and what? Be Minister of Magic?"

"Yes. I don't want to be Minister of Magic. I want to be the force behind the Minister. But enough of that we can discuss details later. Now I need to make a statement-making my separation clear and shake up Dumbledore's world" I rubbed my hands together getting excited for what I was about to propose, but aware it could set things back.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well Cissa, since you asked so nicely, how would you feel if I disposed of your sister?", Draco was drinking as I asked the question so when it registered, he choked and spat the liquid all over himself.

"Murder?" was all she asked.
"I know I said no more killing, but getting rid of her would be beneficial. It would show I'm serious and one less on the other side. Having her still alive would be a safety issue, she would more than likely try to kill all of us." Narcissa swallowed an audible sound. I knew this would be hard for her even though I knew she hated her sister. I had no issues murdering Bellatrix; I did get a perverse pleasure from messier activities.

"You're right, Tom. I don't want to risk our lives knowing she wouldn't have any compunction in killing one of us...and I know she would go after my dragon just to make it hurt more for me", tears welled in her eyes, and I felt uncomfortable, crying women were new for me. It reminded me of Hermione crying in the wagon when Malia died. The scene hit a little too close to home and brought feelings to surface; I'd rather never deal with.

"Alright. Get the elves to lay down some plastic in the dungeons. This is going to get rather messy...and if we get a few more death eaters....well more the merrier". I could barely contain my glee. I hoped Hermione would forgive me for this because I am also doing this for her. Bellatrix would go after her in a heartbeat if she ever found out about my connection to her.

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Hermione Back at the Burrow- The Next Day

I had concealed the piece of paper that had Snape's secret residence in my bra- very secretive. Just until I could get up to Charlie's room that night. I had spent the rest of the day and evening reconnecting with the Weasley's, Tonks and Remus. I tried to push everything that had happened earlier to the back of my mind and focus on getting them to trust me again. I could feel the divide, and I didn't like it. I understood their wariness because the imperious curse was used rather frequently on the other side. I made a mental note to talk to Tom about that.

It was a new day the world hadn't exploded overnight, so I'll take that small win.

The order was still content with the status quo. The more I had spoken to Tom at length about particular issues that I felt he would understand or have an opinion on; I realised I wasn't entirely happy with the Light side either. Everyone seemed to be content to live with varying degrees of ignorance like muggle-born and half-blood inclusivity. Anything muggle still seemed to be looked at with scorn or something lesser than. While Tom loathes muggles- he still had a healthy respect for their technological advancements. But he also lived through world war two and saw the destruction first hand.

It was a point of frustration for me that even if the Death Eaters where defeated muggleborns would sit be in the same place, we are now. Rampant prejudice notwithstanding - but that quiet undercurrent would still be there — a different kind of discrimination than we are fighting against
now. I sighed, would I ever need to stop fighting?

A screamed reverberated around the Burrow, and I immediately reached for my wand. I had kept it hidden as well because I wasn't sure if Severus was allowed to give me my wand or he just ignored the directive. There was running up the stairs, a heavy thumping that indicated running at speed — then banging on the door.

"Hermione!" Ron yelled, "Open up!"

I stuffed my wand quickly in my beaded bag and ran to the door, but it burst open before I could get to it. Ron was red-faced and breathing heavily.

"Mione you have to see this. We think you're in danger! He's obsessed with you!" I scrunched my face up in confusion. What in merlin's name is he talking about? He practically dragged me down the stairs at full pelt. I nearly slipped multiple times, trying to keep up with his pace. The ambience was strange; it was a weird mixture of repulsion, relief, confusion and...joy?

I saw Harry standing by the window; he looked lost in thought.

"Harry" he turned and gave me a calculating look. He was trying to figure something out, I felt like squirming I didn't like the feeling of being under a microscope.

"Look out the window, but be warned it's...a little intense", I was getting concerned now, but I took a deep breath and looked out the window. Just in the edge of the boundary out the front of the Burrow was...oh my God! I turned to the side, and dry heaved. Harry or Ron rubbed my back until nausea subsided. I wiped my mouth on the edge of my t-shirt sleeve and looked back up more prepared for what I was looking at.

I walked out the front door to get a closer look. As I neared the older members of the order were standing off to the side in a discussion. My eyes widen, as clear as day were the decapitated heads of Bellatrix and Dolohov on pikes. I could feel the nausea roll again, but I kept it down. Next to the heads, was a large crate filled with Curly Wurlys.

I laughed, the first proper laugh in days.
I laughed.

The situation was so absurd that I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I was conflicted and worried and scared. I laughed, and I am sure I looked like some pale version of Bellatrix. I had so many different emotions flowing through me that I couldn't process them fast enough. I felt like I was either going to burst or collapse in on myself.

I was afraid of what this meant. The dynamic of everything was going to change rapidly- what did this mean in the grand scheme of things?

Soon my manic laugh turned into a choked sob, and I could taste the sharp tang of salt on my tongue- I hadn't even realised I had tears gently flowing down my cheeks.

"Are you alright 'Mione?" I rolled my eyes. I hated that nickname, but I didn't have the heart to dissuade my best friends to stop using it. I wiped the corners of my mouth where the salty moisture had started to gather, then brushing my hands down my shirt, giving me ample time to ponder the simple question, was I okay?

On the one hand, I was relieved that Bellatrix and Dolohov were no longer part of the world anymore. I should be ashamed of myself for even being okay with what Tom had done, but I couldn't bring myself to care. These were horrible human beings who enjoyed killing and destroying lives. Azkaban wouldn't have been enough, as much as everyone on the light side
preached sending criminals through the justice system, some of the Death Eaters were too far down the road of pure unadulterated evil. The wizarding world was lacking when it came down to dealing with criminals, and they certainly couldn't deal with these types of offenders. I doubt Azkaban would have held them for very long considering the state it was in at the moment. No, death was the only way.

"Yeah, it's just a bit much to process at the moment..." I trailed off not needing to elaborate; further, we were all thinking along the same lines. Harry removed his glasses and begun using the hem of his shirt to wipe the smudged fingerprints along the bottom edge of the optical lenses. He had developed the habit of fiddling with the frame when he was stressed or restless. Thus, they were often heavily blemished.

Ron slung his arm around me, gripping the curve of my shoulder firmly, I couldn't help but compare his touch to Tom's. There was no swarm of butterflies in my stomach or a warm feeling spreading throughout my limbs. Even if Tom and I were never to be, I knew without a doubt that I could never feel that way about Ron- only brotherly affection.

"You're safe with us now 'Mione, that slimy git won't get within two feet of ya" I tried to smile, but I think it must have looked more like a grimace.

"Disgusting ain't it? Crazy bitch got what she deserved. Maybe all the scummy Death Eaters will take each other out then we won't have to deal with it? Be funny if a stray curse got Voldy”, I could feel some of the blood vacate my head, leaving me light-headed. If Ron didn't have such a tight grip on me, I most likely would have swayed or stumbled.

If Tom was cleaning house then I feared for his safety, he was one man, not a god, he couldn't take on all those minions if they decided to turn all at once. They were fanatical; they weren't going to suddenly drop everything because he said so. More so the pureblood followers like Bellatrix's husband Rodolphus, I doubt he would stand by and do nothing after this. They...they would probably form their faction and carry on the fight. It was stupidly naïve of me to believe that Tom adjusting his goals would cease the war. But perhaps it would mean that Dumbledore would be distracted by this turn of events.

"Why the wurly curls or whatever?" I hadn't been paying attention to the conversation between Harry and Ron. Instead I was staring at the severed heads on the lawn. The buzzing was getting louder as more blowflies and flesh flies joined in the frenzied activity. It was gruesome and exciting to watch. The air had a metallic edge, the closer you got to the heads.

"I don't know Ron. Who cares anyway, he just killed two of his best death eaters!" Harry yelled, which startled me.
"What's with all the flies?" Ron asked with a puzzled look on his face.

"They are attracted the *apeneumones* that is released from a body when it dies. Humans cannot smell it, but insects do. Blowflies, those large flies that have the colouring on their thoraxes and the flesh flies those slightly smaller ones with black and white stripes, will have arrived almost immediately after death, and they would have already started laying eggs in the flesh", it was easy to fall back on knowledge and detach myself from what I was looking at, giving a clinical answer was soothing.

"Eww, how the hell do you know that?", I shrugged, they should already know the answer to that. I tore my gaze away from Bellatrix and Dolohov, hoping the image that has been seared into my psyche won't make an appearance in any nightmares.

"Yeah but.." I zoned out of their conversation and started watching the adults, Remus was staring at me as he was talking to Kingsley and Arthur with a critical gaze. Molly, Tonks and McGonagall wherein another spot talking sneaking glances in my direction when they thought I wasn't looking. I started to feel boxed in. They were talking about me; well, I think they were. I decided to go inside and go up to my room. I peeled Ron's arm off me and slowly walked towards the front door, not wanting to seem too eager to remove myself from their scrutiny. I closed the door behind me and sighed a breath of relief. One of the windows was open a crack, and I could hear the conversation between the women.

"Poor girl has been through so much."

"How has she been holding up?"

"Okay, I guess, mostly stays in her room. Except at lunch yesterday when she went off at Dumbledore."

"I heard about that, quite the glare she picked up."

"If she just took the serum, we could get some definitive answers."

"I understand her point about privacy, though..."
"But the fact that she is hiding something is suspicious."

"I mean look at that...there has to be a reason he staked the heads here of all places."

"He knows we're here, so we are going to have to move to a safer location."

"Can you make a list of preparations? and I'll divvy up the jobs."

"He's stalking her. Why else would he kill Bellatrix and Dolohov? And then leave a crate of chocolate?"

"He's like a cat that leaves dead things at the door, hoping for a scrap of attention."

"She'll be safer when we move. He won't know where she is, and she doesn't have her wand so she can't do anything rash."

"I feel a little bad doing this to Hermione...."

"I know Tonks, but it will be safer in the long run for everyone involved. We have to think of everyone in the order, not just Hermione and go through all possible scenarios. Constant vigilance as Moody would always say. I'm sure she understands our precautions even if she might not want to at the moment."

"Don't you think that it is strange that she is alive? It makes you wonder what she did do, not to be tortured..."

"You're not suggesting?"

"I'm saying none of us knows what to think of this situation."

"Maybe Dumbledore was right; maybe He corrupted her mind..."
I couldn't listen anymore as I felt my heart breaking and feeling as though I was being torn in two. This is what they thought? I mean, I knew they had to have some thoughts like this but to hear it confirmed hurt. It felt like having a blade thrust into my gut and its jagged edges pulling and tearing through the skin in the most painful way. I choked back a sob, feeling that prickle in my nose as I tried not to cry again. I made my way up to Charlie's room deep in thought, attempting to shift my thoughts from their opinions of my character.

I knew why Tom killed Bellatrix and Dolohov, that much was obvious. He was protecting me and exacting revenge in one fell swoop. I wasn't sure on the reasoning for placing them here other than for me to see. And Possibly Dumbledore? My worry was the backlash; it was hard to predict how everyone would receive this news. Well, honestly, it would probably be hard for people not to celebrate openly. A parade through Diagon Alley? Bellatrix and Dolohov weren't liked at all, even in the circles they roamed in. This will send waves through the community, which is probably also why he did it- It will daze and confuse people- although it would be advantageous for Tom to keep it quiet for the meantime. The wizarding world was again wired to blow and waiting for that spark to ignite it.

I looked around the room and noted the few books I had stacked around. I contemplated my options- I needed to leave. I didn't want to leave Harry and Ron again, but I would not be subjected to the Order's distrust and methods of rectifying that lack of faith.

The more I thought about it, the more my vexation rose. I had given all of myself to the cause and protected Harry through school, and then missing our seventh year- including wiping the memories of my parents. My irritation soon tumbled into bitter resentment. The heart of the matter up until the incident in the forest was that I had done quite a lot to get to where we were at that point. The adults had hardly contributed anything when it was them that should have been taking this burden off of our shoulders. Why was it left up the three teenagers, well me to solve a dilemma of this size? I will never forgive them for that. Hindsight was a pain in the arse. What I didn't understand, aside, from Dumbledore leaving us the monumental task of finding the Horcruxes and destroying them- was that he didn't confide in someone from the Order about it. We could have worked in tandem, and if something had happened to us...like in Malfoy Manor and we didn't make it out alive, they could have continued searching and eliminating them. I have always prided myself on being prepared, but Tom was right; we were lucky. Too much foolish bravery and teenage invincibility. We could have used some advice from people who were experienced in these situations. We may not have listened to said advice, but it would have been good to have a proper sounding board, and also so we didn't feel like we were so alone. Damn Dumbledore. Why did we blindly listen to everything he said without question?

Frustrated, because after all of that, they didn't trust, I still had the best interests of everyone at heart. I was corrupted by Tom's forked tongue. A bloody amazing tongue. But, I wasn't the type of girl to swoon and drop everything I believed in because an attractive man smiled at me. Who did they think I was? I wasn't some harlot.
Unfortunately, if they were to discover the whole truth about Tom and I's relationship in the current unrest, I would essentially be caged in that safe house—much as I am now. With even more distrust. I would be left out of everything and told nothing.

A housekeeper.

A traitor.

A prisoner.

Being confined in that safe house would be my metaphorical scarlet letter. I would never be left alone until the war ended, or they got tired of being my warden. I don't know if Harry and Ron's friendship with me would survive such a thing.

No, I need to leave. I had to figure out my escape. The longer I linger, the worse or complicated my precarious situation will become. I doubt Dumbledore will let another day of me refusing to answer any more questions go by, mainly after Tom gifted us those hideous lawn ornaments.

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**At Malfoy Manor—Severus**

Severus had been having one of those mornings where everything just...well if he were in the right frame of mind to properly articulate his feelings he would have come up with something that sounded like he had an actual education. But no, he was stressed and sweating.

_The shit had just hit the fan, and it became real._

He wouldn't say it out loud lord knows he doesn't need the entirety of the wizarding population to look at him like he was two bulbs short of a bushel. But, the muggle phrasing summed the situation up succinctly.

The man formerly known as the Dark Lord—Tom—thought baiting and taunting Dumbledore would be a good idea. Was Severus the only sane person around, with a lick of common sense? He had told Tom to hold off and do it quietly—start picking the death eaters off slowly before they realised what was going on. But no, the idiot just had to make a dramatised re-entry into society. He surmised that the snake faced version and the attractive young man weren't so different concerning
some aspects of their personality.

And now the disbanded death eaters had somehow been informed of the *axing* of their two leading members. If he makes it through the war unscathed, he was going to take a long *quiet* holiday- *somewhere remote*— *without people*— to make up for all this rubbish he had to deal with now.

He stopped outside the white panelled, gold-gilded door, that looked like it belonged in the 17th century— which knowing the Malfoy's it probably did and tried to straighten his robes as best he could. He wasn't one for his appearance, but, still he didn't need to look entirely like he had stood in front of a wind tunnel. He knocked his knuckles confidently against the wood and waited politely for entry.

"*Come in*" the disembodied voice penetrated the blockade of timber, paint and solid gold. He yanked the antique gold hand down in a practised movement that gave credence to his half-muggle heritage. He didn't use magic for everything, as most pure-blooded wizards often did. Seriously, it was just quicker to open the damn door with the handle.

Tom was facing away from Severus, and the first thing he noticed was that the former Lord was not wearing wizarding robes. No, he was dressed in muggle jeans and a forest green polo shirt. He looked his age if not slightly younger. It was a stark contrast to the robes he was wearing yesterday.

However, when he turned the fury that was swirling in his blue orbs made the words Severus was going to say die on his lips.

Tom picked up the newspaper that was on the desk and set it aflame in his hands. The firelight that shifted across his face as he watched the paper disintegrate into ash made him look positively demonic.

"*How did this happen, Severus?*" Severus twitched almost imperceptibly at the harsh tone Tom snapped out. He fought the urge to tell the former Lord, *I told you so*. But that would be counterproductive and result in the possible loss of a hand.

"*Tom...*" it was still strange and disconcerting to call this man anything but Lord, "I am not sure how this information was released, but I would hazard an educated guess at Dumbledore. He would undoubtedly be unable to resist the opportunity to turn the death eaters upon you instantly" he drawled out trying to keep his voice even, with no hint of emotion.
"I know", Tom slammed his hand down on the desk, much like yesterday discharging an infinitesimal amount of frustration. Severus watched as he raked a hand through his curly hair. "I wanted time Sev..." and he caught the curly-haired man's gaze- the blue penetrating his.

"It would be best in terms of your safety t-" he carried on despite the uneasy feeling prickling at his skin. Was Tom trying to use legilimency? Not very subtle if he was for the heir of Slytherin.

"I don't give a flying fuck about my safety!" he exploded. It rendered the potion master speechless; his jaw hung slightly in a rather unflattering way before he regained composure. "I care about Hermione. She is important. I l-..." he watched as Tom's face scrunched up like he was swallowing something foul. He couldn't mean... No, he shook his head the dark wizard wasn't one for such things. But, he did appear to care about the young Miss Granger.

"It was inevitable that they would wish to decimate me for my 'blood traitor' deceit, but they weren't supposed to focus in on her." He watched Tom push his fingertips into his eyes, attempting to relieve some pressure.

"I didn't want to have to bring this up as a possible point of discussion, but have you considered that distancing yourself from her might be..." Severus paused as Tom gave him a murderous look, "Only...only as a necessary action to reduce the target on her back", he was ashamed of the stutter to get that last sentence spoken. It was always a point of pride for him to maintain his astute no-nonsense facade. The raw emotion that Tom was displaying made him let down a guard or two, besides he didn’t want to face the brunt of the man's wrath.

He could hear Tom grinding his teeth and tapping his index finger on the edge of the desk, excogitating over the serious matter.

He locked gazes once again with the man, wondering if he came to any kind of decision.

"I'll think about it. It's not something I wish to do. I already despise being away from her in this capacity", before Severus could inquire further a hesitant knock sounded on the antique door. Lucius Malfoy entered before anyone could either deny or permit access. He looked back to Tom, who just had a raised eyebrow in question. Severus noted that this iteration of the dark Lord was much more forgiving, previously this simple transgression in proper etiquette would have resulted in Lucius being under Tom's wand writhing in agony. He was more relaxed, and he certainly didn't want to think about him touching Miss Granger in an intimate fashion. He halted his thoughts from progressing any further with that train of consciousness because he didn't want to deal with an irate possessive man, who was still dark and powerful despite his change of visage. He decided the best course of action was to focus on what Lucius was saying.
"- also we have shut all the floos to prevent unwanted visitors. The manor is more secure than what it was during the war, well...er...umm...the previous" Lucius paused unable to find a word to describe the entanglements of the past, so he just made a boorish gesture with his hand and continued, "it's now completely impenetrable. A veritable fortress", Lucius finished looking more proud than Severus had ever seen the man in the past few years. That being said, they were relieved of some of the burdens and stressors such as not having the immediate threat of being murdered every minute of every day by that snake faced maniac.

Tom's eyes narrowed, a sharp and cunning look claimed his features.

"Not completely Lucius", Lucius looked momentarily crestfallen, then panic suddenly took over. It would be a while before they divested themselves of the habit of flinching when Tom disagreed. "You have done a good job Lucius, however, you have overlooked one key aspect which neither of us thought of before. Do you know what that is?" Tom sat on the edge of the desk, lacing his fingers together in his lap, waiting patiently for someone to answer. Severus hesitated because he wasn't sure where this was going, but he figured a lesson was about to happen. He knew that Malfoy Manor was possibly the most secure building in the country- barring Gringotts and Hogwarts. But he wasn't confident in that assessment due to historical events.

"The house-elves!" Tom exclaimed. Then Severus thought he ought to have known that, and Lucius for that matter, because that was how the Golden Trio and Co escaped the manor, with Dobby after they were captured. In hindsight, it was apparent.

"Yesss...the elves have exceptional magic and can virtually bypass all our safeguards the same as the goblins. So, Lucius gather your elves and ask them nicely to place their protection wards around the grounds. Rodolphus may be thick-headed at times, but he can be crafty when he wants to be. Besides, I wouldn't put it passed the order to try something either. We will not take any chances with our safety." He observed as Tom didn't wait for a reply and hopped off the corner of the desk and went back to looking out the window again. They took that as a dismissal and to take their leave.

Severus headed towards the front entryway to apparate out. He was one of the only people authorised to do so. He had a few errands to run before he returned to the Burrow. He was sure the Order and residents would be frothing at the mouth after the stunt Tom pulled. While he wished Tom had listened to his advice, he still felt a sliver of satisfaction at the chaos it would cause them. He couldn't stop the unfamiliar tugging of his lips in an upward manner. Maybe it was a smile perhaps it wasn't, but one thing was sure that Dumbledore would soon get his comeuppance.

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The Burrow- Hermione
It was very late. I had been lingering downstairs in the kitchen drinking copious amounts of coffee to the point I was probably three seconds away from bouncing off the walls. My hands were visibly shaking from the extreme caffeine injection. I overdid it; I know I did. I was nervous and paranoid that someone would know what I was doing. I was very aware that I wasn't a great deceiver.

I had packed everything that I would need into my beaded bag and transfigured it into a thin gold chain around my throat. You could hardly notice it. I stuck my wand down my bra and wore a loose t-shirt to make it not so obvious I had it back. Being in my pyjama pants wasn't ideal, but I did have to sell it. Besides I could transfigure them if needed.

My plan was simple- make it across the boundary ward, which I knew would go off once I crossed it. I would have mere seconds to disapparate away- to the Forest of Dean- set up my encampment as quickly as I could and hide. I wasn't sure if they had placed a tracker on me or not, it wasn't the type of magic I could wade through without a wand.

Going to the forest again was an obvious move on my part, but the district was an incredibly large area. I needed time to break the tracking magic; once I did that, I would move again. Once I felt it was safe to do so I would apparate to London, change my appearance and purchase a ticket for the last train to take the northern line to Berwick-Upon-Tweed. From there, I can make my way to Snape's safe house. I figure taking the train would be a safe option; I can't imagine many wizards attempting to take muggle transportation.

I cupped my mug with both hands and brought it up to my lips. I paused and savoured the heat seeping into my fingers before taking a small sip. I closed my eyes for a moment and let the espresso warm my insides as I swallowed it down.

A swishing of fabric broke the silence of the house. I stayed stock still until the person materialised from the shadows. It was Harry.

"Hermione, what are you still doing up?" His voice mildly surprised and still thick with sleep.

"I was thinking", I smiled but realised he probably couldn't see it too well in the dark. I went with a vague non-committed answer. I didn't want to lie outright unless I had to. The silence stretched on, which made me uncomfortable before he finally said something.

"You're going aren't you?", I tensed, ready to spring up and bolt if I had too. I wasn't sure how to answer without giving myself away. I hadn't anticipated Harry asking me point-blank.
"Why do you say that?" I almost slapped myself in the pathetic way I sounded.

"I know you, and I know something is going on, not just with you but with Dumbledore too. I just can't work it out. He's been strange since he has been back, but...I'm unsure who to trust." I was a little shocked that Harry admitted that, most of the time, he was happy to follow Dumbledore's every move. But, I was also pleasantly pleased that he was starting to see Dumbledore's duplicitous nature.

"I don't know what to tell you", and I didn't. Part of me wanted to tell Harry everything, but at the moment I couldn't trust that he would tell the order—especially Remus.

"Hermione..."

"No, Harry, I have made my mind up." I stood and walked over to the sink, slamming the mug down a little too hard. I turned back to him, leaning against the countertop. "Don't try and stop me."

"You're going to him? Leaving us again?", he yelled in an angry whisper. Even in the dark, I could see his hands curled into tight fists, and his jaw locked gritting his teeth.

"No" not yet. "I'm going on my own", he stepped up in the centre of the kitchen casting a *lumos* so he could look me in the eye. *Where did he pull his wand from?* His face was a mixture of angry and distressed. My heartstrings pulled a little and guilt *again* settled over me like a thick heavy blanket. I tried to step away, wanting to wrap my arms around my waist—comfort myself that I was making the right decision. I feared if he got any closer my resolve would crumble and I would give in.

I wanted to beg and plead for him to forgive me for doing this again—*not that the first time was my fault.*

"Why? You would be safer with us not out there with a target on your back!" He started in again; his words had a desperate sort of pleading underscored with resentment and resignation. He knew I would go and not be swayed so easily.

"I do not have a target on my back!" his face twisted in puzzlement and I thought for a split second that I had missed something essential but dismissed it instantly. "I'm going because I will not stay here and be treated like a prisoner", my anger at the situation overcame my guilt, and I approached
him poking him *hard* in the chest. "I will *not* stay here and be stamped a traitor or...or...or...accused of being cursed by Tom", I was so irritated that I hadn't even realised my mistake the moment it slipped out.

Harry's eyebrows shot to his hairline, and he spluttered for a moment trying to find words *any words* to articulate his jumbled thoughts. He seemed too stunned to form a sentence, the words slipping through his mind like a sieve- because he opened and closed his mouth, but only incoherent sounds escaped.

"You...you called him *Tom*?" he went with disbelief, and I rolled my eyes in annoyance.

"That's his name, isn't it? What did you think I called him while we were in the past? Voldemort?" I, however, went with sarcasm. It was his name, *so what the hell did it matter?*

"But he's evil" he protested weakly while subconsciously rubbing his scar. I wondered if he felt anything now that Tom was...re-souled.

"Does it hurt anymore?" I couldn't contain my curiosity. He frowned but not at the question; his brows knitted together in concentration.

"Strangely...no. It feels like a regular scar now", he sighed and put his wand arm down by his side. "Are you sure I can't change your mind? Ron will be devastated" I shook my head vigorously, my chest tightened at the mention of Ron. I refused to be guilt-tripped into staying.

"No Harry, as much as it pains me to do it. I have more self-respect than to stay" I reached for his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, reassuring him that I will be fine. "Things will work out Harry, but I cannot stay here- it hurts to see the looks they give me, and it also makes me livid. I would hate it if they treated you like that, so is it too much to expect it in reverse?" he nodded in agreement.

"You're right. I know it's not okay what they're doing, but I don't know what else to do?" I hummed in understanding. It was a messy situation we found ourselves in and one I hoped to help untangle, but not here with them. I pulled him in for one last hug as it may be the last one for a long time.

"Goodbye Harry, stay safe okay?" tears welled, and my voice cracked with emotion. But I wouldn't break down now- I needed to focus on apparating and not splinching myself.
"Bye" replied Harry forlornly thinking and knowing that it would be the last time I saw him for a while. I released him and stepped back hesitating for a split second at the sudden awkwardness. I went to say something, but I snapped my mouth shut, letting it go. Like I'm letting Harry go.

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**The Burrow 31 hours later- Harry**

Harry watched as they all -despite the tiredness- were talking in hushed tones trying to figure out why Hermione did what she did. The thought they were pretty stupid if they couldn't figure it out. Hermione was a proud girl, and she wouldn't stand for being treated poorly- especially by people she trusted.

What he didn't realise for a few minutes after she left and all hell broke loose at the burrow, was that she didn't know about the newspaper article. Maybe he should have pushed more, but Hermione has a way of steamrolling forward; after she dropped his name, he forgot all about it. He hopes she will be careful and not do anything to put herself in danger.

He noticed his old potions professor coming from outside with his pitch-black robes billowing behind him. He often wondered whether Snape spelled the robes to do that, they seemed to move not quite naturally. He snorted to himself, why was he putting so much thought into Snape's garment choices? He was looking down at his feet while those thoughts filtered across his brain.

Until suddenly, his arm was yanked sideways, the fingers clutching his upper arm dug in holding him in a vice grip. He looked up to see Snape looking furious. Harry blinked rapidly thinking that was quick.

Snape pulled him outside and pushed him roughly against the exterior wall of the Burrow and throwing up a *muffliato* so they wouldn't be heard. This must have been important because he had only seen the unflappable man ruffled a handful of times.

"Where is she?" Harry tipped his chin up defiantly not giving an inch despite his instincts, telling him to divulge what he knows. But he still couldn't let his guard down around this man who made his school life difficult.

"I'll take that expression as a no." He watched the man cover his eyes, "Damn infuriating woman I swear he is going to lop something off if I don't find her" he heard Snape mumble under his breath. He didn't think he was privy to listen to that, but he heard it none the less. The information should
have alarmed him that Vol-Tom was seeking out Hermione, while it did induce an uneasy sensation, he didn't think that him wanting to find her stemmed from malicious intent. It went against all his previous experiences with Voldemort, but he couldn't stop thinking about that moment when they returned the casual intimacy they displayed. He prayed that this wasn't a trap and that Hermione would be safe.

"Professor" Harry attempted to catch Snape's attention, but the man was still muttering to himself, not noticing that Harry remained in front of him. "Professor" he tried again more forcefully- this time the man looked up from his internal musings. He didn't say anything just looked at Harry as if to say _hurry up Potter spill it already._

"I think that if she went anywhere to hide, at least initially, she would go back to the Forest of Dean where we hid while looking for the Horcruxes" Harry held his ground, confident in his assessment. He may not be as smart as Hermione, but he did _know_ her.

"Well let's just hope she doesn't foolishly get captured again" the potions master spun and apparated away with a loud crack- the sound was similar to a large tree branch being broken in half. Harry sagged against the wall, wondering as he noticed a gnome out of his peripheral scurrying back under some bushes, whether he would have been better to disappear with Hermione.
Four days after leaving the Burrow...

I had packed everything up relatively confident that I was ready to apparate to London to catch the train. There was no tracking spell upon me, which I found very surprising. Being in the tent on the run again, well all I can say is that I hope never to see the inside of that tent ever again.

It was raining and while mildly protected from the rainfall due to the canopy; I couldn't resist one more peak out at the open fields. I loved thunderstorms. The clouds that hung low in the sky were a dark tumultuous grey and the precipitate that pummelled the ground unfailingly upturned the soil releasing a petrichor to wash over the landscape; giving a renewed vitality to the fields ready to cultivate new life.

It was simplistic — a complete juxtaposition to my own life.

The countryside was darkening, like the HB shaded sky was slowly melting into a pencilled 6B. Moments later, the lightning burst forth, a hot white electrical charge forking an undetermined path, crackling like an exposed live-wire. The photons it emitted were like a momentous camera flash, that blanketed the landscape all at once. A deep rumbling followed, a pause, then the sudden expansion of air clapped so loud that if I were inside a house, the foundations would have shaken.

I looked at my watch, and the time was nearing the departure of the train, I had better get moving; otherwise, I would miss it, and that means another night in the tent.

A prickling sensation at the base of my neck, made me turn because it felt like I was being watched. More lightning flashed in the distance, the light filtered through enough of the forest to illuminate briefly the two figures standing only feet away from me. The roll of thunder must have disguised the crack of apparation. I only recognised one-Rodolphus Lestrange.

My fingers curl around my wand so tightly that I imagined the wood creaking and white bleeding into my knuckles. Fear spikes within me, adrenaline rushing through my veins. My heart beats and pumps like it is actively trying to escape my rib cage. I keep my face as much as I can from showing them how afraid I am because they are sadistic enough to enjoy it.

I am so surprised that I am struggling with keeping a clear head. I want to run; my fight and flight response is screaming run. I apparate quickly, but only end up in another section of the forest. I am
out of practice with duelling, and I know I can take on one, but two? I have no chance. I stifle a
sniffle- I need to think. A bright pink jet of light strikes just above my head startling me that I
stumble back. Only to have another dark blue explode at my feet, making me then jump. Pricks. I
nearly lose grip of my wand.

I breathe through my nose harshly turning and start flinging spells not thinking about what it is I
am shooting. At this point, it doesn't matter. I don't care.

"You can't run you, little mudblood whore!"

"You corrupted the Dark Lord!"

"He deserves to be tortured alongside you for going against the cause!"

"I'm going to enjoy breaking you, Mudblood bitch."

A multitude of spells was flying around our heads. It lit up the forest, like those multicoloured
party lights strung up around a patio. I take a step to the left and nanoseconds later a distinctive jet
of green hit the spot where I had just been standing. My adrenaline catapulted ten levels to the
point I wanted to vomit. My saliva thickened in my throat and beads of sweat were trickling down
the side of my face. I didn't know how much longer I could keep this up. They were relentless.
Then again, they had experience in spades compared to me. I kept throwing spells, hexes and some
curses- if only the order could see me now. I was fatiguing, the muscles in my arm were
protesting under the constant strain of flicking, swishing, jabbing and twirling. But I wasn't going
to give up until the very end. It wasn't like I wasn't a match for them. I did get in some things like
setting Rodulphus's robes on fire, a few well-placed slicing hexes and my infamous Avis charm,
which sent those small birds with razor-sharp beaks at- whom I now knew as Rabastan- at his head.

I had to sidestep again, duck, run for cover- the side of the tree exploded showering me in bark and
leaves. I crouched down twisted on the balls of my feet and shot out a few spells in quick
succession. Then I half stood to get up.

My mother used to say that the things that change someone's life the most aren't the significant
events like a wedding or graduating, but it's the little things that happen in a split second. A simple
slip and fall, a single word, or a collection of things that brings the tension to a catalyst and it
detonates- then nothing is the same ever again.
Well fuck. Was my only thought.

A vague part of me was aware I was falling to the ground. Another more prominent part was aware that I got struck in the legs with something. The pain was so intense that I wanted to scream, the kind of pain that overrides everything because your nerves are in agony; pain receptors are drowning. I hit the ground face first, damp earth and rotting leaf matter coated one side of my face. I opened my mouth to try to breathe in, but my lungs felt as though they were wrapped in razor wire. I couldn't feel my legs, and that added to my already overwhelming stress.

I struggled, gasping and clawing at the ground, black spots clouded my vision and the last thing to cross my mind as everything went black was Tom.

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**Severus- Six days after his conversation with Harry**

He wasn't going even to deny the fact that he was sincerely getting worried about the Granger girl. He thinks he was on the verge of actually getting grey hair from this.

He could tell that Tom was beside himself with worry and he had never seen the former Dark Lord like this. The man was on the precipice of going on a homicidal rampage - Severus knew he wanted to leave the Manor and start his searching, but keeping his face unknown to the general public was an advantage we needed to have. If they were going to bring the Ministry to our side, then we needed to separate Tom as much as possible from the violence of his former minions and the order. None of them may like it but remaining in the confines of the Manor was paramount for now. A plus point was that Narcissa was letting him take out his anger on some trees she wanted cleared to make a new garden bed.

He had also periodically gone to his Hornsmouth cottage to check for any disturbances or activity, and there was none. He considered going back to Harry to see if she had made contact with him or the obnoxious redhead. But he ultimately decided against it for now.

Severus sat at his desk in his home in Spinner's End, going through some notes on a potion he was researching, one he had hoped to create as a replacement to the Dreamless Sleep potion. The potion, while worked, was incredibly addictive. He was still at the stage at looking in depth at each ingredient to see how they interacted with each other, and what could be a possible replacement without inducing the addictive effect. Tom had been consulting with him, it was keeping the man distracted, and he was an indubitable trove of information. A very unorthodox thinker.
An owl tapped it's beak on the window rather emphatically. He hurried to the window, not someone who got owls regularly he didn't have the facilities to accommodate the winged annoyances. He managed a digestive biscuit for the bird, and it went on its way.

He quickly scanned the letter; it was just Dumbledore wanting any information on Tom. He hadn't seen the man in a few days, which was fine since he needed to locate Hermione. He was hoping to do so before the order while he was concerned for her welfare in regards to her relationship with Tom- which he still couldn't get his mind around. It appeared above-board considering how Tom had been behaving.

The vial Tom gave him of his memories the night the Potter's died caught his eye. He had tentatively watched some of it; he couldn't get through all of it. He didn't think he could bare seeing Lily's body again. He had his memories of that night, but seeing it from Tom's point of view...was the same but different. He hadn't been able to get past James' body in the living room, but the look on Voldemort's face at seeing the already dead man was comical. He would have laughed if it wasn't in a morbid set of circumstances. That alone made him convinced that Tom was telling the truth. He had also run multiple tampering spells on it to see if it had been altered it hadn't.

He sighed he may as well go, the older man may let something slip that could be useful. He gathers up his notes and will take them with him in case he gets a burst of inspiration.

He apparates directly into the front garden of Dumbledore's residence, then knocks at the front door. The older man opens the door and gestures for him to enter.

"I wasn't expecting you to come so soon Severus" he had to resist the urge to do the uncouth action of rolling his eyes. The man wouldn't have sent the missive if he didn't want him to come as soon as he physically could- he had been dealing with this man for decades now.

"I didn't have anything pressing that couldn't wait a few minutes to answer your questions", he trailed along behind Dumbledore, eventually reaching his office. He took a seat and placed his notes of the edge next to a pile of paperwork on a lamp table. The room was covered in random stacks of notes- he wonders how the man finds anything in here.

"Organisational chaos", What? He quickly checks that his occlumency walls hadn't been breached unknowingly. They hadn't. He slowly let out a breath, careful not to know that he was momentarily rattled. He knew better than most that while Dumbledore played the friendly aging man rather well. He was a master manipulator who tended to be multiple steps ahead of everyone.
“Lemon drop?” Dumbledore gestured towards the large crystal jar sitting off-centre to the right on his desk. He shook his head in negative- he hated lemon a fact the man knew, but always offered. He still couldn’t work out what mind game the man was playing after all these years.

"Any news on Tom? Or the Death Eaters after that rather disgusting display" Dumbledore kept a straight face but his tone indicated an aversion to the horrendous act.

"He hasn't made an appearance and the death eaters are in shambles. I have not met with Rodolphus as I have no interest in getting involved with them. I am in the dark in regards to their plans as the rest of the wizarding population" He kept to vague half-truths, it was always harder for the other person to call you out for lying when you were technically telling the truth. Let them make their assumptions.

"Any news on Miss Granger?", he knew it might have been a risk to ask Dumbledore about Hermione, but the order was actively looking for her so not entirely out of the realm of possibility that he would ask. The old Headmaster was distracted enough that he may divulge more than he usually would. He was obsessed by Tom Riddle, and he didn't know why he hadn't seen it sooner. But then he wasn't as invested as he should have been, his attention diverted because of Harry and Co. He had had enough on his plate as it was- to bother looking more closely at Albus.

The man waved his hand around in not to worry about it gesture which concerned him slightly. "We're looking and when found she will be placed accordingly for protection. We will be setting up the Isle of Man safe house; everyone will be moving over the next couple of days..." We were interrupted by an incoming floo call in the front room. "You can let yourself out Severus and keep me updated." he nodded and watched the man leave stroking his beard in thought, plotting more likely.

Severus lost in his thoughts twisted to the side to grab his notes accidentally bumps the pile that his notes were next too, knocking some of them off. He organised them the best he could, not knowing what organisational chaos meant. He sighed, what a waste of time, he should have just written a short note. He apparated home with a weird feeling in his gut.

Later that evening, when he sat down, eat some leftover, broth he had made a few days previously. Shuffling through his notes, he notices a dusty piece of paper, he squints for a closer look and realises it's a utility bill- a muggle one.

At first, he disregards it, but it sits there calling to him. His eyes of their own volition flicking to it laying the on the edge of his desk. He didn't know that Albus had another place, not that the man couldn't have had one, but it is a little unusual. In Wales? Unease tugs in his gut that this isn't right, something is going on.
He thinks back to the conversation with Albus it didn't exactly sound like if they found Hermione that she would be going with them to the Isle of Man. What is the Hippogriff's arse cheek did placed accordingly for protection mean? On the surface it sounded like for her protection...but the way he had been acting he didn't think so. That didn't sit well.

It rankled him the high handed cryptic answer. He doesn't get to be all secretive at a time like this- slightly hypocritical- we'll ignore that- it's off, the situation is off. He is starting to see the complex web that Dumbledore has pulled everyone into for his machinations. We were nothing but a bunch of blind marionettes. He looks at the utility bill again, hoping on one hand for it to spontaneously combust and the other...well he wasn't sure. He closes his eyes and hesitantly decides to go and have a look at the property tomorrow if nothing else to put his mind at ease.

__________________________________________________________

The next day- Severus

He opens the single garage door, inside is his father's 1974 Vauxhall Victor, in good condition- it is white with a baby blue roof. The drive should take him around four hours to get to Garthtal. He doesn't know that area enough to apparate there so driving will help him blend in. Before he gets into the car, he takes his robe off and transfigures his button overcoat into an oxford dress shirt and then does the same to his robe, but into a crisp black blazer. He doesn't often wander into the muggle world, but having somewhat grown up in it he does know enough to manage.

Four hours and 27 minutes later....

The drive seemed longer than four hours, but it gave him a chance to keep thinking about his potions notes maybe adding Salamander blood and some Boom berry....ah here we are Priory Lane...

Pulling up to the small cottage, it was the very last house on the road. The road ended with a gate that led out onto an impossibly green field. He sat in the car, looking over the cottage. It was dull and inconspicuous even with a garish egg yolk yellow garage door.

Deciding it was now or never, he slowly exits the car and closes the drivers' door slowly. He looks around, and the area seems like a sleepy little town in western Wales. No wonder Albus picked this place. There was a slight breeze that ruffles his hair- it was fresh even for the end of Summer. He approached the simple white metal gate. He wandlessly did some necessary checks to see if it was okay to touch and checked for any wards on the place. The only one he found was a muggle repellent charm- obviously to keep the locals from checking on the house since most of the time it would be unoccupied.
Gingerly, opening the front door, he entered and did another check—because you could never be too careful with Dumbledore.

The cottage footprint was laid out much like his cottage in Hornsmouth, a small kitchen at the back of the house, a small living room, a wash closet, two bedrooms and a bathroom. He listened out for any noises—there wasn't, but that didn't mean no one was here. Without looking, he reached into the inside pocket of his blazer and pulled out his wand. He gripped it firmly and cast a disillusionment on himself, then cast a *homenum revelio*. The result was distorted; he frowned that shouldn't happen. He crept hesitantly forward then the floorboard creaked. He silently cursed himself from being stupid. He cast a *silencio* and cautiously walked down the hallway to the two bedrooms and bathroom.

The brown carpet was threadbare, and the white walls looked more grey from age. There are a few paintings on the wall, but they are just prints of country scenery. He tries the first door handle or *knob* a generic cheap brushed chrome doorknob. He checked for curses or hexes, and there were none. He turned it slowly, pushing it to swing open using its momentum, while he remained on the threshold. The hinges released an unearthly noise sending a shiver down his spine. He couldn't help the prickling feeling that his instincts were telling him something was wrong and not just an overactive imagination. It turns out to be a standard bedroom, the musty smell indicating that it hasn't been used in some time.

He approaches the second bedroom; however there is a distinct difference— it radiates dark magic or what people would say is dark—*he like Tom thinks magic is magic*. But he can understand that sometimes the magic in its purest form is corrupted. This feels oily and mouldy...*he really couldn't think of another way to describe it*.

He draws on all his knowledge to at least get the door open to peek inside. Something has to be contained within the room for there to be this much warding on it. He would be a fool if he inadvertently let it out because he wasn't careful.

It was somewhat complicated the system that he assumed Dumbledore to have placed on it and has taken him a decent chunk of twenty minutes to unweave enough of it without setting off any warning bells.

He sucked in a deep breath and held it, tentatively pushing the door open, but within arms reach if he needed to....his eyes bulged and he grabbed the doorknob slamming the door shut. He stumbled back against the hallway wall, his palms spread against the plaster, trying to process what he saw.

*This changes things*
Nobody Move There's Blood on the Floor

Chapter Notes

A/N: New chapter hope you all enjoy it. Apologies for any missed mistakes. Thanks for reading!

NOBODY MOVE THERE’S BLOOD ON THE FLOOR

I’m not sure how long I’ve been stuck in this room for. I’ve been falling in and out of consciousness intermittently. I still am unable to feel my legs, and that is pulling me under in depression. I hope someone is looking for me, but I know that the chances are slim because I was taken in the forest and no one knew where I was going. I didn't want to accept that I was probably going to die on this filthy pallet on the floor, but the probability was high.

Tears stung my cheeks at least there was enough moisture still in my body that I could cry. Strangely there was a glass next to the pallet on the floor that automatically refilled itself. I had deduced that someone wanted me alive for a short time- not that was in any way comforting. I half expected Rodolphus to come storming through the door yelling Mudblood bitch in my face. But that hasn't happened yet.

It was silent.

The curtains in the room where drawn, but they weren't thick so during the day it wasn't completely pitch black. I had almost wished I was bathed completely in blackness- because I didn't want to be looking at the pile of human bones in the opposite corner of the room. Acid and bile churned and burned at my insides when I made that little discovery. That wasn't the only discovery that I had made- I wasn't alone.

Its eyes glowed in the darkness like the dying embers from a once smouldering fire; snuffing out any hope of escape. It sat in the corner of this barren room- just watching; its unearthly red eyes never leaving me.

The room was damp and cold bordering on frigid. It never did a thing. Just watching and waiting but for what?
I remained in the same spot, never moving, alone. I was unwilling to move from my relatively comfortable place on the dusty floor, too afraid. Every so often, I would pick up another sound, from outside or inside the room. The sound of a mosquito buzzing close to my ear, tiny feet scurrying across the floor- a growl. I shivered, was there something inside the room with me or was it my imagination? Was whoever had me playing mind games?

I would swear on my magic that sometimes when I managed to doze off, I would feel puffs of breath ruffling my hair and across my face. It was creepy and unsettling.

Am I losing my mind?

Severus- at the house in Wales

Previously...

He sucked in a deep breath and held it, tentatively pushing the door open, but within arms reach if he needed to....his eyes bulged, and he grabbed the doorknob slamming the door shut. He stumbled back against the hallway wall, his palms spread against the plaster, trying to process what he saw.

This changes things

He closed his eyes as panic rose within him alarmingly. For the first time in so many years, he wasn't entirely sure what to do. He was torn and somewhat reluctant to admit that perhaps he was out of his league. The entity in that room was not of this realm, and he didn't know if he had enough skill to get in and out of the room unscathed effectively. There were layers upon layers of dark, dark magic upon that single room. Most likely to keep that thing caged. He had heard whispers of such things in his youth, but it wasn't the sort of magic that you dabbled in — creatures of smoke and sulphur.

He caught a glimpse of Miss Granger on the pallet on the floor, probably starving and on the verge of hypothermia, but that wasn't the only thing to catch his attention. The human remains on the floor in a jumbled mess- while disturbing - it was the single innocuous pair of glasses that sat on the mantle of the disused fireplace that sent his heart into overdrive.

They looked unnervingly like the glasses of James Potter.
His breaths were coming out in short pants, and he knew if he didn't get himself under control, he was going to hyperventilate.

Oh god, everything was a lie. His entire existence was meaningless.

He wasn't in any state to take on what he needed to do. He needed help. He would try Lucius first—as much as the man could be infuriatingly self-centred the man was intelligent. Tom would be the last resort, because the man probably wouldn't be able to help himself burning everything in the immediate vicinity to the ground, causing more problems than solving them. He is sure he would be pissed, but there are more significant problems afoot.

He just hoped this worked.

"Gerdie!", he pointed his wand in the air when his breathing evened out and yelled clearly but not too loudly. He waited hoping the Malfoy Manor head elf would feel the pull of magic and respond. Minutes later there was a pop of magic and Gerdie appeared looking disgruntled. He was dressed in a plain black waistcoat and matching pants. He kept his eyes fixed on the door as if he knew something was in there that shouldn't be.

"Gerdie, can you please bring Master Lucius here please I need his assistance. It's urgent", the elf bowed and dematerialised. He walked back out to the front room, looking out the windows; he was paranoid. Afraid any second that Albus would appear and it would all be over.

Gerdie returned ten minutes later after he was on the verge of having another breakdown. He turned to see Lucius and Tom. Tom had his arms folded defensively across his chest as if he knew that he wasn't supposed to be here. But then again, who was going to stop him?

"Severus, don't argue with me. I just want to help", how could he argue with that? Besides, this man was probably the only person with enough skill to undo what Albus did.

"You look pale old friend, do you need to sit down?" Lucius asked, concerned for his friend's wellbeing. Honestly, he felt tired with those damn glasses haunting him. He took a deep breath and gripped the back of the small sofa chair.

"Hermione is in the second bedroom", he held up his hand before Tom bolted off down the hallway, "But, I wasn't sure I had enough skill to get her out of the room. There's...something in there with her", he emphasised something, so they understood that it was something unknown or
wrong. Really what difference did it make at this point? "I dismantled part of the wards on the room enough to open the door and look,...just go see for yourselves but be quick about it" he was taking that vacation he thought about after this.

He heard a growl that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. It was so unnatural that it made facing Remus as a werewolf, equivalent to playing with a toddler.

He looked back up as the two men re-entered the room. Lucius looked pale, and Tom just looked determined. Did that man get rattled at all?

Tom spoke first pacing up and down the room in thought. "Well, it is certainly not something that I thought Dumbledore would ever...delve into. He is either desperate or overconfident in his power. I had heard rumours and such while in Albania and spoke to a few vampires in Romania. But not even I was willing to go that far into the dark arts, as a purely theoretical exercise, yes, but to even contemplate attempting at summoning...that...is an enormous risk. We don't have time to come up with a solid plan but to be completely forthcoming we couldn't anyway. Now, here is what we are going to do. Lucius, you are tasked with getting Hermione out of the room and to the Manor. Severus and I will distract it for as long as it takes" Severus felt his blood pressure drop, and a wave of dizziness crashed into him. He didn't want to go back into that room. But it was the only way to get answers.

The three of them assembled outside of the bedroom- it was the start of a terrible three musketeers skit.

"Ready?" Tom asked as he held his hand, millimetres away from the doorknob. He threw the door open and started slinging an assortment of spells, relentlessly at the thing. The putrid stench of stale urine and sulphur nearly knocks him off his feet. But he focuses and joins Tom in keeping the thing contained so Lucius can get Hermione out. It isn't easy as the 'creature' materialises and dematerialises rapidly, so you have to have a consistent stream of spells bombarding it. It doesn't even really have a body to hit; it is just the glowing red eyes and black smoke for a body. Now and then, however, you catch a glimpse of a paw or a snout. Severus shifts around the room, edging closer to the bones and glasses.

He can't help it he has to know.

He quickly shoots a shrinking spell at them, then accios them into his pocket.

"Severus!" He turns, and he sees the 'creature' lunging towards Tom. It had had enough of being
pelted with spells.

"Run Tom ", he aims his wand as he throws spell after spell everything he had at it. Those precious seconds of distraction caused this, so he needed to get Tom out of it. He stepped forwards, inching his way closer to Tom as the other man turns- *he could understand the reluctance to turn his back on the creature*. He reached out and latched on to Tom's coat and pulled him behind him. He gets hit in the arm by a ricocheting spell. Tom, in turn, grabbed the collar of his blazer yanking him towards the doorway. The red eyes and growling have turned on him as the unearthly snarling gets louder and louder. They fall back as Tom gives him one last tug over the threshold as the creature leaps in the air only too be cut off by the door slamming shut. He feels winded, but Tom is waving his wand vigorously over the door.

"Hurry, I don't know how much time we have", he follows Tom directions, and they both make a hasty exit out the front of the cottage.

Both were breathing heavily; he leans on his father's car. "Sev, I'll meet you back at the Manor, and I expect an explanation. Oh, and your bleeding on the floor old friend.", he closed his eyes and took a few more gulps of air as Tom disapparates. His heart was thumping in anticipation. He wasn't sure if he wanted the bones to be the Potter's or not. Everything was muddled. He looks at his arm, and it's just a flesh wound, easily fixed.

*Get it together Severus; there is still a long way to go.*

He gets in and shifts the gear stick into reverse, and he pulls into one of the neighbour's driveways so he can drive out of the street front first. He takes a moment to take a deep, albeit shaky breath. He realises his grip on the steering wheel is starting to hurt his fingers.

He thinks as he drives out of the narrow street that the world has shifted and everything feels topsy turvy. He wonders how this will affect the Potter boy, and that gives him a sinking feeling.

**At the Manor- Tom**

"Where Is she?" I bellowed not caring I just wanted to know where my beloved was. Guilt had been eating at me for days, not even blowing up trees was enough to sate my anger. Anger at my self; I should have just taken her with me. Risked it. But no, I left her with those I deemed too soft to do anything like this.

I will get my revenge, and I will savour it.
I storm around the Manor not having a directional purpose; more or less just waiting for someone to appear or bloody answer me. Where the fuck are they?

"Essa!" I yell out again, getting impatient. The small female elf appears in front of me all of a sudden, making me jump in my skin, my heart rate skyrocketing briefly.

"Master?" she timidly asks. I narrow my eyes because something is going on, and they are being evasive. I contain my building anger. I always had a soft spot for the elf who would help when I ventured into the kitchen as Voldemort. I pinch the bridge of my nose and grit my teeth.

"Essa, you have 30 seconds to tell me where they have taken Miss Granger before I go and burn Cissa's prized tapestry", it was a threat not that I would burn it. I watched Narcissa toil over the loom that I purchased for her as a joke for two years, just to prove me wrong.

"Mistress is helping to de-clothe the girl", I groaned in frustration that wasn't what I asked.

"Take me, Essa...please", the elf was a stickler for manners which at times drives me up the proverbial wall.

"It would be inappropriate for master to see the girl bare, very bad indeed" she started grabbing the ends of her ears at my stare. I tried to soften my features I really did.

"Essa, she is my wife. I want to see her", I was starting to lose it, and I feel my magic on the verge of lashing out. The smile that crossed the elf's face could only be described as blinding. I sighed, it didn't seem to matter on species, females of all kinds were suckers for romance. I looked back at the elf, and she was muttering to herself about nurseries, babies and colour schemes.... Oh for Salazar's sake

"Essa!" I snapped, the thought of small children freaked me out. She clicked her fingers, and we were suddenly transported to whatever part of the house they were keeping Hermione holed up. I stumbled slightly at the sudden displacement. It was amazing what some of the elves could do, if they really wanted to stage a revolution, wizards wouldn't have a chance. I had to brace myself against the wall to stop my head from spinning.

I could see Lucius and Draco standing outside a door with it ajar. Narcissa's voice carried out into the hallway, barking orders while the other two Malfoy's dutifully took notes like well-trained house pets.
"Does she need a healer?" Both Malfoy's jumped a mile not expecting someone to creep up on them. It quelled my ire by a few notches.

"That's what we are assessing. We could kidnap one if you want?" My eyebrows rose at Lucius's offer. Draco looked at his father like he speaking gibberish.

"That's a nice offer Lucius, but I think between all of us we will be fine. I know plenty of spells and potions to rival and surpass, what St Mungo's deems as adequate healer training", Lucius smirks, and it is a small comfort that the man has returned a bit more of his character rather than begging for leniency. "Your potion stores, are they well-stocked, even with rarer ingredients?" my mind was buzzing with various scenarios, but until I saw Hermione, I couldn't ascertain a single path to take.

"Yes, Tom. I can check if there was something specific you wanted?" I shook my head.

"When Severus returns, then I will give you a list. First, I need to see what are the extent of her injuries."

I moved forward and knocked on the door frame and stuck my head in.

"Narcissa?", the woman turned, looking frazzled. It was not very often you saw a less and perfect Narcissa Malfoy.

"Tom.....ah", she started moving this around covering Hermione. "Her modesty" I rolled my eyes.

"Cissa, for god sake. Screw her modesty. I can't objectively look at her injuries properly if I can't see them! Besides it's nothing, I haven't seen before" I carded my hands through my hair in a very muggle way. I turned to look at Lucius and Draco who remained in the doorway, Lucius looked stunned, and Draco was boring holes into my head with a flush rising in his cheeks. I waved my hand gesturing for them to come in.

"Don't test me", it wasn't up for discussion. I pulled off the sheet. Hermione was still in her bra and panties. I took her all in, and my heart was pounding in my ears, my perfectly crafted façade was cracking. I could feel all three Malfoy's looking at me rather than Hermione.

She looked thin but not as bad as I was anticipating, not like when we first got sucked into the past.
One side of her face was grazed and dirty like she had been dragged through the dirt. Her hair was full of sticks and leaves. Her stomach was also scratched, probably from being dragged, her t-shirt and jacket riding up. That's when I noticed her legs.

"Help me turn her so I can look at the back of her legs", Narcissa carefully grabbed her ankles, and I gently rolled her torso on to her side.

"Someone get her head please, so we don't suffocate her", Draco handed his parchment to his father and stepped up looking apprehensive. I wondered if this the first he has seen Hermione since the end of sixth year. Or since she was last here in the Manor under Bellatrix's wand. I couldn't help the smug smile of attaining Hermione's affections and also the sense of satisfaction of decapitating Bella.

After a brief hesitation, Draco clutched her head, and we successfully rolled her on to her front. The back of her legs were terrible. A single slash crossed both legs. The edges of the wound were black. I stepped closer, bent down so I could get a good look- I ignored to smell. I had an idea of what it was, but I needed Hermione awake.

"We need to wake her up. You put her under a sleeping spell?" I directed the question at Lucius. He simply nodded and urged Draco and Narcissa out.

"I will call you back in after I have spoken to her. But have a calming draught and a pain relief ready." I went to lift the sleeping spell but hesitated to look back over Hermione.

"Essa!", but it wasn't Essa who appeared but Bartle. Not that I cared really.

"Bartle can you bring me some essence of Dittany and bruise paste, please. After you have done that could you organise something light on the stomach for Miss Granger to eat."

"Yes, master" and he popped away. Moments later he returned with the Dittany and the bruise paste.

I finite the sleep spell and watch for her to awaken. I made sure I stood in her line of vision, but not close that I was crowding her. She blinked sleepily, and her body tensed realising she wasn't where she was before.

"Welcome back, Mrs Granger" she shifted a little to get a better look at me.

"Tom?" I could hear the confusion in her voice. "Am I hallucinating?", her voice broke, and she started to cry. I didn't like her crying, and I didn't like the way it made me feel. I brushed her hair
back and kissed her forehead.

"It's real sweetheart. You're here safe with me. Let's get you cleaned up and then I can tend to your injuries", I had expected her to push herself up, but she didn't.

"I...I can't feel my legs", she said it so quietly that I almost missed it. I was not expecting that. I got up and stormed out; I needed to let off steam. I walked outside, and I conjured one of those muggle punching bags. I needed to do something with my hands. I knew I needed to be comforting Hermione, but I had to release this anger.

"Tom, what are you doing?" Narcissa's tone was no-nonsense and *don't you even think about lying to me*. I focused on punching the life out of the bag.

"What does it look like I'm doing" I didn't need her questioning my life choices right now.

I feel a stinging hex hit my shoulder and I stop to rub it while glaring at her. "Get inside now", not many people spoke to me like and lived another day. I set my jaw stubbornly.

"No", not because I didn't want to, I just wasn't ready yet. She gave me the Narcissa look, which nearly had me caving. Just. *Almost*.

She turned and walked back into the house, and I thought I had won that round. Then I clearly hear "*Accio Tom Riddle*", *oh for fuc-* and I found myself hurtling through the air and into the conservatory. Cissa had a smile that looked like she was the cat that got the cream.

"What part of *no* did you not understand, Cissa?" I was fuming but more at myself than her.

"What? Did you think this was a democracy, Tom?" I did a double-take. This crafty woman. "Get your arse up there and comfort that girl, she thinks you've abandoned her." Guilt ripped through my heart.

I entered the room Hermione was in, feeling semi better for beating that punching bag within an inch of its life. I know I screwed up not intentionally, but I did.
"Hermione?" she was facing away from me. "I wasn't angry or ashamed of you, I got caught up in my own anger at this situation so much so that I had to go and beat a punching bag to death." still nothing, she was moving a little, so I knew she was awake and listening. "I was afraid". There I said it. It was the truth; the root of my anger was ultimately being scared to death for her. Afraid of losing her- which I realise I very nearly did if it wasn't for Severus. I should send him a fruit basket.

She turned her head, and I looked more closely at her, and she was nude apart from the sheet, and the scratches on her face were gone. I frowned.

"The elves bathed me while you were...gone" I didn't like her despondent tone. It was like an uppercut to the gut.

**Hermione POV**

"You said you wouldn't leave", I didn't like how weak I sounded. I was still scared and unsure where I stood with Tom. I knew I loved him deeply and wholly, but did he feel the same?

He walked over and sat on the edge of the bed. He rolled me over on to my back and propped up some pillows, so I was more comfortable. I kept the sheet clutched to my chest tightly- I felt exposed enough as it was without being...well exposed.

He kicked off his shoes laid down facing me, propping himself up on his elbow. His free hand cupped the back of my head, and he leaned in to put his lips up to my ear, and he whispered, "I was going crazy missing you. I was worried they would take you away from me." My breath caught with his words.

I shifted my head so I could look him in the eyes. They were earnest in their conviction. Every doubt I had just slipped away. I smiled as I whispered, "I promised I would never leave". He nuzzled his nose in my hair, taking a deep breath.

"I feel like I can't breathe when you're not around. Tell me you love me. I need to hear you say it" his lips moved lazily down the column of my neck. Tom was just as scared as I was; it was unsettling but reassuring at the same time.

"They could never take away how deeply I love you. You are woven into my DNA -the essence of
my very being. I love you so much, Tom." I caressed the side of his face, and he pulled away from nibbling at my neck. I pressed my lips to his, meaning for it to be a chaste kiss. But this was Tom; he wasn't tentative or soft. A low groan erupted from his throat, and the hand he had in my hair kept me from moving away. His lips slanted across mine in a rough kiss; his tongue ran along my bottom lip, wanting me to open up for him. I did. The moment our tongues touched, we moaned into each other's mouths. I had missed this, it had only been two weeks, but damn it felt like months. I wanted him so much it was like a sickness. If only I could get my legs to move, I would have pinned him down and had my way with him.

He pushed me back down, and he ripped the sheet away from me, hungry eyes devouring my body. The way he looked at me was unnerving sometimes. Like he was memorising every curve, dip and angle, every freckle and scar, plus the map of veins underneath my skin.

He ran his fingers tips across my face down my neck, through the valley between my breasts and down my stomach. He stopped just above the patch of curls leading to the apex of my thighs; a question in his eyes. I nodded, curious if I could feel anything. I was too afraid to try earlier. He kept his gaze fixed on me, and I let my eyes slid shut. The feeling was faint like it was far away. But it was nice. It was there.

"Anything, love?", his voice had a husky edge which made me blush.

"A little, faint but there", he pulled his fingers away, letting them skim up my side until he cupped my left breast. He leant down, kissing the side of my mouth, down my jaw. His thumb brushed my nipple, and I gasped. He kept fondling my breast as his lips travelled down to my other neglected one, taking it in his mouth. I squirmed as much as I could.

"Oh..." I let my fingers tug at his curls.

There was a knock at the door, but he kept lazily sucking and licking at every expanse of skin he could get his mouth on. The man was persistent and such a tease.

"Tom, we need to stop" I panted out. I didn't want to stop, but it was for the best.

"I could kiss you all day if you would let me", he kissed back up to my mouth, giving me another long, deep slow kiss that left me completely breathless.

The knocking became more insistent. He sighed and rolled off the bed, clicking his fingers, so I was dressed in one of his shirts and a pair of my sleep shorts. I snorted and tried to get comfortable.
I was fiddling trying to distract myself from my growing nervousness. Narcissa told me that Severus found me but didn't elaborate because she didn't know the details herself and that Tom had some ideas, but was waiting for Severus to return to consult. There was a small spark of hope that it will be okay. That everything will work out.

"Hey", Tom pushed the pad of his index finger underneath my chin and tipped my head back. "Everything will be fine love."

"Come in", Tom called out, and Narcissa poked her head in.

"Severus is here."
Somebody Tell Me How I Am Supposed to Feel

SOMEBODY TELL ME HOW I AM SUPPOSED TO FEEL

Previously...

"Hey", Tom pushed the pad of his index finger underneath my chin and tipped my head back. "Everything will be fine love."

"Come in", Tom called out, and Narcissa poked her head in.

"Severus is here."

"Alright, can you send him up?... Actually just bring everyone in here saves having to repeat everything. I sense this is going to be a long discussion", I watched Tom as he began pacing up and down along the side of the bed. His eyes kept shifting to the bed like he was torn between his constant pacing and sitting on the bed with me.

I let my head fall back on the pillow and closed my eyes. I was starting to feel nauseous from the headache that was pounding inside my head.

I felt Tom touch my face gently, "Don't go to sleep my little star, we have much to discuss, and you need to eat and drink something" my eyes fluttered open, and just as I was gearing up to deny him he placed a finger on my lips, stopping me. "Don't even try to get out of it. You need your strength. Don't argue you won't like to consequences" I nipped at his finger, and his eyes darkened. He leaned in close so our noses were touching "Don't start what you cannot finish" he whispered and desire coiled in my chest. Just as I went to press my lips to his the door opened again breaking the moment. He pulled away slowly making it look like we were snogging like a couple of teenagers. A blush rose in my cheeks in embarrassment. I must have looked a mess, with my hair ruffled and my lips bruised from when we were snogging the daylights out of each other. I tried to run my fingers through my hair making it look semi-presentable. The Malfoys looked regal as always, and I was a peasant by their standards.

Draco was looking everywhere but at me, which irritated me. Narcissa and Lucius offered small smiles, well I was surprised by Lucius's reaction. Severus walked in a moment later looking dishevelled and a tear on the shoulder of his blazer.
"Professor" I greeted warmly to the man who found me in that house. I was immensely curious about how he did it and would be forever grateful. Tom lifted my legs and sat down on the bed with them in his lap, running his hands up and down them in a show of possessiveness, but also I knew whether he wanted to acknowledge it or not he was irrationally worried I would disappear again and by always touching me I couldn't be taken away. It was sweet in his weird way. But if he thinks for one second that I will be locked up again he has another thing coming.

Once everyone was seated he, the question on everyone's faces was, how did I end up in that room in that house? But what I wanted to know was who owned that damn house.

"Sweetheart, are you up to telling us how you ended up trapped in that room?" As much as Tom was giving me an out with his words, his face was hard, and I knew he was probably holding himself back from diving into the depths of my mind to find the answers he desperately wanted.

While I was upset by everything that happened, I was somewhat ashamed that I couldn't defend myself. My pride was battered more than anything. My eyes scanned everyone eagerly anticipating my answer, then dropped to my lap. I twisted my fingers in the hem of the shirt I was wearing and contemplated my words.

A hand came into my line of vision and covered my fingers with a firm squeeze. "Just start at the beginning", I pulled one of my hands out, and before he could pull away I clasped his hand tightly as of I could draw on his strength to help get the words out.

"I left the Burrow the night you left the...heads and the chocolate out the front" Tom snorted then chuckled to himself. "I could feel their eyes on me, constantly, it was suffocating. I don't know if they thought I was going to snap and go on a killing spree or if I was conspiring against them. I knew Dumbledore's patience with me was running out and he wouldn't hold out much longer before trying to interrogate me again. So I decided to wait up until everyone had gone to sleep and make a break for it. Unfortunately, Harry came downstairs because he couldn't sleep. He knew what I was going to do. Say what you will about Harry, but most of the time he can be eerily observant. We had a small argument, and I left. He understood why I was leaving and didn't try to stop me. I didn't know if I had a tracking spell on me or not so I knew I would only have a tiny window in which to hide. I moved around the forest for a few days making sure I wasn't followed, on the night I planned to leave for London to catch the train there was a thunderstorm. I was stupid I should have left immediately, but I stopped to watch the lightning. I just wanted a small moment of peace. I turned after a particularly loud thunderclap and there they were standing a few feet away from me" I stopped to take a deep breath and to collect my thoughts. Tom shifted him and me around, so I was sitting in his lap with my head tucked underneath his chin. It was comforting.

"Who was there?" I nuzzled into his chest as it rumbled with the question.
"Rodolphus and Rabastan" I whispered. Tom went as still as a statue I couldn't even feel him breathing.

"What?" the alarming question came from Severus. I pulled my head away from Tom so I could look at my old professor.

"I was just as surprised to see them. I was so caught off guard that I panicked. I knew I would never be able to fight the both of them off, but I tried. What I couldn't work out was how they found me" I frowned I still couldn't figure out how they did it, was it just luck on their part?

"You don't think...?" Lucius was looking between Tom and Severus, hoping they would catch on to his train of thought. "It would make sense" my eyes darted between the three of them, but they weren't giving anything away.

"Would you mind sharing with the rest of the class, dear?" Lucius sheepishly turned to Narcissa.

"Sorry my dear...we're just in-" but he was cut off by an animalistic growl from Tom, he moved me off him carefully and began his pacing. No one spoke while we waited for Tom to elaborate, he was visibly putting the pieces together.

"That twinkly-eyed fucker." Draco and I tried to stifle a giggle, we shared a look, and at least this time he didn't shy away. "why didn't I see this coming?" he seemed to ask himself more than anyone else.

"Tom, all of us didn't see this coming" Severus drawled out bitterly.

"Tom?" Narcissa asked, her tone was lined with you better tell me now, or Salazar help you.

"Cissa, what Lucius was saying before was that we are just putting the pieces together now. Now that we have Hermione's perspective on recent events and will on some other's" he shot a look at Severus when he said that- I was missing something, "But so far Albus as a form of backlash against me, somehow sent Rodolphus and Rabastan to collect Hermione because he knew they would want revenge for killing Bella and screwing up his plans. He didn't expect me to leave my Death Eaters and kill Dolohov as well. He is attempting to rebuild his public persona and discredit anything we do as 'good' as just a trick. By putting out that newspaper article it hurts us because whatever we do now looks desperate, regardless if we are telling the truth". Narcissa hummed
"I disagree, Tom. We need to do our own campaign, but focus on sympathy" she turned and looked at me. My eyes went wide when I caught on to what she was saying. "We need to do this quickly before Albus works out what you have done. No doubt right now he is already planning a counter-argument. Now Severus clearly you have something to add” she primly crossed her ankles and folded her hands in her lap. She looked around and everyone looking at her like she had grown two heads. "I may be a housewife, but I was in Slytherin for a reason," she said that as if that was the only explanation needed.

"Ahh... Yes"

Tom turned a stern gaze to Severus, "I expect that explanation now Sev..."

"Well, I may as well start at the beginning...I looked at the memory...well the first part I couldn't bear to see her body" Severus looked like he was in physical pain just thinking about it and my heart went out to him. I did some testing and agree that it was genuine. I distanced myself after I told Miss Granger of my safehouse in case she needed sanctuary. I couldn't let Dumbledore get the slightest inclination about it. I prayed that she wouldn't tell either of those buffoons she calls friends so that it wouldn’t be accidentally revealed." he looked at me and proffered a small smile. I scowled and crossed my arms.

"Did you?" Tom asked me.

"Huh?"

"Did you tell them about the safe house?" I huffed in annoyance.

"No... I didn't." I wasn't going to give them the satisfaction of telling them that they were right. While I could have told Harry and held him to a promise not to tell Ron, he would have done it reluctantly. Ron, however, was another matter as much as I like Ron's friendship when he became over-emotional, he acted out. I couldn't have trusted him not to yell it out in anger effectively blowing Severus' safe house and privacy.

"Anyway, one evening, Dumbledore summoned me for a briefing on you, Tom. I could safely say that I hadn't had any contact. I bumped some papers with my own- his office is filled with stacks of parchment how he can find anything is a mystery. When I gathered my things one of his got caught
up in mine, and at home I was going through them I found it, and it was a muggle utility bill. I thought it was strange because he hadn't said he had another safe house. At first I dismissed it because he could have one like I do that no one knew about. What made me suspicious was the conversation we had about what he was going to do with Miss Granger. It didn't sound like he was sending you with everyone else. It seemed off, so I decided to go and have a look at the house, I figure if I were wrong then it wouldn't hurt. You had been missing for a few days by then, I kept checking the safe house, but you hadn't turned up. So I took the chance and drove the four hours to Garthtall from Spinner's End. I'm glad that I found Miss Granger otherwise you probably would have ended up as...well..you know" I shivered and felt sick I knew precisely what he was talking about. A disregarded pile of human bones in that room alone with that thing.

"Severus...", Severus reached into his pocket, stood and waved his wand conjuring a large trestle table, placing whatever he had in his pocket on the table then waving his wand again. He stepped away, revealing what it was with a gasp and an oh my from Narcissa.

"Are those...?"

"Yes, darling", Tom answered for Severus who looked like he was going to keel over any moment.

Lucius not affected by the sight of human bones simply asked, "And the significance?" I wanted to chastise him for his insensitivity, but I could see why they didn't seem to mean anything. I mean, whose were they?

Tom's brows knitted together, looking between Severus and the bones an invisible tennis match that only he was seeing. His face went slack when he came to some conclusion.

"Are you certain?" he walked up to Severus and got right up into his face. For a moment I thought he was going to punch him. Lucius must have considered it also because he got out of his chair and took a few steps closer to the two men. Draco looked amused by the turn of events.

Severus dug into his pocket again and pulled out a pair of glasses. I was still a little confused.

Tom stepped back like he was burned.

"Well, this makes things more interesting" Lucius drawled twirling his cane around like it was a baton.
"Are those who I think they are?" Narcissa was now out of her chair, and it seemed that Draco and I were the only ones out of the loop.

"Mum, what's going on?" Narcissa turned seemingly lost for words.

"It seems that we have discovered the bones of James and Lily Potter."

"What?" Draco exploded. "That's Potthead's parents?" Narcissa clipped him around the ears.
"Ouch mum". He grimaced rubbing his head. He looked how I felt. I wasn't sure what to make of this, I was concerned about how this would affect Harry when he found out.

"I know you said you didn't kill Harry's parent's so then who did?" I was a little surprised that Draco asked Tom directly.

"That is the question I have been asking myself for the last two decades. We will probably never know definitively, but regardless of whether Dumbledore killed them or not, he was involved."

"But why?" it was Lucius who answered his son.

"Tom was gaining too much power at that time; he had more people on his side than I think you realise Draco. It wasn't like it was now- no offence Miss Granger", I wanted to grumble that it wasn't that much difference, but I didn't know what the first war was really like. I nodded.

"People wanted change, not everyone was fanatical or fell in line with the pureblood ideologies. Some just wanted the Ministry to get more with the times and sensed a revolution in the air. Not all of Tom's plans were inherently radical; that's why he attracted a large underground following. I can assume that Dumbledore wasn't happy about that, he had tried many times to discredit the movement, but it had both effects- more to his side and more galvanisation in Tom's. There was so much push and pull that in hindsight something had to give" He looked off into the distance being pulled off into memory.

"Lucius is correct, something did have to give, and I guess Dumbledore was prepared in one way or another to sacrifice the Potter family to give him the edge in the war. Telling the public I had killed the young family of the Order, would have and did destroy my reputation. I am wondering if the prophecy wasn't an elaborate ruse or an extraordinary coincidence that he worked in his favour. I don't care because at the end of the day it's all swings and roundabouts. Also, it meant he could manipulate Severus into joining the order and be a spy. Of course, there was also Peter, I would
have rather had some better, but he served his purpose. He also hated Dumbledore with a passion and surprisingly wasn't blinded by the man's actions as a lot of you seemed to be. His actions afterwards...well they're irrelevant now...". I felt blindsided by everything when Tom had said nothing was as it seemed, I don't think I truly understood that until now. Having this laid at my feet was a heck of a lot different than thinking about it abstractly. But...

"How do we know they are really James and Lily?" I wonder if I was the only one to think about this rather than just blindly accepting it at face value. Maybe it was the muggle in me, human police didn't just find a set of remains and because someone else said it was who they believed it was and accepted that as the truth.

They all turned and looked at me with varying expressions of confusion.

"I'm just saying that while I hope it is James and Lily, how do we know that it is them? They could be anyone's remains for all we know. Dumbledore seems to have been doing a lot over the last twenty years, how do we know that he didn't knock off a few more people? Just because James's glasses were on the mantle doesn't necessarily mean that one set is James"

"She has a point" was all Draco said in response.

"Could the magic that is used in identifying family associations be manipulated into recognising individual samples?"

"You mean like the muggle DNA testing?", naturally it was Tom who answered. I nodded.

"It theoretically shouldn't be that difficult; it already does part of it. If we want a definitive answer, we will need a sample to match against" Mmm ok well we'll need to think on that. "Deviating from Dumbledore's scheme's, here.." with a flourish a piece of parchment appears out of thin air in front of Lucius, "is a list of the ingredients I need for Hermione's legs. Do you have everything?" Lucius quickly scans the list.

"I have dried dittany leaves can they be substituted?"

"No, they have to be fresh. The Wiggenbark doesn't have to be fresh, however"

"Unicorn blood...that I will have to double-check. Severus do you have any in your stores and are
you feeling alright old friend?" Severus looked like he a bit more colour in his cheeks, but he was visibly exhausted.

He smiled weakly "I wish somebody would tell me how to feel about all of this. I think I have some if you do not. How much is required? And are we making a large batch?"

"I just need two drops per the recipe. It has to be made directly before applying to the wound. It doesn't keep for its purpose. It does, however, turn into a wonderful anti-wrinkle cream" I laughed. Tom looked slightly irritated by that revelation.

"Where did you get this recipe from?" Severus asked, looking mildly curious at the list in Lucius's hand.

"I created it while I was in Albania. I needed something to draw out dark magic from wounds and repair the skin" Tom cocked his head to the side and answered.

"That's remarkable. This could do so much for St Mungos."

"I tried doing that anonymously, but because unicorn blood is used, they will not touch it. I told you, my dear, that I have many things up my sleeve but they refuse to utilise them because it's banned or considered dark. Too stuck up their arses to know what is good for them" I sighed, that paste could save hundreds no thousands of witches and wizards around the world. I'm not saying they go drain all the unicorns, but a few blood samples taken wouldn't go astray, much like going to the doctor or vet for testing. I touch were part of the scar is underneath the shirt, I wonder if the paste would work on that?

"Well, bollocks" Draco summed up rather inelegantly what we were all thinking.

"Will it help with my legs?"

"Yes, I am hoping it will" he waved his wand over me and an image appeared similar to an x-ray off to the side. "While I don't know what spell was used, you can see that it has wrapped itself around the base of your spine- and that is why you can't feel your legs. What the paste should do is draw it back out through the gashes on the back of your legs, and after a few applications you should start to get a bit more feeling back" he cupped my face and placed a gentle kiss on the forehead. Tears pricked my eyes. I was worried that this would be permanent. Not that I should complain there are people out there who are in worse situations than I am.
"It will work if not...we will keep trying. Your legs don't make you who you are" a pop of magic and Bartle appeared holding a newspaper disrupting our moment in front of everyone, another blush rose in my cheeks.

"Master you will want to see this, we heard you speaking; this important" he held it up and pointed to it. In large bold print the words "LESTRANGES DEAD" flashed, immortalising in black ink their horrifying demise. The picture below showed their smouldering bodies, and when I say smouldering. I mean you could see the smoke rising from their charred remains.

"Well, I can't say I am sad to see them gone," I say finding my voice.

"No..."

"Good riddance."

"Dumbledore tying up loose ends and trying to pin it on me"

"What?"

"Look at the article off to the side underneath the ministry one." and he was right in smaller writing there was a tag line, Is Voldemort announcing his return to power? Inciting fear in the wizarding public once again... I stopped reading after that. How can we one-up the man who has a firm grip on the ministry?

"What can we do Tom?" I was almost afraid to ask.

"We need Harry Potter."
Sorry, this took so long. My kids had Hand, Foot and Mouth and as anyone with kids will know it's a huge pain in the arse.

I apologise for any mistakes I missed- I tried to get this out as quickly as I could.

"What can we do Tom?" I was almost afraid to ask.

"We need Harry Potter."

"What?" I spluttered while blinking rapidly. *Harry? What could Harry do?*

"As if Potter would ever step foot in here" I rolled my eyes at Draco's bitter tone, but I agreed with him anyway. "and how the hell would we get him to agree to speak with us without him thinking we aren't imperioused?" My instinct was to jump to Harry's defence, but looking at it from his point of view....*we would look a little crazy.*

"Well we have his parents I would say that's an incentive" Lucius snorted a laugh at what Tom thought of as an incentive.

"At this stage, we have a pile of bones and Harry would think we are bonkers, besides we would be seen as being unnecessarily cruel that would not endear us to him" I laid a hand gently on Tom's arm.

"I didn't kidnap his parents or kill them I would say that was a plus" I couldn't resist a small smile, *at least he thinks not murdering is a good thing.*

"That is an excellent point, Tom, and while that may be, however, I think the first thing we need to do is make Harry see that Dumbledore is a man not to be trusted. The man did raise him essentially to be a martyr, a lamb for slaughter offered up to destroy you" the room went quiet for a while, contemplating Severus' point. Putting it that way made it seem more manageable because I knew that Harry did have some doubts whether he shared them or not. I think he just gave up on the idea that his life would be normal or that he would make it to his next birthday.
"As I told Hermione many months ago, we are pawns on Dumbledore's giant chessboard, disposable when we had served our purpose. And I admit I was like that too because I thought that was the only way to beat him. Now...with hindsight and sanity it's time to flip the board, and we do that with Harry" Tom spoke confidently that this was the right course of action assured that everyone would agree with him. Until Draco.

"Do we really need Potthead?" Narcissa poked Draco in the shoulder, getting his attention.

"Can you stop calling him that, my dragon it's so uncouth. And we need to make a better impression; he is the Black Heir through Sirius" I can't believe I had forgotten that...which reminds me. I smiled widely. I'm sure my eyes were twinkling with mirth and mischief.

"Tom" I stroked the inside of his wrist, rubbing circles with my thumb.

"I'm not going to like this am I?" he asked, seeing the sugary smile I had plastered on my face.

"It's never a good sign when a woman gives you that smile" Lucius commented grimacing a little while trying to avoid eye contact with Narcissa.

"You and Harry...are related too" I walked two fingers up his arm and then tapped him on the nose. He grabbed my wrist firmly, stopping any movement.

"How?" it was low and cold, and I was not expecting that reaction. I tipped my chin up stubbornly.

"Really? Did you do any research into the Deathly Hallows?" At his silence, Draco piped up, asking me "Are they real?" I nodded without taking my eyes off Tom.

"Let me guess you just researched the objects but not the people? Harry is a descendant of Ignotius Peverell, the younger brother and you from the middle brother Cadmus" after a few beats something rattled lose in my mind and the pieces started clicking in place.

"Oh...my...god...I can't believe I didn't see this earlier" a sense of urgency came over me, and I felt like I was on the verge of hyperventilation and exploding into a cloud of glitter. It made so much sense or at least a significant part.
I started waving violently, my brain to mouth circuit shorting out in my frantic disposition.

"What is she doing?" Lucius asked, whispering to Narcissa.

"It's a thing muggle girls do when excited...I think" She replied frowning in thought wondering she was indeed correct.

"No, she's having a brain meltdown" Draco interjected into his parents' conversation. I flipped him off, and he laughed. Funnily enough, it helped divert my synapses from their current course, so my mouth would resume functioning.

"No, she's had a revelation. Haven't you, Miss Granger? Calm down and speak!" Severus turned on his teaching voice, pairing it with the stern glare he would give everyone when entering the potions classroom. My inner teacher's pet couldn't help responding. I stared at my unresponsive feet taking a few deep breath's calming my thoughts, trying to organise them as best as I can.

I looked at Tom then everyone when I was ready to present them my working theory.

"I think...I mean you and Harry being related makes total sense...it's almost too good to be true. He must have done a bloody happy dance when it all fell together. He must have started planning this after his initial discovery of you, Tom. I mean this is a long game, forward planning to the max. He must have the patience of a saint. Then there-"

"She's rambling."

"Shh she's formulating, just listen" Draco waved them off while waiting for me to continue.

"Sorry. Let me start again. This begins with the Deathly hallows, he must have researched them with Grindelwald before their falling out or started around that time, but continued trying to track them down in secret. I don't know when he realised that Grindelwald had the wand, we'll probably never know. But, looking back on it fighting him served two purposes- mastering the undefeatable wand and looking like a saviour. That was the beginning of his campaign. But rewinding slightly, him meeting you Tom was a turning point. He saw your power, and he worked out who you were before you did. You were next on the list because that meant getting the resurrection stone" Tom's eyes widen as he could see what I was seeing. "You were so hellbent on destroying your family tree, that he could have dropped hints, but the prophecy either by luck or coincidence ended up doing it for him. It links into story of the three brothers loosely. It makes sense if you really
delve into it."

"What has that got to do with the Potter's?" Narcissa asked curiously.

"The Potter's had the invisibility cloak. Dumbledore couldn't directly get it from them without arousing suspicion. I suppose or risking his perfectly cultivated reputation. Killing them was the only option in the end. I'm not sure why he didn't end up letting Tom do it, perhaps because of Harry or maybe they discovered something. Maybe there was some truth in prophecy. Personally, I think it's complete crap, but regardless... Harry was in the perfect position to be manipulated, abused by his aunt and uncle, desperate for acceptance" I couldn't help looking at Tom when I said that there were so many parallels, "spoke parseltongue" Tom's head snapped up at that, "the difference being that Harry didn't have darkness surrounding him like Tom, Dumbledore didn't sense a threat to his power, only someone he could use to destroy and be destroyed, then ultimately he would have unfettered access to all three deathly hallows and be the master of death, the master of his own universe. It's a work in progress" Lucius just looked stunned.

Tom rubbed his chin, "My little star, your mind is amazing. I think Peter was the scapegoat. He must have seen them killed, then Dumbledore tricked Sirius and being a loyal dog he followed. And Severus, his unwavering love for Lily sucked him into the game of our lives." Severus looked down a light blush dusting his cheeks. Everyone else looked pensive. It was a lot of information to process.

"Then what about you two?" Draco asked, flapping his back and forth between the two of us. Tom smirked flashing his bright white teeth.

"Something he didn't account for. He was desperate, and things were tumbling out of control. If Hermione didn't get sucked into the past, then he would have won. It was Potter's persistence I would imagine on bringing Hermione back that has unravelled everything. If he didn't, I believe he would have left her to her imagined death- yes I am aware everyone would have thought I would kill her and initially it did cross my mind more than once. But she grew on me like a fungus." he reached out and laced our fingers together. I swallowed thickly as he ran his thumb over the ring, that was heavy in symbolism. "His constant underestimation of people is going to be his downfall. But we will have to move swiftly, Harry at this stage is probably only alive because killing doesn't serve his purpose, at least not.Yet." I felt panic and dread wrap around me like a straight jacket. Harry was in a precarious situation. Thinking he was safely tucked away in the Order's safehouse when really it was in the lion's den.

"Ok, I think I understand Dumbles motivation for this long game at becoming the master of death, but how does Harry come into this? Not for his cloak, I mean in our play against Dumbledore." At least Draco could keep up with me, if he wasn't such an arse for the first few years at Hogwarts and the blood prejudice spewing from his mouth every second sentence, then we would have been friends much earlier, and dare I say before Harry and Ron.
"He's the 'boy who lived' it would be a massive scandal if he appeared to switch sides. Harry Potter and Tom Riddle, taking on Albus Dumbledore..." Narcissa was right. It would cause a massive fracture in the wizarding world in Britain at least.

"So another poster boy, for our...your...movement? Political Party?" I could almost see the wheels turning in Draco's head.

"Yes, what are we? What do we call ourselves?" If we wanted to attract people to jump ship or just join, we needed a label.

"Tom, you wanted to focus on politics, is that still the case?" Lucius interjected tentatively.

"Yes, we need to beat him in the political arena. Harry will help draw attention this way, and we bombard the public, not the Wizengamot with our proposals. They will eventually cave under pressure. Albus won't be able to resist to pick a fight." He stared off in the distance smiling to himself with a sadistic gleam in his eyes; he was obviously picturing doing something I would not approve of. Dumbledore was his kryptonite. "But that doesn't matter at the moment. First, we need Hermione walking then operation Potter begins" I snorted a quiet laugh, the absurdity of the situation I think was starting to get to me. Things were moving quickly, much too quickly. I felt like I couldn't catch my breath. I don't even think my ramblings made all that much sense; there were too many variables and unknowns- things we will never know. But irrespective of how we got here, one thing was for sure- Dumbledore wanted control of the deathly hallows at any cost.

"We will continue this conversation later as we have a lot to think about and a lot to do. Lucius and Sev can you bring those ingredients up now and a mobile cart? I want to apply Hermione's first treatment" Tom returned from his dark thoughts, seemingly temporarily sating his bloodlust.

They nodded and filed out of the room, quiet thoughts blaring in the silence. His blue eyes swivelling to meet mine, something tense hung in the air between us.

"Do you need help turning over?" Such an innocent question, but evoked such pointed emotions. Did I?

No. Nope, I can handle this.

I lifted my lower leg of my right limb and crossed the ankles. I managed to shift myself awkwardly,
slightly twisting the sheets and not at all in a straight line but I did it. Off to my periphery every time I moved or attempted to, I could see Tom's fingers twitching- itching to assist me.

It made me irrationally irritated, I knew I was being a little silly, but I couldn't stop the well of resentment rising. It really hit home about Dumbledore- how we're just puppets and had no control over our own lives.

I turned my head, so I had a better view of Tom, his face was a stony mask, but his eyes were the giveaway. His eyes were darting all over me, assessing, analysing my every move. He was probably confused by my subtle change in mood.

He went to open his mouth to speak but was stopped, by Severus and Lucius bickering as they rolled the trolley into the room.

"I told you we should have used the other trolley-" as a loud, ear-piercing screech erupted from one of the wheels, then an unmistakable shuddering.

"But this one had the inbuilt mortar and the stove for the cauldron-"

"Yes, but Lucius-" neither man seemed to remember where they were.

"Gents!" Tom snapped out, annoyed but unsurprised by their behaviour. Whereas, I was still baffled by their familiar jesting.

"If I weren't mostly concerned with aesthetics than practicality then we wouldn't have to suffer defective equipment" my eyebrows rose at Severus's passive-aggressive jab at Lucius' expensive tastes.

"Defective? It's a 1657 King Louis XIV custom potion moveable table! Ho-"

"Stop it! You're grown, men!" Tom bit out harshly, he was shorter than the other two, but he somehow towered over them. He did his best to scold them like disobedient children, but neither precisely relented. Both Severus and Lucius ignored Tom; their gazes fixed on each other to see who would break first. Lucius slowly backed out of the room not turning his back, once he reached the threshold, a few beats went by then a slow smug smile upturned the corners of his mouth. He abruptly bolted down the hallway, then yelled out "Narcissa!".
I quietly laughed into the sheets; my bad mood briefly alleviated.

Tom shook his head and ran his hand down his face, "I can't believe I associate with these idiots", disbelief and resignation colouring his tone.

"Yes, we aim to entertain", Severus drawled out grimacing at the thought of entertaining anyone.
Tom snorted, and there was a flicker of fondness, that comes over his face for like a -nanosecond. If I had blinked, I would have missed it.

Tom waved his wand and bandages disappeared, most likely to be incinerated by the elves. I was apprehensive about this, as most people would. While I couldn't feel anything from my hips downwards, I was also a little nervous about the paste that was to be applied. Would it hurt? Would it shock the unresponsive nerves with a jolt of something? I closed my eyes and took a deep, steadying breath in, then released it; my eyes fluttered open. I watched silently as Tom and Severus worked seamlessly around each other, creating the paste, adding, chopping, pounding all without words. It spoke volumes to the close relationship the two men had- neither of them will admit that it was anything substantial, but I could see the truth. Tom looked up from lighting the stove for the cauldron, a ghost of a smile appeared on his lips, then he was back to concentrating again.

"Ok nearly done here. Severus keep stirring the paste- don't stop while I apply the thin film of aloe gel on the gashes", Tom hurried over with a small white ceramic bowl and wooden stick similar too what women use to apply wax to their legs. He dipped the stick in and gathered a small amount of the clear gel smoothing it against the side of the bowel, before leaning over and gently rubbing it on my legs. There was a tall mirror perpendicular to the bed, and I could see what he was doing, not that it helped with my nervousness. Severus approached, hovering just off to the side for when Tom was ready. When he was satisfied that the correct amount had covered my gashes, he held the bowel silently out for Severus to exchange. Tom carefully held the concrete looking one which held another wood stick, but this one, when he pulled it out of the bowel, had leaves tied to the end of it.

My head was brimming with questions. I watched him brush over the back of my legs but so far no response.

"Oak leaves" Tom answered.

"I just know your head is about to burst from the burning curiosity Miss Granger", I groaned and buried my head under a pillow until it was done.
I'm not sure how many minutes passed, with my head under the pillow. I relaxed and closed my eyes just listening to the quiet musings of Severus and Tom. I wasn't listening to the words, only their voices.

Later, the pillow was lifted, and I must have briefly fallen asleep. I smiled, lazily at Tom.

"Hey" I blinked sluggishly at him. He was trying to keep a stoic face, but I could see the small twitches of a barely restrained smile.

"Are you going to come out of hiding?" I hummed and pushed myself onto my back. Tom rearranged my legs that were now covered in thick white gauze. He slipped in bed beside me. I hadn't noticed him wearing his pyjamas.

He rolled on to his side, cupping my cheek and stroking my cheek with his thumb. He looked pensive, but his pupils were like saucers. My eyes dropped to his lips which looked pillow-soft and inviting. He rose up and straddled my lap.

**Tom POV**

As I leaned down to take her mouth, her pink tongue darted out, wetting her lips. I released a growl that I couldn't contain even if I wanted too. She knew what she did to me. Part of me fucking hated her for making me weak like this- for wanting and shifting my world axis for her and debasing myself for carnal desires. Emboldened, she leaned up and kissed me chastely, and I stayed frozen in place, my muscles protesting at the angle I was positioned. But I refused to move waiting to see what she would do. She bit my lip, then ran her tongue along over the punished flesh in a soothing manner.

Damn it she was making lose my mind.

I felt her fingers dip low to the elastic waist of my sleep shorts, “Can you finish what you started earlier?”, she whispered against my lips, gripping my length tightly at the base, then stroking slowly to the top.
Fuck.

I swear she would be able to feel me swell painfully in her hand. I didn't resist the small jerk of my hips, trying to get more friction than the lazy teasing strokes- maybe she was trying to drive me to the brink?

The swipe of her thumb over the red swollen tip was my breaking point. I snapped ripping the shirt she was wearing, not caring that I didn't even use magic. I just wanted to touch her skin, make her come undone as much as she was making me lose it.

I slid my hands up her rib cage and over her breasts, her nipples were already taut tempting me to brush a thumb over each making her gasp. I flash her a wolfish grin and drop my head to suck one into my warm waiting mouth. I love the feeling of her pushing her hands in my hair and tugging on my curls. It's that perfect bit of pain, that pulls me closer to the edge.

"I love these", and I do. I can encapsulate her pert little breasts fully in my hands. I tighten my grip, most likely to leave purple smudges haloing her mounds. But instead of pulling away or wincing, she pushes more into my grasp. Another growl erupts from me, and I sink my teeth into her shoulder, "You little tease". I whisper before licking my bite mark. She makes me feel like an animal. She is still stroking me with one hand, squeezing the base, release on the upstroke, then me the bottom of the head, before smearing the pre-cum with her thumb, then downward stroke. It was a perfect rhythm to keep me on edge. My hips where thrusting of their own volition following her lead.

"I want you to suck me deep" I almost didn't recognise my own voice, it was so thick with lust.

"Now?" she whined out as I tugged on her ear lobe with my teeth. I shook my head even though my body was very much on board with that line of thought. Hermione pouts as I pull back and peel her fingers off my dick. I lament the loss, but I need to shuffle down so I can move her legs.

I take great pleasure in relieving her of her shorts and knickers. While she may not be able to feel her legs and only faintly her sex, her body still knows my touch. Hermione is wet, and I can smell her arousal. A sense of manly pride overcomes me. I hitch a leg over my shoulder and apply a wandless sticking charm to stop it from slipping off.

I look up at her, and she is flushed, her eyes ablaze, and chest heaving. I keep eye contact as I drag my tongue up her wet centre, my eyes nearly roll into the back of my head- she tastes fantastic. A moan gets caught in her throat, and I wonder how much she can feel as I continue to lick and suck on her folds, like a parched man dying of thirst.

Her fingers find purchase in my hair again and pull. I moan, her desire dribbling down my chin.
My cock is so hard, it aches and weeping an obscene amount of fluid. Her cries are getting more desperate, and I want to push her over the edge. Easing one finger inside her, I curl it upward and stroke the spot I know will set her off. Her fingernails rake against my scalp, and I give her clit a tiny nip with my teeth.

Hermione makes a frustrated noise because I assume she can't quite get what she needs because she can't move her hips. I flatten my tongue and press it as firmly as I can against her and rub it up and down trying to mimic her grinding on my face. It must do something because moments later, she stills and emits a long satisfied sigh.

I immediately release her leg and crawl up her. One hand navigates its way underneath her palming her arse, lifting her slightly to give a better angle with which to slide into her wet heat. I am breathing heavily through my nose and thinking of flubberworm mucous just to stop myself from exploding like a virgin teenage boy. Her inner muscles are still spasming, clenching hard around me. Sweet Jesus, this is torture.

Sweat is beading on my forehead, and some of my hair is plastered to the side of my face. I must look ridiculous. I shift a little moving that little bit deeper, her head is thrown back panting. As she comes down, her fingers begin running all over me, unsure of where to grip.

I can’t imagine how this feels for her, but for me, it’s incredible. She fits around me as tight as a glove.

She opens her eyes and two deep pools of whiskey latch on to mine.

"Are you okay?" I can't help but rock a little more into her; it's killing me holding back, but I need to know it's okay.

"Yeah..." She captures my lips In a tender but searching kiss. I groan as she sucks on my tongue and licks the inside of my mouth. I move with abandon, pounding into her to reach my release. I won't last long, too far gone. It wasn't supposed to be like this, but damn it I don't care.

My release comes upon me suddenly; all my muscles relax and like a hose that had suddenly become unkinked a tidal wave of unimpeded ecstasy floods my brain, drowning in everything that is Hermione.

I move off to the side, so I don't crush her under my weight. I'm panting hard trying to catch my
breath. I pull her close to me, so she's in the crook of my arm and I gently kiss her head.

"How do you feel?", she tilts her head back so she can look me in the eyes. Her face is still flushed, and a sheen of sweat coats her skin, but she has never looked more attractive than she does now.

"Relaxed and tired. I can feel a light tingling in my legs, is that normal?" I moved before answering, lying on my side so we could face each other.

"Yes, that is a good sign that you are feeling it already. In three days we should be able to get you moving around for short periods ", she nods but I could tell she wasn't really listening and I wonder if I had approached our intimate moment incorrectly.

"Do you think about the future? I don't mean the immediate future but fifty years from now" At first a spike of white-hot anger rips through me and I want to tell her to stop this sentimental bullshit. I scan her face for some kind of motive and don't see anything but hope...and resignation. I realise she is expecting something that would cause her disappointment, that maybe perhaps I would run off and make Horcruxes again or at least along those lines. I have listened enough to Narcissa and Lucius to know that I need to reassure because if I don't, I know I will have Narcissa riding my arse- not to mention the elves. I drop my gaze from her face to the ring on her finger, that is on the hand that is clutching the sheet in a death grip. Did I want that? That was the question. I certainly didn't want anyone else touching her, seeing her naked or having in-depth discussions about the more ethical methods of procuring murtlap tentacles. I wanted it all. I was greedy and selfish bastard after all.

"I want this" Her head snapped up eyes wide; she obviously wasn't expecting it. Silly girl.

"Even when I'm old and wrinkly?" It came out breathy like she was afraid even to ask the question.

"You'll still knock me off my feet even when you're eighty-three" she sucked in a sharp breath, and she was blinking back tears. "Ok enough of that you know I hate seei-" before I could finish my sentence how much I hated seeing her cry she yanked me down by my hair and crushed her lips to mine, viciously biting my bottom lip, splitting it open.

"I love you" she whispered against my bleeding mouth. I loved hearing her say those words, but I couldn't get them to pass my lips. I pulled away; seeing her swollen lips smeared with my blood and saliva had me groaning and grasping for some semblance of control. It had been an incredibly long day, and I wouldn't be surprised if she sleeps for most of tomorrow.

Tomorrow the real work begins.
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